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INTERPRETERS

by Ben Anderson

VICE NEWS

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*This manuscript is a companion to an original documentary of the same name.
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VICE NEWS

For those left behind.



VICE News

THE INTERPRETERS who worked for American forces during the recent Afghanistan war (and the many still working) are among America's bravest and most loyal allies. So that you don't have to take my word for it, I asked several US Marines I'd met in Afghanistan — not the easiest people to impress — to share their thoughts.

“We are quite simply blind without them,” said one. “They played the most important role in any unit operating in today’s dangerous and complex combat environment,” said another. None of them had anything but the highest praise. “They put more on the line for our country than the average American ever will.” “They are themselves American veterans.”

As well as translating for American troops attempting to build relationships with Afghans, the interpreters played an essential role educating foreign forces about the local culture they so badly needed to understand. They were also key sources of intelligence, able to keep an ear out not just for information about the Taliban, but also about the Afghan army and police, who sometimes posed as much of a threat as the insurgents they were supposed to be fighting. The interpreters, or “terps” as they became affectionately known, did this

for years on end, going out on every patrol and operation with American forces. It’s no exaggeration to say that the interpreters saw far more combat than the vast majority of American veterans.

Most didn’t take the job for money. The only interpreters who were well paid were those who had long ago become American citizens and spoke English fluently. They were sent to Afghanistan for the duration of their contract and could then return straight back to the United States. The Afghan interpreters who still lived in Afghanistan were lucky if they got paid more than \$1,000 a month, and faced as much danger on the rare occasions when they went home as they did on the battlefield. They also had the extra burden of putting their families at risk because the Taliban often target interpreters’ relatives too. And as I was repeatedly told, many other Afghans also despise those who worked for

the foreign forces, who are considered by many to be “invaders” and “infidels.”

Some interpreters took the job because they were explicitly promised a US visa after at least 12 months’ service. But most took the job because they believed the Taliban would be defeated and their country would be rebuilt. After more than three decades of war, they felt that at last the outside world was coming to help and that they should do all they could to support that process. Of the two dozen or so interpreters I interviewed over five months, and the many more I had gotten to know over the last seven years of covering the war, all said that if they knew how our endeavor would end up — with the Taliban resurgent, rapidly declining security, and a downward-spiraling economy plagued by spectacular levels of corruption in all aspects of daily life — they would not have volunteered. And they certainly wouldn’t have volunteered if they knew they would be abandoned as soon as American forces started heading out the exit door.

As the West withdraws, the outlook for many Afghans, and in particular the interpreters, is bleak. And while it’s predictable that our leaders in Washington, DC cannot admit that the situation they are leaving behind in Afghanistan is almost the exact opposite of what was promised, it shouldn’t be too much to ask that the tens of thousands of Afghans who put their and their families’ lives at risk because they believed those promises would be fulfilled, should now be offered safe haven. Instead, a majority of the interpreters (approximately 70 percent) are being either denied transit to the United States, or left in limbo for years on end. Demonstrating once again their good faith, many I interviewed told me that even after waiting for years, they still

believed that America would do the right thing and look after them.

Because they had to speak both of Afghanistan’s official languages — Dari, the language of the northern ethnic groups and the Afghan National Army, and Pashto, the language of the southern Pashtun population and the Taliban — the interpreters are a diverse group, representing Afghanistan’s various ethnicities. The multi-lingual tend to come from the cities, so when they were sent to work in the war-torn, mostly rural southern provinces, what they saw upset them deeply. They ranged in age from teenagers to men in their 50s who had seen the Russian occupation, the civil war, and the rise and fall of the Taliban. I met very few who were staunchly anti-Taliban or pro-government; most just seemed to believe that the war would eventually deliver their country from a seemingly endless cycle of violence. Most of them spent years on deployment, while US troops never did more than six- or 12-month tours. The job was so dangerous that the interpreters often lied to their families about what they were doing. If their neighbors suspected they were interpreters, it was assumed that the Taliban would soon be told and might come knocking. Three interpreters from the relatively small group I interviewed had relatives killed because of their work.

Because the withdrawal is already well underway, many of the interpreters have lost the protection that US forces and their bases offered them. Those who have been denied visas, or are still waiting, are already in mortal danger. The Taliban have repeatedly shown that they can attack anyone, anywhere, at any time. They have killed a number of interpreters and their family members (no one knows how many have been killed,

but a 2009 UNHCR report estimated that an interpreter was killed every 36 hours) in gruesome murders that are then posted on Facebook and YouTube. In a recent interview with the Taliban's official spokesman, Zaibullah Mujahid, I was told that the interpreters will be "targeted and executed like the foreign soldiers and other foreigner occupiers. They will be put to death." Even members of the Afghan security forces, who are trained and funded by the United States, have threatened to kill interpreters, simply because they worked for "the foreigners."

In short, these Afghans were not only astoundingly dedicated, but they now face the very real prospect of being slaughtered because they supported the intervention, believing that it would result in a Taliban defeat and the rebuilding of Afghanistan. But instead of doing everything possible to offer them safety, as would happen if Americans were stuck overseas and in danger, the United States has created a program that is so dysfunctional that it seems to have been designed to fail.

The program is called the Special Immigrant Visa, or SIV, and the interpreters I interviewed who applied have been waiting years to be approved. To be fair, the process has improved recently, but at the time of writing, thousands of interpreters are still waiting for visas that they will never get. This includes the interpreters featured here. Only 3,000 visas were available for this year, but there are an estimated 8,000 applicants (or more) waiting, a number that will grow as withdrawal continues; as of this writing, the State Department has already issued almost all of the available visas. Unless new legislation is introduced, the majority of those applying will not be granted visas and will be left to the mercy of the Taliban.

What follows is the story of those interpreters, told almost entirely in their own words. I have sometimes combined quotations, and changed names and locations to protect those who spoke to me. Any other changes I made were purely grammatical, as English is often the interpreter's third, fourth, or fifth language.

SROSH came from Mazar-i-Sharif, the fourth-largest city in Afghanistan, famous for its beautiful mosques, archeological sites, and relative peace. I spent five weeks with him in Sangin, the most violent district of Afghanistan's most violent province, at the end of 2010. US Marines had just taken over from British forces, who had lost more men in Sangin — 109 — than they had anywhere else in Afghanistan. Casualties caused by IEDs (improvised explosive devices) were hideously high, and we all had to watch every step we took to avoid stepping on one. Rather than clearing IEDs by hand, as the British had done, the Marines blasted themselves new paths every day, mostly using long explosive belts called A-POBs. Sometimes they simply bulldozed their way through villages. When we were away from the Marines, Srosh was often tearful when he saw what life was like for the villagers of Sangin. He later told me that after I left, he was allowed to interrogate a Taliban prisoner about the meaning of Islam. He was so offended by what the prisoner said that he beat him “badly.” He later had to take a few months off and seek treatment for stress.

I worked for the US government as an interpreter for more than 11 years. The US Marines I was with really liked me a lot. All of them were my friends. “We stand shoulder to shoulder,” they said. We went out on patrols, helping each other; they let me carry and fire weapons. The people who came from the US, they don’t know anything. They don’t know about Afghanistan. So this is my country, I know what is going on inside here, so my responsibility was to help them understand.

I was in Sangin, in Helmand province. Wow. Every day I saw my friends get blown up. I was making friends and then seeing their dead bodies. I don’t want to see any more of my friends die. I always remember this one day when a good friend, a US Marine, was blown up and killed by an IED. Why? He’s coming from far away to help the people of Afghanistan, why did it happen?

There was another US Marine officer who was on a patrol, and an Afghan National Army (ANA) officer was looking at him in a very bad way. I heard that he was going to try to shoot the American because he really didn't like him.

I had filmed the American officer, who had been tasked with training the Afghan army. It was a task he clearly hated and thought was utterly futile. The Marines and Afghan soldiers often seemed on the verge of attacking each other.

When I heard that, immediately I went to the Marines and told them, "Hey, guys, I heard something very bad. That guy, he's suspicious, he's talking to other friends, and he's going to try and kill Lieutenant Robertson." So they moved the ANA officer away. I saved the life of a Marine. I have the document proving it. I have a recommendation from that lieutenant. I have lots of letters like that.

After a few years, I started receiving threats. My mom called me from our home province. "They're looking for you," she said. "All your relatives are hearing it. The bad people are looking for you. Please run away." They have already killed three of my family who worked bringing logistical stuff to the foreign forces with a big truck they had. The Taliban knew about their work and killed them two weeks ago. So I decided to go to Pakistan; right now I'm living in Islamabad.

I thought that the Taliban were going to be finished and this country will become peaceful. But day by day, the Taliban is getting more powerful. This country is the worst country in the world. I'm afraid of that day when

NATO and the US forces leave Afghanistan. It means we are done.



Two of my friends were interpreters and they were shot by the Taliban. They called them traitors. One was killed near his house. One survived and escaped from Afghanistan. I don't know where he is now.

If I go to the police station and say, "My life is at risk," what will they do about it? They'll say, "Okay, the government's life is at risk too. We can't do anything for you." We are poor people, we don't have enough money to go to another country and stay over there with our family. So the only chance we have is to go to the US Embassy; they should accept us because we helped them. This is the time the United States needs to help us. I really respect the US people, especially the military people; those families lost a lot of their boys inside Afghanistan.

I don't regret my work as an interpreter. I'm proud that I worked with the United States forces, and my father is proud of me too. They came here to rebuild, even though people think they came here to destroy. So it was my responsibility to help them and rebuild together. I'm really thankful for the US forces because they've done lots of good. They've done everything for us in Afghanistan and we really appreciate them.

Srosh's story was similar to many others I heard. What follows is a composite of my other interviews, so details are sometimes contradictory.

I was also a soldier with those guys. If they were upset, I was upset. If they were happy, I'm also happy. I was never estranged from those guys. We were always together, like, we are using the same towel, the same shower. We were living together. They gave me the nickname Bruce Leroy. Whenever those guys went outside, they never went without me. The majority of their work depended on us. They trusted me 100 percent. And I trusted them.

The Americans we worked with are really sad; they try to help us but there is no way they can help us. They cannot take me and my family to the United States. They told us, "We're fully responsible for you guys." The Americans I worked with, they came to my wedding. They circled it so I had full security.

We spent months in these very dangerous places, with just one day to go home. One day I came home on leave with another interpreter and the Taliban surrounded us. There were American Special Forces in the area and they saved our lives. We showed them our badges to prove we worked with Americans and told them the Taliban followed us.

All of the patrols were walking patrols, so I had to patrol with them day and night. Like three days, four days, we were walking for 24 hours or 72 hours and only eating one MRE [meal ready to eat] and we didn't have any training like the Marines. We were not professional. We faced ambushes and IEDs. One day one of the team members walked on an IED. He died and I was injured.

My injury is so bad — in the private part of my body — that I cannot have children. I need additional surgery that costs a lot of money, but I don't have it.

I went to Kabul and got some treatment. But when I went back, the team that I was working with had already finished their tour and left. There was another team. They didn't pay anything. They said, "Our hands are tied, we cannot help you financially. We cannot pay for your surgery."

In the beginning, in 2002 and 2003, when I was working with the US military, I really didn't even think of going to the United States, or even out of Afghanistan. I just thought this was the chance to rebuild my country.

I was told that if I worked for three years, I would be able to go to the United States. That was a promise. The supervisors, all the US soldiers, they told me, "It is good pay and you can get a visa to go to America and live a better life." It was a guarantee. They promised us that they would take us to the United States one day. Every single American we worked with, they told us this. "Your life will be saved one day." When we started, we actually believed that.

Right now, the Americans need to help us. Take our hands and bring us with them to save our lives. We are human also. We need protection. Nobody wants to stay for this life in Afghanistan.

After 2008 and 2010, the situation was getting worse. We are first in the line because we are interpreters. We are the first targets. If they do not kill us now, they'll kill us soon very easily. For how long can we hide from these people? One day we will die. We are in a very bad situation. We lost our destiny.

I was working on the gates at the jail in Bagram, so we were face-to-face with the Taliban who were detained there. Their families were coming once or twice a week, to the same gate, back and forth, so we were always seeing each other. They would look at us like they were hating us. And that was the start for me. We were covering our faces, trying to ignore them, but they know us from our work there. Many of them just got released — 700 or more — and it's a big threat for me.

The Taliban say we are not human. They are saying that we are spies for America. And now we are blamed for everything. The problem is we have lots of uneducated people. They just think that if somebody works with Americans he is a spy, he is not good, and he should be killed. If he is a Talib, if he is not a Talib, he just thinks that. Even my cousin, he doesn't like me. For seven years since I started working with Americans, he didn't come to my home. He says, "Your life is *haram* [forbidden] because you work for Americans." My cousin is not a Talib, but he does not come to my home because I worked with Americans. I can't trust my neighbors. I can't trust some of my relatives.

We cannot go to our mosque. People say, "He is an infidel. He is a spy for America." Whenever I just go to the shop, the shopkeeper says, "Are you Muslim? Do you pray? How can you be a Muslim? You work with Americans. You are a spy." People think I am behind everything that the security forces do in my area.

Normal people also say things like this because they have a lot of ties with Taliban and they're not happy with the government because of all the corruption we have right now. Even if they don't have connections, the Taliban will torture them and force them to say who is

helping the Americans. They will have to tell the truth to save their lives.

One day they just attacked our family, my house. I have lots of pictures of the bullet holes in my house. They attacked during the night. They came and knocked on the door. I had to jump out the window and hide in the neighborhood. My father, he just yelled, "Who is that?" They said, "We need to talk to Bilal." My father said I was not home, that I was at work. They said, "Tell him, 'One day we will catch you and we will cut off your head.'"

I'm Hazara and I have worked for America so I am like a devil to the Taliban. It's very hard for me. I cannot travel back and forth. I cannot go anywhere. I cannot visit my family in our home province. My cousin got married a few months ago, and I couldn't go.

Even Kabul is dangerous; in the night nobody can walk around, because of the Taliban, because of thieves. I'm sure that if the Americans leave Afghanistan, there will be fighting in every street like before, like when the Russians left.

One place I worked was on a big base. Outside, the first checkpoint was an Afghan army checkpoint, and this Afghan soldier stopped me and pointed to his friend and said, "This is our guy, take him to the base because it's a long way." And our company policy is, like, do not pick up any strangers... so I said no. They started beating me up and then locked me in a bathroom for more than two hours. Nobody from my company knew where I was. They took my phones, ID, everything. They were telling me that the day will come when you have nobody — these Americans are getting out from Afghanistan and what will you do?

The international police mentor for the American military contractor we worked for wrote me a letter of recommendation. In it he says, “It was not uncommon for some of the Afghan National Police we trained to have ties to the Taliban. Because of this, some would threaten interpreters with death for helping coalition forces.”

The corruption has increased a lot the past eight to 10 years. It is now very high. That’s why the Taliban can easily have influence inside our security forces. And they’re not influencing the small people, they’re influencing high-ranking officials.

If I knew that after this job I’d stay in Afghanistan, I would have never taken the job. During the three years’ working, I only made about \$14,000 or \$15,000. I’m not crazy. I wouldn’t put myself in danger for \$14,000. The only privilege was to get the visa and go to the States, to get out of this misery.

I had been working in the same place for over six years. During that time, I was known in the villages and districts because of my work with the Provisional Reconstruction Team (PRT). It was a nine-mile drive from my home to my work location. We were helping the people who were visiting the villagers, so I was known in the area. Therefore I was also known to the Taliban, so they attacked me in 2007. In the morning when I left my home going to my job, they attacked me. I was a mile away from my home, and the insurgents started shooting me in my car. My brother was killed. Me and my coworker were injured very badly. I went to Bagram for recovery. I was under treatment for about three months. When I recovered from these injuries, I continued working for the PRT for a while,

but since there was a very serious threat I decided to move somewhere else and just be away from this very serious risk. I had to quit my job.

I really believed that what I was doing was the right thing for the country. We needed to stand up, not just give up. I wanted to go forward not backward, and not lose our achievements.

I got threats before the attack and afterward especially. They were calling my father, they were saying they would target my family next as I was still working with the military. They said they would target my whole family, not only me. And after they attacked me, the threats got even more serious.

Even before, but especially after that time, everything that the Afghan security forces do in my village, in my district, everyone thinks I am behind it. The people in that area really think that I am the one who is telling the security forces to search the houses, and do some operation in the area, so it is even more risky for me now than before. They think I am providing information to the ISAF forces and the Afghan security forces for their operations. They think that when houses are searched, it is because I provided information. This is what they believe, especially the Taliban.

What will happen to us? Oh, my God. I can’t imagine this. Everybody knows the situation of the interpreters. It’s caused us to not be with people, to not be with our neighbors, to not be with our friends, even close friends. We can’t tell our location to anybody because it’s really dangerous for us.

When the Afghan people are talking about us as spies, the first action they’ll do is to kill us.

Even right now, here in Kabul, I hide a lot. I won't show you my home, where I live, just in case there are other bad people who will target my family again.

Because of this risk, I applied for a visa to relocate to the United States. Right now I feel like it is time for me to leave Afghanistan. As everyone can see right now, the security situation is getting worse, especially with the troops withdrawing from Afghanistan. Security here will be difficult for everybody. We don't have the personnel to help us. The Taliban are all around Afghanistan.

My family and I moved twice from one place to another. Then finally, at midnight, some unknown people came inside our house and they stole everything. There were more than 12 of them. They came with rifles and bayonets, and they treated us like animals. They said, "We know you, you are working with the United States and you have a lot of money. Where is the money? Give me your account number. We want all the money you have right now." They took my two computers, my camera, my iPad, my Motorola cellphone, and some jewelry. They took all the things. The people that came to my house were Hazara, so they were not Taliban.

Our house also got robbed, less than two years back. And they were all uniformed with police badges. And they had guns and flashlights and their faces were wrapped up, and they got in the house, kicked the door in, broke the lock, and put us all in one room. They took everything they could find and threatened to kill me, saying, "I know where you work and if you still keep on working with the US government, we're going to come back for you." So we had to change houses after that. And we couldn't inform the police because the robbers themselves were wearing the uniform of Afghan border police.

I can't trust my neighbors. They say that my job with the United States means I am no longer a Muslim, that I am an infidel.

There was a day, two months ago. There was a notice in the window of a shop and I asked this guy, "This house is for rental?" And the guy told me, "Yeah, it's for rent." And he said to me, "Hey, I know you. So you have been in Kandahar, right?" [One of the biggest foreign bases was located at Kandahar.] I was like, "No, I've never been in Kandahar." Then he said, "You're an interpreter, right? With the United States?" I was like, "No, I've never been an interpreter." Then he said, "All right, we have all the info on linguists. They are living in the tent district in Kabul. We found out about those guys. We hate those guys."

It is scary for me. I'm really, really concerned about my relatives, my neighbors, and all the people around me, the people that have contact with the Taliban. I'm so afraid that I'm not going outside, I'm not playing football. I don't have any amusement. I'm just staying all the time in my house and I'm not able to apply for a job.

THE SIV PROGRAM

The Special Immigrant Visa program was created for both Iraqi and Afghan interpreters, but for reasons that aren't clear, the Afghans are offered far fewer visas than their Iraqi counterparts, and fewer people are eligible. No one knows the exact numbers, but tens of thousands of Afghans worked as interpreters and only approximately 9,000 visas have so far been offered (as opposed to 25,000 for Iraqis), and many of those have expired. So only 2,799 interpreters (as of March 31, 2014) have been given visas. And it's common to hear

about the process taking three, four, or even five years. Although they have already been vetted thoroughly and regularly (they were, after all, living, sleeping, and patrolling alongside American troops, often while carrying weapons), to receive a visa interpreters have to prove themselves all over again. For starters, they have to demonstrate four basic things: that they are Afghan, that they worked for the US, that they provided “faithful and valuable service,” and that they are now facing an “ongoing and serious” threat because of their work.

They all carry around files full of laminated letters of recommendation, ID forms, letters from the US embassy, medical certificates, and photos, all of which they have had to collect and pay for themselves. (The medical forms alone can cost \$1,500 and are valid for only six months, so they often have to be bought several times.) Seeing the interpreters clutching their little folders as if their lives depend on them — which they do — is one of the most heartbreaking things I’ve seen in Afghanistan.

If they do get an answer, and many don’t, it’s often a rejection. So far, fewer than 30 percent of applicants have been granted visas. All of the applicants I interviewed had collected far more letters of recommendation than they actually needed and a few had already been attacked. Even then, they still needed to somehow demonstrate to the US that they faced a serious and ongoing threat. The fact that any of them had to prove that such threats exist is particularly disgusting. I don’t know anyone serious who would claim that an interpreter still living in Afghanistan isn’t facing a serious and ongoing threat.

What follows is again a composite of interviews with many interpreters who are now in hiding in Kabul.

This is the only chance for me: It’s life or death.

I’ve got all four requirements. I was approved for the SIV nine months ago. I applied in 2012. After a long process I got my interview. Then I got the medical. Got the passport. Everything is done. After that they gave me a card: “You will not be re-interviewed, in several months you will receive your visa.” After a month my visa was denied. I just received an email from the US embassy: “Your visa is denied.” For what? The guy at the embassy had actually told me, “Congratulations, you have passed.” I don’t have any idea what the reason is. If they told me the reason, I will find a solution.

Everyone knows about it, that we face danger every day working with Americans, and danger now. But how am I going to demonstrate that? How? The Taliban just kill people right on the spot.

I got a bunch of certificates and recommendations from lots of people — from a general and a captain in the US Army. I even have pictures of me working with the defense secretary of the United States, Robert Gates.

I have a letter from the commanding officer saying, “I enthusiastically endorse this recommendation of approval for a special immigrant visa.” Another wrote that I showed “unwavering service and faithful and valuable service. I’m confident he will face threats and potential harm or death as a result of his work with the mission forces, I don’t believe he’ll pose any type of threat to the security of the US.” And again someone says, “He went far beyond what an interpreter is expected to do, he maintained an infectious positive attitude, an explosive work ethic, he never tired, was never negative, always willing to work.” And another: “His dedication, drive to succeed,

honesty, and integrity are undoubtedly in keeping with the standards that we would like to believe every American has the responsibility to uphold.”

I applied for the SIV in 2010. The process took all the way to 2013. At the beginning of 2013, I was informed that my SIV would be issued and that I need to make arrangements to go to the United States. Now they're telling me I'm denied for “unknown reasons.”

I'm asking the entire American people and their government, to please focus, please concentrate on the interpreters who have been refused visas. We are good people. We did a really valuable job for the United States armed forces.



I saw American people for over 11 years, and I really believe that somebody in the American government will see my case, review it, and reconsider. I know the US government is not corrupt. Maybe it takes a little bit of time because there are lots of interpreters. But I am really asking the American government to please reconsider my case and other people's cases in Afghanistan facing the same situation. After serving the US government for over 11 years, the Taliban and al Qaeda will not let someone live in Afghanistan if they don't get

their visas. They will be targeted by the Taliban until they are eliminated.

If I could speak to the soldiers I was with now, I'd like to say hi to everybody and please know that I really miss you guys. I'd tell them, “Please give me the visa. I'm hiding all the time in Kabul. I lost my destiny. Please renew my case for the special immigrant visa. If I get the visa, I will never lose my life. If I'm not going to get the visa, I'm going to die. Some people will kill me, they will kill my family.”

If I don't get this visa, I'm going to die. I'm 100 percent sure. I've seen a lot of people, they're smirking at us and they're staring at us. They change their behavior with us. They will find me and they will kill me.

Many of the interpreters I spoke to complained of suddenly failing one of two tests — a counterintelligence (CI) test or a polygraph test. Not only would neither be admissible in a US court, the interpreters had usually passed the tests — which always involve the same, simple questions — many times before, and had given exactly the same answers to exactly the same questions.

I had done the CI and polygraph tests many times and passed. How come I failed the last time? The questions were normal every time: How many brothers do you have? I have one brother. What is his name? His name is this. Where does he work? He works there. More than 10 times I got it all right because I worked with them for seven years. I never failed. But then the last time, they failed me. They said that I could not come on the base again because I had failed. I was really sad that day. I said, “Why?” She said, “They didn't tell us

the reason.” It made me more sad. I said, “At least if I know the reason I can tolerate it, if it was my fault.” But they said they didn’t know the reason. We had worked for them for many years and there was nobody to listen to what we have in our hearts or what things we have to say. There was nobody.

The polygraph test is something that I don’t think is accurate. It is not something that can really clarify whether or not you’re a bad person. They would ask a really easy question and I would wonder why they’re asking me this question. It was not for security purposes. But then some questions were really difficult. If someone asked these questions of an American, they would not feel very comfortable. For example, they will ask you, “Are you related to al Qaeda?” They will ask you, “Are you a member of a terrorist organization?”

One day, it was our last CI test, there were 40 people there and all 40 failed the test. Everybody. The place we worked was a forensics lab that was closed down soon afterwards. Nobody remained there. This needs to be reviewed.

This is just one single, small part of it, just the very first step. It’s like the baby step, you prepare all these documents and your company approves it, and you write all these truths about yourself and you send it to the embassy and they send you this approval. Then you have to go through some two or three more steps to get to the interview and get a visa. We didn’t just do this one step, we did everything: medical checkups, which cost more than \$1,000; we sent many letters, our ID cards, our passport, our marriage certificates and birth certificates.

If you are the person to give me the visa, I’d tell you to please give me the visa, and if you are not going to give me the visa, you are responsible for killing a person. It’s not like something hidden. They kill people and video-tape it and put it on YouTube.

One weekend I spend in a friend’s house; the next weekend with another interpreter, a trusted person. The people in my neighborhood, they have contact with the Taliban. They have to think I’m still away at my job. If they know that I’m at home, released from my job, and that the Americans do not support me anymore, they will kill me.

We just avoid going out a lot. We prefer to stay at home all the time. Even on our holidays, our weekends, we don’t go out. We just stay at home and spend time with family, not outside. It’s like we are in prison in our own country.

These days they put these magnet bombs under the cars, and of course I drive my own car going to work and coming back because I can’t take taxis or buses. You never know who’s the driver in another car or a bus. So if they find out that I’m driving my car and I’m an interpreter for the US government, they’ll definitely put a magnet bomb on my car one day and blow me up because these days, these things are increasing. We cannot park our car anywhere that isn’t secure.

When I go to work, whenever I get there, I will call my mom to let her know I got there. When I finish work, I wait until it gets dark, I will call her and say, “Okay, Mom, I will be home in an hour or half hour.” Still, my mom is always calling me, “Where are you? Where’s your location? Let me know your location.” I leave

when it's dark, then I come home when it's dark, and the other times I just stay at home.

I just ran away from Afghanistan, I ran to Pakistan because my life is at risk. They're looking for me. They're very bad people. I don't have any choice. I love my country but I can't stay here. My country, Afghanistan, is the best country, the people are good people, but I can't stay there anymore. They're going to catch me, they're going to do what they want to do against me. Probably cut my head off, you know? I saw it on YouTube: They got the interpreters and they cut their heads off.

It's really hard to go to Iran, Russia, Pakistan, or Uzbekistan, countries around Afghanistan. They really don't like the US government. So if we go over there, our life is at risk. We can't stay in Pakistan, there are no jobs. Even if I go to a hotel there, whenever they see my passport, they say, "Afghan people are not allowed." Why? What is the reason? We are not human?

The US Embassy has seen all of this. They know the situation. But still, they just deny my visa. I have 40 letters of recommendation. I have one saying I was employee of the month — and in our company there were 300 people. The American soldiers we worked with, they were happy with us, they know we are not bad guys, they're grateful that we worked with them.

The way I have been treated, it really broke my heart. For seven years, we helped them, really honestly worked with them. We weren't absent one day. We

thought that we had a mission together. We thought that if my American friend, if my brother might die on a mission, I am going with him. I'm not more than him. If I might die too, it's not a problem.

If I take a risk of going on the ships and going illegally to Europe, there's gonna be a 50 percent risk I will die. But I prefer to take the 50 percent risk instead of taking the 100 percent risk and staying here. I just have to leave. Borrow money or be a refugee, just take myself out of here. I have no other way. If I sit here, I will be killed.

For one interpreter, just one person, going from Kabul to a foreign country is \$25,000. I only made \$600 a month. How can I find \$100,000 to take my whole family with me to Europe? If I had that much money now, I would never leave my family behind, but I don't have that much money. That's huge money. We cannot find that.

Every day the situation is getting worse. For that reason I told my father, "If you just stay here with my family, I will move somewhere else like the other interpreters."

Just imagine yourselves in our place, how hard this could be to live a very scary life. You're scared of everyone. If the situation was good in Afghanistan, if there's no Taliban, after the work with Americans, I would stay in Afghanistan. I would continue my higher education, I would do something, I would be an engineer, a doctor, or something. Now, when I leave my home, I don't have the hope that I am coming back.



Dimitris Dimitrou, AFP

MANY INTERPRETERS can't afford to wait for a visa and instead pay smugglers — often by selling everything they or their family own — to get them out of Afghanistan before they are killed. Most get smuggled into Europe, but the journey is hazardous and many end up in detention centers, or sleeping in parks and slum-houses.

Many simply walk across Iran to Turkey, or get fake visas and fly directly to Ankara. They then sneak into Greece, usually on tiny, overloaded boats that often capsize in the middle of the night. If they aren't captured on arrival and locked up for 18 months, they live in overcrowded apartments, or sleep in parks or disused warehouses. They then try to sneak into the friendlier countries of Western Europe. Those who get stuck in Greece live in poverty and are often victims of attacks by the far-right group Golden Dawn or by the Athens police.

No one knows how many interpreters have given up on the SIV process and paid to be smuggled out, but conservative estimates put the overall number of Afghan immigrants at just under 30,000. For many, life is so bad that they decide to go back to Afghanistan. I met one former interpreter named Khaled who was about to do just that, and was hoping to then raise enough money to flee east instead of west, to Pakistan or India, where he believed he had a better chance of a normal life.

I came by airplane to Turkey. I paid \$3,500 for a fake Turkish visa. Then I paid someone \$1,500 to get me to Mytilene, in Greece. But I was caught and spent seven days in jail. After that, the Greek government gave me papers, but only for one month.

I went to Athens and I stayed there for one and a half months. I spoke to people there and they showed me how to get to Italy. "If you don't have money, you go to Patras and put yourself on a truck." People went there because they couldn't pay the smugglers. You need three

or four thousand euros to get to Germany or different places in Europe. But we didn't have that money, so we went to Patras.

We used to sleep in an old wooden boat there, especially when the rain came. In the summer, when the weather is better, we slept in the park. We spent six months there trying to get to Italy or Germany. We slept near the big car park, where the trucks came. When a ship came in, the trucks would be there to pick up the cargo. They came at 4 o'clock, 8 o'clock, 11 o'clock at night. We would get close to the fence, then run and try and put ourselves inside the trucks, hoping they were going to Italy. Some of the guys made it, but I could never do it. There were always lots of police there and they wouldn't let me get inside the trucks.

The drivers couldn't see you. We had to pull ourselves onto the back of the truck, open the doors, and put two or three boys inside. Another boy would stay outside to close the door. Or you could hide yourself on the wheels. Sometimes, two guys can put themselves on the wheels. But it's dangerous. Too many people have been killed under those wheels. One or two guys managed to hide in the toolboxes — the trucks have a big toolbox — so we tried to do that too.

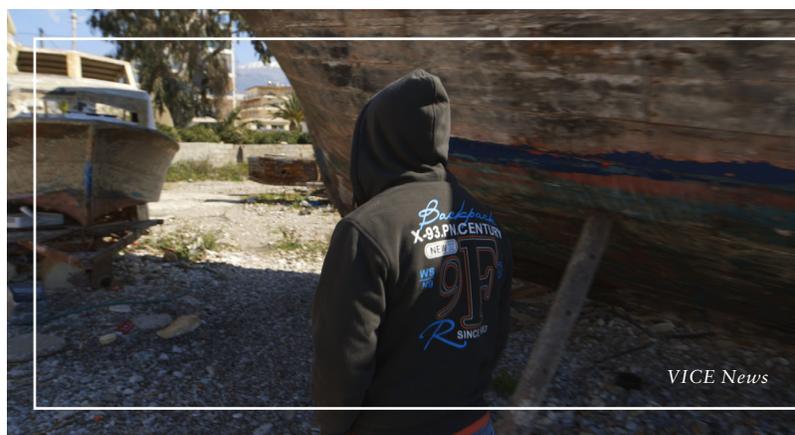
Those days, in the summer of 2013, all the people wanted to put themselves inside the trucks. But then there were lots of police commandos and they were attacking the Afghans, hitting them and kicking them until they turned back. Too many times the police caught me and hit me with a big club. They kicked my ass.

Some of the people brought food for us. There was also a big church nearby and people brought bread or

some food. But it's only bread and sauce, nothing else. In the last 24 hours, we just ate two pieces of bread. Sometimes some of the guys make some money so they run to the city to buy just bread and water — only bread and water.

I haven't seen my wife and kids for 13 months. I spoke with them by phone a few times, just saying, "Hello, how are you?"

We slept on these small old ships that are grounded. Not just me, lots of Afghan people slept there. Sometimes I had a blanket, sometimes we just slept in this small space, on the wood. Some Afghan boys put a plastic sheet on top of the boat to try and stop the rain. Too many people slept here, too many. Maybe 20 or 25 people. All Afghan people. Some of them made it to Italy, Germany, France, everywhere. Some have gone back to Afghanistan and some of them are still here. Some of them are in jail here. They get 18 months.



VICE News

Hundreds and hundreds slept in this old mattress factory. Five or six hundred people at least. There was just one tap for washing clothes, washing ourselves, for showering. Over the last two years a lot of people have come from Afghanistan. Because of the situation there, no one

knows what will happen. Everybody there has a plan to leave if things get really bad. They are ready to leave. There is fighting. There is no work, no food, nothing.

One boy was five years old when he left Afghanistan. He was brought here by another family. He went to Iran, then Turkey, and then Greece. After Greece he went to Serbia, then Hungary. Then he came back to Greece and he is waiting to move to another place, anywhere in Europe. His mother, his father, and his young brothers were killed in Afghanistan, in their house. He says he just wants to leave. It's not important where. He just wants safety and a good job. He says he just really wants to leave Greece.

I met one former interpreter in a café in the middle of the immigrant area of Athens, which is not far from the area where Golden Dawn has its strongest presence. The interpreter sometimes slept on a friend's sofa, sometimes in the nearby park. The café was full of smugglers, who sat in groups of two or three, sipping coffee, smoking cigarettes, and barely talking. "They are waiting for people now," said the interpreter. He appeared so hardened by his experiences that he was no longer capable of feeling or expressing pleasure. Acts of kindness didn't have any impact. He was just tough, and nothing else.

I found a person in Kabul who was a smuggler. I told him I wanted to go to Europe. I told him that I wanted to go to Germany, because I'd heard it was better for Afghan people. I told him I was an interpreter with the Americans and he said, "Yes, it's cool. If you go there, they will give you quick immigration papers." I asked how much was needed to get to Germany and he said

\$18,000, to go direct from Kabul to Germany. But I didn't have that much money. He told me I'd have to go by walking, by plane, and by truck. He said he'd get me a visa for Iran, and another person would collect me from the airport in Tehran. Then I would cross the border to Turkey. There, other people would receive me and send me to Greece. He said that from there I had to find good people to move me to Italy. But he wanted \$2,000 just to send me from Turkey to Greece. He said he could make me a passport there to send me to France. I wanted that but I didn't have the money.

I was in Kabul for nine months, trying to raise this money, but I couldn't. I spoke with him again and told him I was sorry but I couldn't find that much money. I told him I had just \$8,000 and I found that by selling my wife's jewelry and my small Corolla car. He said that wasn't enough. He said he could make me a fake Turkish visa and after I should go to Greece, then wherever I wanted.

After a few days I told him okay, and I gave him my passport. It was \$3,500 for the visa. I said I didn't want to give him cash because nobody trusts smugglers. We agreed that I would leave the money with a cashier in Kabul's money market. After 15 days, he brought back my passport with a one-month visa. I gave him the money and he was gone. I got a ticket with Ariana Air for \$160, direct to Ankara. After that I took a bus to Istanbul.

The smuggler gave me numbers for his Turkish partner. I called him and he told me to give the phone to a taxi driver. The taxi driver took me to a small house, where 14 people were living, most of them Afghans. The house was too small. It had very small rooms and two dirty beds. I'd never been in a place like that. In the morning

I left and found some Afghans in a different place. For five months I was stuck there, and I lost too much of my money there. Every month I was paying 150 in Turkish money for house rental and 150 for food.

Then I found another smuggler. He said he liked me because he was also from Afghanistan. I told him I wanted to go Italy and he said he had sent some people there, but it would cost \$5,000. I told him it's too much. He said, "How much do you have?" I told him, "Just \$2,000." He said, "That's not enough, my friend. You must go to Greece." I waited one month more. I called my friends in Afghanistan, my family, and my father-in-law found another \$1,000 for me. I don't know what he sold, but he found the money. I went to speak with the smuggler again and I told him I had just \$3,000. "Can you send me right now to Italy?" He said, "No, sorry." He told me again that I should go to Greece and I finally agreed.

They had a small boat that could send me to Greece, near the border of Turkey. But he wanted \$1,800. I told him, "No my friend, that's too much money." I had brought another Afghan to him, so he gave me a discount of \$300.

Again, we agreed to leave the money with a cashier, an Afghan, until I arrived safely. He demanded \$100 more, which he called a commission. I pleaded with him to give me a discount but he said, "No, nothing. If you're happy to leave your money, do it; if you're not happy, get out of my shop."

The smuggler kept me in his house for three days. Then he woke me up one morning. We got a taxi to the bus station. There were just two other people and I thought

they were playing games with us. Then we arrived to the place and saw, inside the trees, 18 more people. There were two families, all ladies and children. All of them were Afghan. The sun was still down, so it was dark. We started running until we got to the water. We saw the boat, but when we put everything and ourselves inside it, it was too small. I told the smuggler, "This is no good, man, 20 people inside one small boat. How will you get us there in this?" He said it was not up to me. It was not my business. "Just sit, don't go making a problem."

We arrived 40 or 45 minutes later, I don't know, I don't remember. We landed at a place called Mytilene. We jumped into the water and saw the mountains, some small roads, and also some lights. We started moving with the children and the ladies. We didn't know the place. We walked for 18 hours until the next night had passed. Then the police came. I told them we were all Afghan people and we had come from Turkey. A big van came and took us to the police station and then to jail. There were just five rooms there, but there were too many Afghan people living there — boys, men, children, and women. After seven days they gave us some papers and a blanket. They asked me if I had money and I told them yes. I showed him 100 euros and hid my other money. He told me to buy a ticket to Athens, which I did.

I arrived at 8 o'clock in the morning in Victoria Park and I saw too many Afghan people living there. They told me that with food, with showers, with bathrooms, with one blanket, and one mattress, houses cost 250 euros per month. I told them that was too much money. The Afghan people told me to go and sleep in Alexan-

dra Park. There are still lots of Afghans living there now, you can see them, young boys smoking heroin, smoking hashish. It's a bad life here.

I met some other interpreters who had been smuggled in two years ago. They had been arrested and sent to a detention camp for 18 months. After eventually proving that they were genuine asylum seekers, they were released and given amnesty, but they couldn't find work and had also run out of money.

The police here are always arresting Afghan people or other peoples — Somalis, Iranians, Pakistanis, Bangladeshis.

We live in one room. Five people sleep in one room together. There is a bathroom but no warm water. Every day I wash my body with ice water, hot water is too expensive. We have no work, no income, and we have to pay \$150 a month for this room.

We had a little savings but every day we take a little something away, when we get some eggs, to make a little meal. We didn't have any problems like this in my country. I had a good life in Afghanistan, a very good life, but I left that life. I sold my car. I lost everything. We had to come here, where there are big problems for us. We don't have our own place to stay. We don't have bread for eating. We don't have money to go somewhere, to buy a ticket for the bus or the metro. Sometimes I call my family in Afghanistan and tell them I'm in a bad situation, I ask if they can send me a little bit of money. Sometimes they do, but most of the time they can't.

When I left my country, I paid more than \$55,000 because I came with my family, my mother, and my brother. Now I have finished my money. I've been here more than two years.

I hadn't committed a crime when I came. I just didn't have the right papers. They sent me to a place that is worse than prison. Prison is better. In prison there is a place for sleeping, for eating, for meeting people. In prison they have to give you everything. In the camp, they don't give you good food. You don't have any possibilities, nothing. I was there for two months and my family didn't know anything about me. Only after two months did I have the possibility to call them from my mobile phone. They said, "Where are you? Are you alive?"

I had to pay a lawyer to get me released. Then I paid many times for the room and I tried to send money to my mother and brother. Now all the money is gone. Now it's down to zero. Now I don't know what to do. I think my life is finished. You have no idea how I feel.

My life was in danger. I couldn't stay in Afghanistan anymore. The Taliban shot me outside my home. They gave me warnings, many, many times. They told me to help them. They are Pashtun, like me. They speak my language. They are from my area. And I didn't do it. They told me, "You must. You are Muslim. You are Pashtun. We need your help. You must give us your car." My car had a card in the window. It allowed me to go into the big camp of the Americans. The Taliban told me they would pay me for my car and the card. I understood that they wanted to use it for bad things, so I said, "I cannot do that." They said, "If you don't do that, you will have problems." I said, "I cannot. This is my job."

And for that, they gave me three warnings. I have the letters that they sent me. And then finally they attacked me. It was nighttime and I was walking home. They were waiting for me. I saw a man take out his gun, so I ran toward the door. I managed to get into the doorway when he started firing. He hit me in the leg and it was only by chance that I got inside. So I understood that my life is in danger. I was afraid and I escaped, I left the country straight away, I didn't have time for anything else.

I'm a good person. I have good qualities. I was born in Kabul, I studied and my father was a pilot. I only took the job because I thought it was right and it was good for my country, for me and for my future. But I never thought that this would happen to me.

We walked to Turkey through Iran, illegally. We were walking and climbing mountains for 13 days. In Turkey I was captured twice and deported to Afghanistan. As soon as I got back I left again. My mother, my father, my wife, we all just cried. But I had to leave my country. My uncle's son, he's dead, I have a photo. I have five brothers. Two brothers, I don't know where they are now, because they were also working for the Americans. One of them, I think, went to Iran; the other, I think, he went to Pakistan. I don't know.

I supported the Americans. I really supported them. I didn't do anything wrong. I didn't help the Taliban and for that I am now in this situation — because I didn't do what they said.

The police arrest us here all the time. They say, "Hey, don't speak. Let's go to police station. I check your document, after you can go." I do this three times with the

same policeman, three times in one day, for two, three hours each time. We go inside, they check us, we go out again and on the street they catch me again. I say, "I came from the police station just now. What more do you want from me?" They say they have to check me again. I say, "Again, for what?"

The problem is our faces are foreign faces, you know? When they see us in the road, they understand where we are from and they stop us. Everywhere. And they check our papers.

For many foreigners who come here, it's a very difficult situation. I feel very sad. I gave them proof that I have the right to be here and get asylum. But I still had to pay. I still got sent to prison. What more do they want from me?

Now I'm very sick. You can see all my hair is going. It's because all the time I am thinking about my wife, my family, and my life. I never used medicine in Afghanistan, ever in my life. But in this country I use it. I go to the doctor many, many times. Here I have a doctor who gives me medicine for depression, all because of thinking too much about my life. My mother is 70 years of age, and she's in a very bad situation now. My brother is the same. They are crying for me, I am crying for them. They made it to Italy, but they're in prison. She's sick; many times we spoke and she needs attention. I cannot live like this. I don't have possibility to do something for her.

My mother had to leave because of me. When we had problems, I didn't have anybody. I had to take my mother with me. Where should I leave my mother in Afghanistan? Who's ready to take his mother of 70 in

this way? In Iran, they fired at us many, many times as we crossed the border. My mother accepted this for my brother and me. We understood that really we would die one day and very soon if we stayed. So we left. I didn't have time to try and leave legally or get a visa.

First of all, I trust our God, and then we trust American people. They came to Afghanistan to finish off the terrorists. We thought they'd bring peace; working together with Afghan politicians, with the Afghan mujahideen, with Afghan soldiers, they would make it happen. That's why we had to help them. We joined them and travelled to different places, dangerous places. We were in many fights with the Taliban. Then I started to get contacted from different people on my mobile phone. They said they'd kill me because I helped the Americans. I don't know if it was the Taliban; some mujahideen also hate the American soldiers.

After the job, the American soldiers I worked with said they would give me some letters for their government. They said, "We will help every interpreter." But they gave me nothing. No papers, no recommendation letters. I was alone in Afghanistan. I don't know where they are. I don't have any contact with those soldiers. So I couldn't apply for a visa. They promised all of the interpreters, not just me — everyone working inside the American bases. American soldiers promised these people, "After you leave your jobs, we'll support you to leave Afghanistan, to go to different countries to save your life." But now I know, they didn't give help to those people.

I joined with the Americans. That's my mistake. But I would request to other Afghan people, please do not help the Americans. Don't work with them, or the British, because they all lie. They promise anything to any Afghan, but then they don't help you. If you help the Americans, you'll end up the same as me, sleeping in parks with nothing, no food and no money. Don't break your future in this place.



Courtesy of Matt Zeller

JANIS SHINWARI is probably the most famous of the interpreters who made it to the States. He was only granted a visa after a US Army veteran and former CIA officer, Matt Zeller, spent years campaigning for him. Janis had saved Matt's life in Ghazni, a heavily contested province in eastern Afghanistan where the Taliban have a strong presence, and Matt had promised Janis he would do everything he could if Janis ever needed anything. The two of them now live a short drive away from each other in Virginia, where Janis is struggling to find work. He was allowed to bring his wife and two kids to America, but not his parents. Unlike their Iraqi counterparts, Afghans can only bring their spouses and any children under the age of 21 with them. Like many conditions of the Special Immigrant Visa program, no one has any idea why this is the case, especially not when parents and brothers of interpreters have already been killed in retribution for the work the interpreters did.

I spent a day with Matt and Janis. They told me how they had met and how hard it had been to get Janis out, despite the obvious service he had performed and the threat he had faced.

Janis: The biggest thing was, for us, that when I landed in the United States, I said, "I'm safe." No more fear. No more fights. And we can go everywhere.

Matt: Yeah, you could see the sigh of relief on his face. You could just... it was palpable. I mean, it was just right there.

Matt took us to lunch at his favorite restaurant, a BBQ place on the ground floor of his apartment building. Matt said he had a "never-ending quest" to get Janis to love American food. He pointed out the dishes Janis had to avoid because they contained pork and insisted he try the burnt ends in beef dishes.

Matt: I met Janis the first week I got to Afghanistan, in April 2008. We'd gotten down to our base, FOB Vulcan in Ghazni. I only met him briefly in passing. They basically brought all the interpreters on the base and introduced us. I just said, "Hey, I'm Matt. I look forward to working with you." And that was it. I didn't realize that a week later he'd be saving my life.

We were in this horrible firefight. We were pinned down, surrounded by 45 members of the Taliban versus 15 of our guys. I was one of those 15. We were running out of bullets. I was out of grenades. This firefight had been going on for about an hour. I had already been almost blown up three or four times, with rounds landing right next to me, and this mortar hit about two or three meters away from me. It sent me flying into this ditch.

I thought, Okay, that's it. That last one was way too close. I'm going to die now. And literally, you couldn't have scripted it better, in terms of a Hollywood movie. At the absolute moment of total despair, somebody yelled out, "Zeller, don't shoot to your six, friendlies to your rear." And I turned to see these three armored Hummers tearing up like bats out of hell coming to save us. The lead vehicle got there and it was driven by this US Army sergeant, who threw open his door and goes, "Aye sir! I heard you're in a pickle. I brought an MK-19 grenade launcher. Where you want it?"

I pointed up at this ridgeline and said, "Kill everything that moves up there." They went for it, but I started taking fire again. So I'm starting to return fire, when all of a sudden I feel somebody land right next to me. And before I can turn to see who it is, I hear the unmistakable sound of an AK-47 being shot right next to my head. I turn and it's Janis who has just shot and killed

these two Taliban fighters who were creeping up from behind me to get me. And if he hadn't been there, I'd be dead. Hands down, they either would have shot me in the back or dragged me away and killed me on the spot. Had it not been for him, I would not be sitting here.

And from that point on, I made sure that he and I were connected at the hip for the rest of my deployment. He became my personal interpreter. We ate every meal together. We basically went everywhere together. I almost never let him out of my sight. And so my tour ends around Christmas 2008. He had saved my life in April. They had us all gathered, waiting for our flight home. We're no longer on this small outpost. And he'd come to the front gate to say our goodbyes, and I looked at him and said, "Brother, I promise you I'm going to do whatever it takes to repay this debt. I'm going to get you to America. I don't know what it's going to take, but I promise I will not stop until I've gotten you to safety." And he said, "Okay, thank you. We will see."

I flew home and we spoke every day, either via Skype or Facebook. In 2009, he got transferred to Kabul because his name had been added to the Taliban kill list for having saved my life and others. He was told, "It's too dangerous to stay, they know who you are. They're hunting you."

So I called him up and I said, "You know, there's this visa process, do you want to apply?" And he says, "No, I love Afghanistan. I'm safe here in Kabul. Things are good now. I think it'll be okay."

Then two years go by and finally, in 2011, a US officer I was working with said, "Look, I know you're real close with Janis. We have to let you know he's

basically under a ton of threats now and I'm going to be helping him apply for his visa, but he'd like you to be his sponsor."

I said, "Sure, not a problem."

I thought it would take a couple of months at the most. But much to our absolute dismay, two years later, it's the summer of 2013, and we're still waiting. We haven't heard a thing. The State Department had interviewed Janis, made him do the medical screening. But then, nothing. It was just like his case had disappeared into a void, never to be heard from again. And so for the time being we were just in this weird sort of holding pattern. The threats had gotten so bad that he had to actually live on the US base. He couldn't go home anymore. He hadn't seen his family for almost two years because it was too dangerous to go and see them.

And then in July 2013, I was sitting on my computer when he sends me a Facebook message and he says, "Brother, I just got word they're going to lay off all the interpreters on the base because the US unit we are supporting is leaving and there's no replacement unit coming after them, which means we're all going to lose our jobs. We all have to move off the base and we're all going to be exposed. It's only a matter of time before the Taliban catch us and kill us. You have until October to save my life." So I went into overdrive. I started calling up all my friends in the State Department asking for help. They basically said, "We're powerless. You need to get some Congressional action and maybe some media attention."

So I started a petition and within a couple of weeks we had a couple thousand signatures. Yahoo News heard about it, we did an interview and they made it their

front-page story. Within 72 hours, we had over 100,000 signatures and several members of Congress asking how can they help. There was a lot of media attention. And then much to our absolute joy, within a day or two of hitting more than 100,000 signatures, the State Department called up Janis and told him his visa had been approved. We were all overjoyed. We were celebrating and making plans for his arrival in the US.

They told him he could only come with one suitcase per family member. So he had to sell his house, quit his job, get rid of all his things, and consolidate his life into one suitcase per family member. And he does all this, just as they instruct him to. He sold his home, was living out of a relative's place, changing locations every night because he's afraid the Taliban might come and find him, and the State Department sent him a message. I'll never forget this.

It was two in the morning here in the US, and he sends me another Facebook message just as I'm about ready to go to bed. He says, "The embassy just called me and says there's a problem with my visa and I need to bring my passports to the embassy. This happened to my cousin. When he went there they actually took away his visa and said, 'Your visa's been revoked; you're never going to the US.' I'm terrified. Do you think I should just spend all of my life's savings and buy plane tickets now?"

I called up his lawyers and they said that if he gets on a plane there's no way they're going to let him into the country, that visa's likely been turned off even though he physically holds it. They said I had to get them to turn it back on, but they've never heard of anyone having their visa reinstated. That's what I was up against.

So I called the embassy and they forwarded me to a mailbox that nobody answered, a voice mailbox. Finally I got ahold of an actual American who tells me that they can't help me, that there's no way to appeal this, that Janis has the email address which he should send all correspondence to. And I've been emailing this email address. They'd said that for reasons of national security, we had to make a different decision. And that's the end of it. His visa was revoked.

I call every press person that had been a part of this, told them what had happened and that Janis was now on his way to an early death in Afghanistan because we're screwing up. So they made this big media story.

I found out from some friends of mine in the State Department that the Taliban had followed his story. They saw that Janis had been given his visa and they knew that their only chance to kill him was to keep him in Afghanistan. So they used the tip line at the US embassy, for Afghans to call in anonymous tips about potential attacks. They used that tip line and called it up and said, "Janis Shinwari is actually a member of the Taliban working for us all these years. And he's going to kill Americans." That triggered a knee-jerk reaction.

Forget the fact that he has been fighting for us for seven years and saved my life and the lives of four other soldiers. Forget the fact he has been the personal interpreter for 12 US senators. That apparently isn't good enough. They'd spent three years investigating him. The FBI, the CIA, the NSA, you name it, and they found nothing. And yet one anonymous, bogus tip comes in and suddenly all of that investigation just gets tossed out? And he's now screwed. He's now going to die a horrific death in Afghanistan?

I started arranging meetings with members of Congress, talking to anyone in the press who would listen, just anything I could think of. Ultimately I made such a political stink about it that the State Department knew they couldn't just toss this guy back into the wind. I emailed the former ambassador, the current ambassador, General Joseph Dunford, anyone who would listen. I was not going to let this die. Eventually the CIA came in and polygraphed Janis twice, and he passed with flying colors. That was enough for them to say, beyond a reasonable doubt, that he was not a bad guy. They turned his visa back on a couple of weeks later and by the end of October, he was in America.

It had taken three years. Three years of sitting around waiting with no response whatsoever other than, "We're still looking into it." That was it. Three years of absolute silence.

More importantly, no one should have to go to this level of an effort to honor, to ultimately honor our nation's promise and commitment. But we'd done it. I thought, Okay, this is great. I got my last member, my buddy, out. But because we got all this press coverage, Janis and I have become the people that Afghans, and other American veterans who want to save Afghans, come to for help. And the scariest part about this is, it isn't repeatable. This is the one time that I'm ever going to be able to do something like this. It's not news anymore.

So all the other interpreters are now in what's called the administrative review process, where they have the US intelligence community investigate their background. And they just languish. They sit there for

years, untouched. No one is coordinating the process. And sometimes the easiest thing for these people to do is have a mindset where they don't want to let these people in. The easiest thing for them to do is to just not make any decision at all. And just say, "Well, it's still being investigated." And the effect is still the same. The interpreters are still trapped and stuck in Afghanistan.

One Marine came to us for help. His interpreter just got here last month. While he was waiting for his visa to be approved, his father was killed and his younger brother was kidnapped, just because the Taliban were trying to get to him.

There was another interpreter who applied for a visa. While he was waiting, he went to meet his parents. When he got there, the Taliban killed him in front of his family. They decapitated him.

That's the fate that awaits these people, our allies. And if these were US soldiers, or American citizens, we would move heaven and Earth to save them. There would be no expense spared.

One of the interpreters Matt and Janis are now trying to rescue is called Qadeer, whom they had both worked alongside in Afghanistan. I had interviewed him in Kabul. It was his house that was shot up by the Taliban, and his father who had agreed to look after his wife and kids should he decide to get smuggled out of Afghanistan.

After several failed attempts, Qadeer finally appeared on Skype, where the weak signal meant that his image kept freezing and only the light from his laptop screen lit his face, giving him a ghostly appearance. He ex-

plained that they didn't have electricity and only had tiny battery-powered flashlights for light. Matt told him that a petition to get his case reviewed (he had been approved for, then denied a visa) had attracted more than 10,000 signatures. But Qadeer didn't seem to take any hope from this.

Qadeer: Last night I just received a call and an email that were very hopeless. A captain I worked with said President Karzai just released many, many of the prisoners from Bagram that me and Janis arrested. All those leaders, they were released from jail. We arrested them in Ghazni and Bagram and other places, and they know us because we sneaked into their houses and a couple times we attacked them. They were all released. The situation here in Afghanistan, day by day, is going to be worse. We could actually lose everything. My case is actually blocked and nobody knows who to ask about my problem. I went to the Ministry of Interior but they said they could not do anything. They told me that if I want someone to be responsible for me, then it is America who should be responsible.

He then announced that his wife had just given birth the night before, to their third daughter. Matt and Janis congratulated him and for the first time since we'd started talking, if only for a minute or two, they were both smiling broadly.

Qadeer: We didn't name her yet. We have to wait for my father. He's a little sick. He went to the hospital, but when he comes back he will pick the name.

He then went straight back to talking about his case.

Qadeer: The problem is, I don't know why I am stuck. I helped the Americans. I told those guys I helped them, but who cares? I helped the Americans and I did a service for this country. I did very honest work but there is no place for me and I cannot appeal. I'm so disappointed that sometimes I talk to myself and I swear. I ask myself, Why did I work with Americans? Why?



Lucian Read

Every night there is a very bad situation going on outside, in the streets. There's no government, no security, no nothing. We are stuck and we don't know what will happen. Why am I stuck? Why won't they re-interview me?

Matt winced with each sentence.

Matt: I can only say on behalf of my country and everybody you ever worked with, I'm sorry. We're... you're absolutely right. What we're doing is entirely wrong. It's reprehensible. It's a disgrace. It's an embarrassment and it's something that I am profoundly, profoundly upset about. And I promise you I am not going to stop fighting for you until we get this resolved. All right? I'm deeply... I am so sorry. We owe you. You've done so much for our country. You deserve to be sitting here with Janis and I as an American. I'm sorry we are

not holding up our end of the bargain. I'm sorry, I really am. And I'm not... I'm not going to forget about you, brother. All right? You just got to hang in there.

Qadeer thanked Matt for all his efforts but had more startling news.

Qadeer: Sometimes now I go outside for work. I have been hiding for too long at home. There is no income, sir. Day by day my economic situation is going down and down. For that reason I had to go outside and start working as a taxi driver. You don't know, but the money I saved before, I have spent. Everything is very expensive, so I cannot just hide at home anymore. We will see what will happen. I cannot stay at home because there is no income. I have a big family. I have three daughters. They need food and many things. So I go out, driving a taxi and I make, like, five or eight dollars a day. I do it just to bring a few things home, some food. I need it now. I need to work.

The Skype connection was lost again, and Matt and Janis digested what Qadeer had just told them.

Matt: These people are going to get killed. And for people who make policy, it's an abstract concept, these are people they've never met before. But for a guy like me who was on the front lines, it's like these are my brothers that I'm thinking about.

Janis: The situation is getting worse. I'm talking to many people. Many people, they are sending me emails and messages to help them. They are cases just like Qadeer's where there is no cooperation. If the situation changes just a little bit, these people are the first

targets. And the ones who got released from the jail? They're not like the thousands of other Taliban, they are the commanders, the ones making decisions, big commanders ordering the other Taliban to go attack and kill people.

Matt: They remember, and they're going to exact their revenge. They told you just that. The first people they are going to kill are those who collaborated with the Americans.

And now Qadeer is not just visible, he's remarkably visible. It'd be one thing if, you know, he'd be working in a back room somewhere stocking shelves or working as a day laborer. But he is driving around picking people up.

Janis: Yeah, he's an easy target for the Taliban. But he has to do something because he just got a baby. The kids need clothes. They need food. It's winter, they need boots.

I asked Matt and Janis if they were nervous every time they switched on their computers or checked Facebook. They both said they were.

Janis: I'm getting a lot of messages, even from the Americans who are here now, because we were in the news. They say, "I need Matt's number, I need to talk to him to help my interpreter because he's stuck in Afghanistan." And interpreters are sending me messages and emails: "Please Janis, help us, talk to Matt, can you talk to the press or the media because we are stuck in Afghanistan?"

After we were on Voice of America [the channel in Afghanistan], people said I was a CIA agent. They said I saved an American life and killed my own country-

men. So this has a very bad image in Afghanistan. They think I killed some civilian and I saved an American life. They didn't mention that I killed Taliban and I saved my brother's life, my friend's life. And that message, even in our area, even in our village, everyone told my family, my father-in-law, and my in-laws' family that I killed some Afghans and saved American lives. So normal people, not the Taliban, people in my village, they think I am a special person for the United States government. They think that I was working as a spy for the CIA. Every day I am getting messages accusing me of this.

Matt: And we get two or three a day asking for help. Two or three a day from Afghans I've never met before. They ask Janis, "Do you know this person?" And I get two or three a day from American soldiers. They find me on Twitter or Facebook. They start looking into this problem. They Google "SIV" and my name comes up. The coverage comes up. They say, "You seem to have more success than anybody else, how do I do this?" And I usually spend like the next hour with them on the phone, walking them through all the steps that they have to take.

I asked what impact it had on veterans when they couldn't get their interpreters out. Matt sighed.

Matt: I mean, I can only imagine if it was the way it was with me and Janis. Sleepless nights just totally drumming up all this stuff that you have to work through and just constantly... I mean... PTSD happens, you end up having panic attacks. I remember the night when they took away his visa, I couldn't sleep for two days and was just an emotional wreck, and I remember

calling my mom in tears and I said, “Mom,” I said, “I’ve killed my best friend.” It was catch 22. To get the State Department to do the right thing, I had to go to the press and sort of embarrass them into action, but by doing that I exposed the fact that he got his visa and now he’s going to die and it’s my fault. I didn’t know how I was supposed to live with this. I still can’t even put it into words. You can see it freaks me out just thinking about what would happen to him.

We all think that the State Department has absolutely no idea what’s going on, on the ground, they don’t understand these men and women and none of us can understand how they can possibly claim that these people don’t deserve a place here, after what they’ve done for us. I’ve yet to encounter an American veteran who was like, “You know, my translator was kind of useless.”

I think there’s a prevailing attitude at the State Department. I think it drives every single decision that these people are making. The average length of tour for, like, a consulate affairs officer is six months; they don’t get outside the massively guarded embassy compound in Kabul, they’re having salsa nights, they’ve got fast food. They’re not living and working with these people on a daily basis, and they’re told that they’re the front line of defense. They’re the first check to make sure that somebody doesn’t get into this country that doesn’t belong here, and so their attitude is, all of these people are potentially the next Bin Laden and they’re looking for a reason to say no.

If you’re the State Department, consulate affairs guy, and you’ve got Qadeer’s visa packet, this is a person you’ve never met, who you’ll never see again, and you’ll likely never hear what happened to him. It’s out of

sight, out of mind. If for some reason you accidentally said yes when you should have said no, you’re going to be in front of Congress, and you’re going to be yelled at or fired... so it’s easier to say no.

They need to realize that this monolithic idea that all Afghans are the enemy is not true, it’s absurd. It’s the exact opposite. That’s why the effort that I’m putting in is the exact same effort I would put in for any American. The only difference is that there are times that I feel like I’m fighting this all by myself. If this were an American, I’d have every available means. I wouldn’t be leading this, it’d be someone much more senior. I’m doing this as a private citizen. I mean that’s what’s terrifying.

Janis showed me another message that had just arrived. Another American veteran was asking for their help.



Lucian Read

Matt: This is why we ended up starting a nonprofit. We call it No One Left Behind because that’s our mission, that’s our goal. We don’t want to leave a single person behind. We were getting inundated with so many requests that we had to start an organization to formally help these men and women and establish a process and get it going.

I mean, to me personally, the Army has certain values, right? The very first one is loyalty. How are we remaining loyal to those who have been loyal to us if we're not fulfilling our promise? This was an inherent promise we made to these men and women to do right by them. And as an officer of this country, as someone who still wears a uniform, I will do anything I can to fulfill that promise and I'll gladly go back into combat if it's necessary. But if you're going to ask me to fight alongside people who support us and become our allies, people like Janis and Qadeer, and if you're telling me that I can say to them, "Hey, because of your service and support, we're going to bring you to America if necessary," then allow me to fulfill that promise. Because if you don't, then my word is worthless and why should anybody ever trust me again?

I've been to Afghanistan 12 times since 2007, when it had become clear that the Taliban were far from defeated. During those early trips, there were plenty of people who believed the intervention could succeed. But over the last few years, and especially after the withdrawal began, I've failed to find anyone who still believes that any of our stated goals — defeating the Taliban; training the Afghan security forces; leaving a lawful, competent, and representative government in Kabul; or even removing al Qaeda — will be achieved. What we are actually leaving behind is a spectacularly corrupt government whose security forces often prey on the population they are supposed to be protecting. It is no longer a surprise to be told by Afghan villagers that for security and justice, they prefer to live under the Taliban, who are in control of more territory now than they have been since losing power in 2001.

Considering this is the situation, it feels like a sick joke to demand that interpreters like Qadeer and Janis must prove that they face a serious and ongoing threat. I'd love to hear someone from the State Department explain how any single interpreter could not now be facing a serious and ongoing threat. I asked how it felt to be asked to prove something that seemed so obvious.

Matt: It totally pissed me off. My word isn't good enough? He's got to provide evidence? I'm an officer of this country. I have a top-secret security clearance. You're telling me my word isn't good enough, my report, and my eyewitness account aren't good enough?

You pay me to be an intelligence officer of this country. My whole job was to make sure that these aren't bad people, that they should be working with us. For me, it'd be like if I came home and somebody says, "Well, prove that you got blown up." Are you kidding me? Do you want to see the x-rays of my lungs and all the scar tissue from the massive fireball that I breathed in? Do you want to see, basically, the fact that I have no cartilage in my right knee anymore? Or the nightmares I have every night? Do you want to talk to my ex-wife about how I used to wake up screaming for two years every single night? I mean that would piss me the fuck off. That's what they're doing to these people and these are combat veterans. You're telling them that they actually have something to prove when they could easily be the next person that the Taliban are going to catch and kill?

And then after you make them prove that, you tell them, "Thank you very much, we're not going to tell you whether or not we believe you this time, we'll get back to you." I mean, we wouldn't stand for this in this country,

and I don't think any other country would stand for this treatment, so why are we asking our friends to?

Janis: When the Americans first came to Afghanistan, they showed me a video of President Bush. He said, "We will fight until we eradicate or destroy al Qaeda from Afghanistan." And everyone was hoping that, yes, this will happen and we will get rid of bad people. I thought I would work for America for maybe months or even years. After that, the US will leave and Afghanistan will be a peaceful country. We can join the government and we can have a good life. But we saw this fight for almost 13 years and still the situation is getting worse. More people are dying every day. And now in this bad situation, the Americans say they are withdrawing. If it happens, I guarantee the Taliban will attack and they will get Afghanistan in a couple of days.



Lucian Read

Matt: A couple of days after that firefight, we were all coming to terms with what we'd just gone through. I sat Janis down and I wanted to know everything about him. I wanted to understand who he was, where he was coming from, and why he did this. And never once did he say, "I'm doing it to come to America." I asked him, "Why are you fighting for us?" And he said, "Because

I love my country and I hate the Taliban, and this is my country and they've got to go."

We had a vision of what we'd achieve in Afghanistan. If that's not going to be the result, and if the interpreters are going to end up being killed because they worked with us to try to achieve that vision, they should be coming home with us as well. If it's all going to fall apart after we go, which it's looking like it's going to, then we need to do everything we possibly can to save them. I said it time and time again: Janis and Qadeer were members of my unit. They are still working. They are still deployed, still at war. As an officer, as their officer, it's my job to bring them back home.

While we were driving into DC after lunch, Matt and Janis got a phone call. Another interpreter, called Ajmal, had just arrived in DC. He'd been granted a visa, and had to wait for seats on an official International Organization of Migration (IMO) flight. But the Taliban heard he had been approved and sent him night letters (letters left on his doorstep during the night) promising they would not let him leave the country alive. He scraped together what money he could and bought tickets on the next flight out, to Dubai and then to DC. He had arrived with his wife but they had nowhere to stay and just a few dollars for food. He sent messages to everyone he knew and an American soldier offered his dining room floor as a temporary home. Some other interpreters heard about him, and they were outside his building by the time we arrived.

Ajmal: I have been here six days now. We were alone on the streets, now we are sleeping on an air mattress.

When I received my visa, I was going to wait to catch the arranged flight. But then I received the night letter and seven or eight threatening calls and I thought with myself, If I'm gonna wait for the approved flight, I'll be dead. I barely had any money so I borrowed money, sold my car, and bought my own tickets. I got in touch with my previous supervisor from the US Navy who picked us up from the airport and brought us here, to his dining room.

I sent the State Department an email the next morning explaining my situation. I told them that we have no place to live and no money at all. I didn't receive any response, only an auto reply. We also went to the Office of Refugees and Resettlement. I asked for the benefits we were promised and a Social Security number. The only thing they gave us was \$313 in food stamps and \$300 in cash. And I can't continue my life with this money. So I became very serious and sent another email stating, "Well, sir, I would have been better off dying in Afghanistan because there's no — I mean, housing or nothing more here."

The trouble is that when they arrange your flight, it can take four or five months. So because of the night letters I couldn't wait. Once I borrowed the money, I didn't even tell my relatives that I was coming here because I can't trust them. So we came directly here and we thank my previous supervisor for our lives, because he gave us a temporary place to live in order to find work. I need to work if there are no benefits for me. I cannot rent a place with \$300. But I cannot stay in this man's dining room. He is eating here so it means I am causing a disturbance for him. I will be an intruder if I'm going to spend more nights here.

One of the other interpreters told him that he could move in with him, saying, "Hey, brother, you are welcome. My house is your house." Matt promised they would raise some money for them and promised he would "fight my ass off to get your benefits back."

Ajmal had to pay for his medical certificates twice because the first one had expired. Added to the \$2,600 he had to spend on getting the first flight out of Afghanistan, he was now broke.

Ajmal said that all he needed was a mattress and a blanket, which Matt and the interpreters promised they could get. Matt was ashamed to see someone he held in such high regard humiliated like this.

Matt: You shouldn't have to come here like this, it's wrong, and I'm really sorry. But you're here now and we're gonna take care of you. All right? You took care of us when we were in your country so I'm more than happy to return the favor, brother. All right?

Ajmal: Thank you sir.

Matt: You're not alone, okay? You got brothers now who are gonna take care of you. You're part of our family now. I'm not saying it's gonna be easy but we'll take this one day at a time and at least we can get you things. You're here now. You're safe. That's the best part. You should have been brought over on a nice plane, sat down and told, "This is your house and welcome to America, thank you for serving our country." But what's good is that you're here now and you're safe and that's the most important thing. You're safe, and you and your wife are alive and you're good now. And you have a bunch of new friends.

Ajmal thanked him again, and was struggling not to weep. He'd obviously been keeping himself together for days as he tried to navigate a way out of this crisis for himself and his wife, who was ill. Now that the worst of his problems might be over, he looked as if he was about to collapse. On the verge of sobbing, he told the rest of his story.

Ajmal: I had no money. Zero. So my family, my friends, they borrowed some money and I borrowed it from them. And now they're asking for the money back, but I don't have enough to send them. My father and my mother, they are about to sell their own house and be homeless in order to pay my money. These are the problems we have and we would like to ask the US government to find a solution for these kinds of problems.

We worked in Afghanistan. We were helping our army and our country, but we were also helping the American Army, standing side by side with the Americans.

I've been more than 10 times, 20 times, 50 times under attack. Rocket attack, RPG attack, different attacks. We were all working together, me and thousands and thousands of other interpreters. We could be hunted at any time.

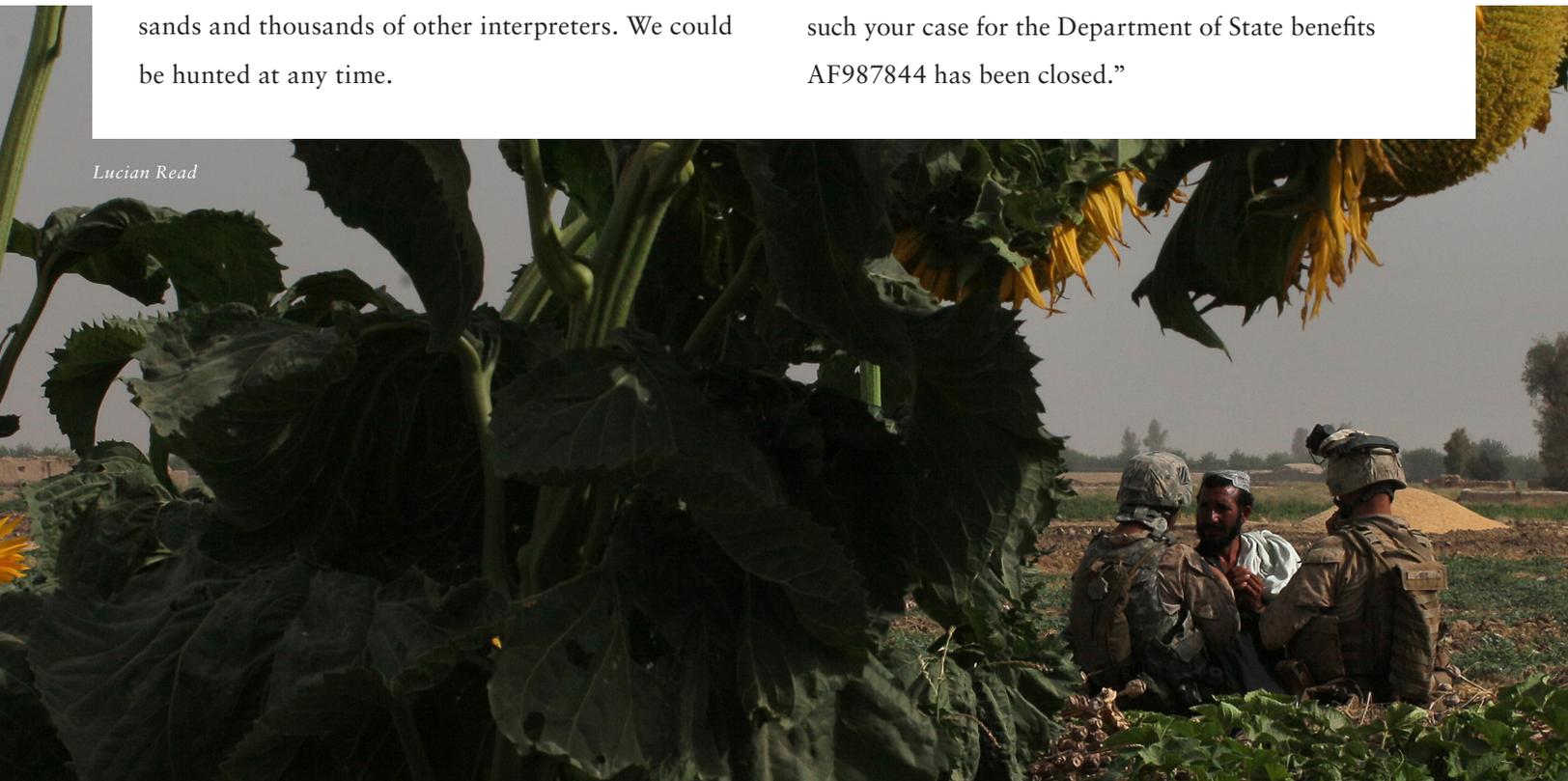
He had even heard about Janis, and the struggle he had to get out.

Ajmal: Believe me, that day that I heard that your visa was revoked, I started to cry. I swear that I cried when I heard that. You faced a very bad situation in Afghanistan. I spoke with my family about it and said that I was really, really sorry for this guy whose life was in danger. I read all the stories that were written about you and tears came in my eyes.

Ajmal looked at his phone and read a message that startled him. He had received an email from the State Department, a reply to his message about having to flee as soon as possible. He read it out loud to us.

“Thank you for confirming that you have arrived in the United States. In order to qualify for Department of State resettlement benefits, SIV recipients must arrive to the US on an IOM arranged flight. As you arrived to the US on your own flight, you are no longer eligible for the Department of State Resettlement benefits. As such your case for the Department of State benefits AF987844 has been closed.”

Lucian Read



By the Iraqi Refugee Assistance Project

The Iraqi Refugee Assistance Project (IRAP) organizes law students and lawyers to develop and enforce a system of legal and human rights for refugees through a combination of direct legal aid and broad policy advocacy. IRAP utilizes a network of more than 1,000 law students and lawyers at 26 law schools and more than 50 global law firms to provide direct legal assistance to refugees and their families, give clinical legal education to law students, and do policy advocacy work. Its clients include Iraqis and Afghans persecuted because of their work with the United States; survivors of trafficking and domestic and sexual abuse; persecuted LGBT individuals; children with medical emergencies; and survivors of torture. It leverages its individual casework to advocate for broad systemic reforms within national and international refugee resettlement regimes, enabling refugees and displaced persons to better enforce their human rights.

For more information, visit refugeerights.org. If you or someone you know needs legal assistance, please email info@refugeerights.org.

Congress created the Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) program for Afghan Allies in order to provide life-saving protection to the thousands of Afghan men and women who risked their lives to assist with the US mission in Afghanistan. The program went through various iterations following the US invasion of Afghanistan, but its final version passed in May of 2009 as the Afghan Allies Protection Act. The Act provided for 1,500 visas per year for five years for Afghans who could demonstrate that their lives were at risk because they had provided “faithful and valuable service” to the United States in Afghanistan.

Unfortunately, the legislation has largely failed to live up to its name. During the first three years of the program, 2010–2012, the State Department approved a paltry 32 visas.

The failure of the US Embassy in Kabul to get the program up and running, according to the clear congressional mandate, may have been deliberate. In 2012, the Washington Post reported that, following the passage of the legislation, officials at the US embassy in Kabul worried that the program could drain the US embassy of local employees. Then-US Ambassador to Afghanistan Karl Eikenberry went so far as to cable then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in February 2010 to protest the program.

“This act could drain this country of our very best civilian and military partners: our Afghan employees,” he wrote. “[The SIV program could] have a significant deleterious impact on staffing and morale, as well as undermining our overall mission in Afghanistan. Local staff are not easily replenished in a society at 28 percent literacy.”

The suggestion that the success of the US mission in Afghanistan somehow rested on systematically breaking our promises to protect those who risked their lives to serve with us is naïve at best. Even under the coldest utilitarian calculus, where the value of our interpreters’ lives is solely measured by their ability to continue to work for us, they are not going to be of much service if they are beheaded by the Taliban.

But more to the point, what kind of message does this send to those whose cooperation we seek? There are serious national security implications to failing our al-

lies on the ground. In a region where the United States is already hemorrhaging credibility, do we really want to desert the small group of people who truly believed in our mission? And at some point, we'll be in another country, and we'll need in-country support. And when we ask people on the ground to work with us, maybe they will think twice before signing on.

FAITHFUL AND VALUABLE SERVICE

Applicants for SIVs must first demonstrate that they provided at least 12 months of “faithful and valuable service” to the United States. Under the legislation, this is relatively straightforward — a US citizen supervisor (typically a service member or veteran) writes a letter attesting to the value, loyalty, and length of service of the applicant.

In practice, the US Embassy in Kabul has employed varying and imprecise standards in evaluating the “faithful and valuable service” requirement, denying deserving applicants only to have to evaluate the applicant again when he or she re-applies. It's actually the embassy that often requests applicants to re-apply if they are rejected because it has no kind of formal appeals process. Some of these internal standards have been improved after legislation, congressional inquiries, and media attention have laid them bare. But many inefficient and imprecise systems remain. It is currently our understanding that when SIV applicants' personnel files have any negative information in them, applicants are automatically rejected. However, in many instances, such negative information — such as employment termination — when contextualized, is clearly not the product of unfaithful or invaluable service, and the applicant is not at fault, as numerous US citizens can vouch.

This results in applicants getting rejected for preposterous reasons. We have seen applicants who were fired from their position of employment because they did not get a passing score on a language test the 10th time they took it after passing it the first nine. The embassy does not scratch beyond the surface of the files; they just see that the applicant was “let go” and reject the SIV application. In many other cases, applicants are rejected because they have failed a polygraph test implemented by the defense contractor that retained them. Not only are such tests not a formal US government procedure (rather, they're the internal policy of a private company) but the polygraph itself is so notoriously unreliable that it is banned from being used as evidence in US courts.

For example, “Mark” worked as an interpreter for US forces for three years in some of the most dangerous provinces in Afghanistan. His supervisors wrote that he is “by far the most fluent and skilled linguist in our Task Force.” One recommender recounted that he saved the lives of six US soldiers:

“My Platoon was struck with an IED and [Mark] was instrumental in evacuating the casualties. His actions were crucial in saving the lives of 6 Coalition Forces soldiers in my Platoon. This action alone is enough to warrant citizenship. I have never witnessed this type of valor and courage from a linguist.”

In retaliation for Mark's loyalty to the US troops, the Taliban first dropped two death threats at the door of his home. Then they left an IED and nearly killed him and his family members.

Mark had to take a regular Dari language test administered by Mission Essential Personnel (MEP), the

defense contractor that retains and subcontracts most of the linguists in Afghanistan. Mark had passed the same test previously. However, one of these tests was administered by a local national from a rival tribe, who failed Mark. MEP then fired Mark several weeks later, over the protests from his Task Force supervisors. Mark approached MEP to re-take the test but they refused. Despite having saved the lives of six US soldiers and having the support of multiple US soldiers, the embassy found that the “most skilled” linguist who evinced unique “valor and courage” did not provide “faithful and valuable” service and revoked his embassy approval. Only after Mark appealed and retained legal assistance did the embassy reverse its decision.

In another example, “Mohammed” worked for the US Marines in Afghanistan for more than five years. Periodically, he was given a counterintelligence (CI) test, which involved routine questions about his affiliations and family. In 2013, he was notified that he had failed his last CI test, even though he had given the exact same answers to the exact same questions that he had always given. He was not given any explanation about why he failed; the failure simply resulted in his automatic job termination. It also resulted in his SIV application’s being denied for failure to show “faithful and valuable service” and for “derogatory information,” despite the continued, emphatic support from his US Marine supervisors. With no way to appeal the results of his CI test conducted by his employer, MEP, or to overturn the decision on his SIV denial, Mohammed is jobless and living under constant threat from the Taliban. Just a few months ago, the Taliban shot at his bedroom window. Mohammed feels as if he is now living under a death sentence.

These baseless SIV denials are something that the State Department could easily fix by issuing internal guidance that directs SIV application reviewers to look into applicants’ personnel files in instances of negative employment information, and to determine whether the context renders the negative employment information irrelevant to the “faithful and valuable service” determination.

A SERIOUS AND ONGOING THREAT

The second SIV requirement is that the applicant has experienced or is experiencing a serious and ongoing threat as a result of his or her work for the US government. This also seems like a relatively simple principle to implement: The United States has thousands of pages of federal case law in the domestic asylum context that defines “credible threat” and “persecution.” And just as a basic intuitive matter, it seems clear that if someone is trying to kill you, you are probably under a serious threat.

Unfortunately, this requirement has also proved oddly complicated for the US government to implement. For a period of time, the embassy in Kabul — which is staffed almost exclusively by foreign service officers who are not even permitted to leave the confines of the embassy and have no field experience — did not seem to believe that interpreters were in any kind of peril and that their claims about “serious threat” were exaggerated. We saw a rash of applications, including those of people who had been shot at and received numerous night letters who were denied approval because they were not under any “threat.”

This thinking appeared limited to those whose lives and work existed solely within the walls of the US embassy. Servicemen and women, journalists, civilians — anyone

out in society — universally agreed that Afghans whose affiliation with the United States was known were in constant mortal peril.

IRAP has been working to get these adverse decisions overturned, but this requires a lengthy appeals process, ironically putting applicants even more at risk. As long as the appeal is pending, the ally is still in danger. As one interpreter asked in a Washington Post article, “What’s a serious ongoing threat for them? Do they need someone to bring in my decapitated head?”

BACKGROUND CHECKS

Thankfully, in the past year, the State Department’s approval rate for SIVs has increased dramatically. Between October 2013 and June 2014, 2,300 Afghan SIVs were issued to our allies. But as State’s SIV issuance rate has improved, the long waits that SIV applicants experience are due less to State’s determination of the merits of the applications, and more to the security-check process applicants must undergo before being issued their visas (also referred to as “administrative processing” or “background check”). Applicants continue to wait years in extremely unsafe conditions for their security checks to go through, even when State has already determined that they meet all of the requirements for their SIVs. This problem costs both money and human lives.

In the lead-up to the end of the last federal fiscal year, September 30, 2013, the Iraqi SIV program was set to expire, and the administration undertook an inter-agency process to try and streamline the security-check process. Some progress was made. However, more improvements are still necessary.

“Alaa” worked as the deputy director for a US government contractor for a number of years. Due to the direct threats that her family faced on account of her work, she applied for an SIV several years ago. Two years ago, her 3-year-old son was diagnosed with leukemia. Alaa’s case is now languishing in security checks while her son’s health is rapidly deteriorating. Doctors have told her that with proper treatment, he has a 90 percent chance of survival. Unfortunately, Alaa’s son doesn’t have access to the services or medicine he needs. Alaa is desperate to get her son proper treatment and to get her whole family to safety, but she has no idea who to contact or how to expedite her case at this stage.

“Harry” is in a similar predicament. He spent seven years working for the US Army in Kunar Province. On patrol with US troops, he came under enemy fire multiple times, and when he applied for an SIV, nine US soldiers served as recommenders and recounted his “impeccable character” and “unwavering loyalty,” and noted he was under serious threat. In 2010 the Taliban burned his car, and in 2011 they denounced him in a radio broadcast as working with US troops. He began his SIV application in 2012, and almost two years later he has still not obtained an SIV. In October 2013, the Taliban’s efforts to capture or kill Harry intensified and he was the target of an unsuccessful Taliban ambush when he returned home from the US base. Though he narrowly evaded being killed, upon arriving home, a neighbor warned him that the Taliban had been talking about killing him. At that point, he had been waiting on his background check for three months, and he and his counsel alerted the embassy in Kabul that he was under immediate threat. The embassy did not respond to his requests for expedited processing, and only emailed months later to require Harry and his wife to

pay hundreds of dollars of his minimal savings to obtain new medical checks, because the original medical checks had expired before security checks had cleared. Six months after the attempted assassination, his background check remains pending despite multiple direct threats to his life and the support of nine US soldiers.

WHEN IT'S PERSONAL

Even though these Afghan interpreters served alongside us in the war, they are not considered veterans or “warfighters.” As a result, the Department of Defense has largely declined to be involved in the SIV program. They say they don’t have skin in the game.

But for the servicemen and women who served with our Afghan allies, it is deeply personal. Many of the veterans we speak with say, “You know, Mohammed was essentially a part of our unit. And the rest of our unit was able to come back to the US — but not him.” There are so many Americans who served on the ground with these Afghans and feel deeply obligated to them, but that sense of obligation is not felt at the top. When many of our service members leave Afghanistan, they tell their interpreters, “I’m gonna do everything I can to get you to the United States.” They feel this is tantamount to a promise, and that it is a promise they can keep. It is made in good faith: “You saved my life, I’ll save yours.” But they are not aware of the labyrinthine bureaucracy they will face upon returning home and trying to navigate the actual visa process. From what we have seen, this can also contribute to post-traumatic stress among our veterans, who often feel that they left a member of their platoon — their interpreter — behind to die.

It is challenging for us as their advocates as well.

No other legal channel for getting to the United States requires a US citizen to vouch for what a person has done for this country, that they know them personally, and that they are not a security risk. It’s an astounding thing to ask of someone, and it’s a task that is not taken lightly.

We talk to our Afghan allies every day and listen to their stories. Some have worked for the United States for nine or 10 years. You listen to everything they’ve done for us, everything they’ve gone through, everything their family has suffered. Maybe they’ve survived an IED; maybe they’ve been shot; a family member may have been attacked. Throughout the entire conversation, we are figuring out how we can help, running through the paperwork mentally, starting to feel optimistic about helping another Afghan family get to safety — and then we hear that they have failed a single polygraph test, and we know it’s an almost insurmountable obstacle to getting an SIV in the current system. They tell us, “I’ve done everything I can to help the Americans here, and I was told that I am eligible to apply for this program, and now they are telling me I can’t do it.”

Here we are, a nonprofit organization with a network of nearly 1,000 legal representatives in total. We are lawyers and native English speakers; we have Internet access 24 hours a day, seven days a week. And sometimes we can help them, but sometimes we can’t. And we wonder: How do you do this if your English is not so good, if you have no Internet access, you’re in hiding, and someone is trying to kill you?

IRAP has successfully resettled more than 2,500 refugees from throughout Afghanistan, Iraq, and the Middle East. We have successfully advocated for legislation benefiting more than 80,000 Iraqi and Afghan allies of

the United States. We are enormously proud of all that we have accomplished in just a few years as an organization. But each time we hear that a client's application has been denied because he checked the wrong box or took family leave on the wrong day, we can't help but take it personally, because we do have skin in the game.

THE FUTURE OF THE PROGRAM

There is good news. The State Department has owned up publicly to its past failings. "Bluntly stated," wrote Secretary John Kerry in the *Los Angeles Times* in June 2014, "the process wasn't keeping up with the demand." And State has implemented changes over the past year that prove it can process these visas at a healthy clip if it prioritizes the program and gets its house in order. Just a few weeks before the Iraqi analogue to this program was scheduled to expire in September 2013, the State Department and its partner agencies throughout the federal government were able to process almost the entire backlog of Iraqi SIVs. The lessons learned during that surge of processing carried over into the Afghan SIV program: In the past eight months alone, the State Department has given visas to twice as many Afghans as it had in the prior five years. We need to see this kind of effort continue.

However, as of this writing, the Afghan SIV program is drastically insufficient — both in time and in scale — to address current and projected needs. About 2,500 SIVs are available for Afghans between now and September 30, 2015, and Afghans have to apply for these visas before September 30, 2014. However, an estimated 8,000 Afghans wait somewhere in the backlog — either those whose applications the State Department

hasn't looked at yet, or those who are still waiting for their background checks to go through. And this backlog is only likely to swell further as the American troop withdrawal proceeds. Moreover, the US government's current plan is to keep American troops in Afghanistan through 2016, in which case the need for the SIV program will extend far past its current expiration date as the need for in-country support continues.

Most pressingly, the State Department officially estimates that the current supply of allocated visas will expire in July 2014. In short: We desperately need more visas and more time.

Congress has, over the past year, passed three extensions and expansions to Special Immigrant Visa programs for our wartime allies. The SIV may be one of the only true nonpartisan issues of the day. Yet public attention to this issue will wane as our war in Afghanistan recedes into memory. Without further legislation from Congress soon, the political moment to get this program right will pass too, and thousands of Afghan allies will be left to die.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



David Belluz

BEN ANDERSON is a multi-award winning filmmaker and writer who has been covering foreign conflict for more than 14 years. He began his career as an undercover reporter producing exposés on topics as varied as funeral home abuses, violence among prison officers, the abuse of the mentally ill, and civil war in Burma. A veteran documentarian, Anderson has presented numerous films and series for *BBC* and the *Discovery Channel*. Highlights include *Holidays in the Axis of Evil*, secret travels through six countries blacklisted by the U.S. State Department, including North Korea, Iraq and Iran, *Taking on the Taliban*, following a unit of British soldiers on the front lines in Afghanistan, *The Violent Coast*, a series about the conflicts along the west coast of Africa, *Frontline Football*, chronicling four teams from war-torn nations as they try to qualify for the World Cup, and *Slumdogs and Millionaires*, exposing slave labor in Dubai.

Anderson has spent the last seven years concentrating on the war in Afghanistan, visiting the southern war-torn province of Helmand over a dozen times. During this time, he produced and presented five hard-hitting documentaries, including *The Battle for Marjah* for *HBO*, which won a *History Makers* award, a *Marine Corps*

Heritage Foundation Award and was nominated for three *Emmys*. *The Battle for Bomb Alley* for *BBC1*, followed U.S. Marines as they struggled to reclaim the district of Sangin. His last film from Afghanistan, *This is What Winning Looks Like*, has already won the *Prix Bayeux Award*, the *Frontline Club Award* and been a finalist for a *Royal Television Society* and a *Rory Peck Award*.

Over the course of his career, Anderson has also won a *Foreign Press Award* and was twice shortlisted for the *Royal Television Society Young Journalist of the Year* honor and *Prix Europa* prizes. In addition to writing articles for the *Times*, *Esquire*, *GQ*, and other publications, his book about his experiences in the war-torn southern provinces of Afghanistan, *No Worse Enemy*, was published in March 2012, to critical acclaim.

Anderson is now a senior producer and host for *VICE Media*, and is based in Brooklyn. His films on the drug wars of Rio, the civil war in Yemen, and the forgotten genocide in Sudan is featured on *HBO's* Emmy-nominated series *VICE on HBO*. The series has just been honored by the *Television Academy* at their seventh annual honors, for using the power of television to bring awareness to important social issues.

*If you'd like to support the efforts of those working
on behalf of the interpreters, we recommend the
following organizations:*

NO ONE LEFT BEHIND

nooneleft.org

IRAQI REFUGEE ASSISTANCE PROJECT

refugeerights.org/support-the-work-of-irap