United States Government Accountability Office

Report to the Honorable
Robert Menendez, U.S. Senate

December 2015

AFGHANISTAN

State and USAID Should Evaluate Actions Taken to Mitigate Effects of Attrition among Local Staff

GAO-16-100

GAO Highlights

Highlights of GAO-16-100, a report to the Honorable Robert Menendez, U.S. Senate

December 2015

AFGHANISTAN

State and USAID Should Evaluate Actions Taken to Mitigate Effects of Attrition among Local Staff

Why GAO Did This Study

Congress established an SIV program in 2009 for Afghan nationals with at least 1 year of U.S. government service, given the risk these employees face. Local staff at the U.S. diplomatic mission in Afghanistan are key to implementing U.S. policies and programs because of their institutional knowledge, language skills, and local relationships. A high rate of Afghan staff resigning after receiving an SIV could diminish the U.S. government's capacity to carry out its mission. GAO was asked to review State's and USAID's efforts to mitigate the loss of Afghan staff.

GAO evaluated (1) SIV-related resignations, including how, if at all, State's and USAID's workforces in Afghanistan have been affected in recent years; (2) the actions, if any, State and USAID have taken to mitigate any effects related to attrition of Afghan staff, including SIV recipients; and (3) the extent to which State and USAID have evaluated mitigating actions related to the attrition of Afghan local staff, including SIV recipients. GAO analyzed data from 2010 to 2015, reviewed documents regarding the Afghan workforce, and interviewed State and USAID officials.

What GAO Recommends

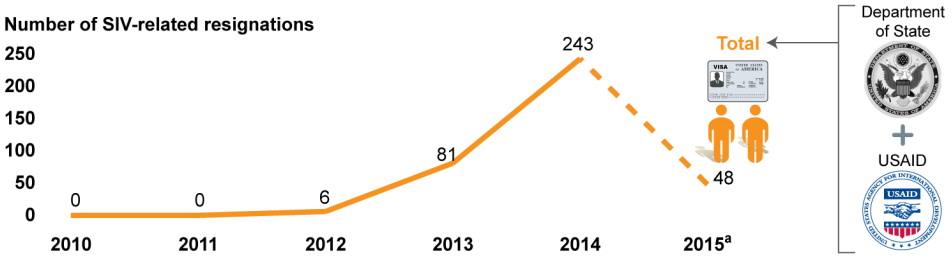
GAO recommends that State and USAID evaluate actions intended to mitigate the effects of Afghan local staff resignations. State and USAID agreed with the recommendations.

View GAO-16-100. For more information, contact Michael J. Courts, (202) 512-8980 or courtsm@gao.gov.

What GAO Found

Resignations of Afghan local staff at the Department of State (State) and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) after receiving a special immigrant visa (SIV) reached their highest level in 2014, and have had varied effects on the agencies' institutional knowledge (fig.). Resignations increased as more Afghan staff began the SIV application process than in the initial years of the program, and as State addressed delays that had previously slowed visa issuances. Afghan staff resignations are likely to be lower in 2015 than in previous years based on the number of current staff that have initiated the SIV process. Based on GAO's assessment of changes to average tenure and grade level of Afghan staff from 2010 until June 2015, and insights from agency officials, the effects of SIV-related resignations on State's and USAID's institutional knowledge is varied. For example, average tenure among both agencies' Afghan workforces decreased slightly. In addition, embassy officials said that local staff attrition may affect some program coordination with the Afghan government. Nonetheless, despite this attrition, agency officials reported that they were successful in identifying qualified replacements to fill positions.

SIV-Related Resignations in Afghanistan, Department of State and USAID



Source: GAO analysis of Department of State and USAID data. | GAO-16-100

[a]Data are reported as of June 2015 for the Department of State and August 2015 for USAID.

Agencies have taken a number of actions to mitigate the effects of Afghan staff attrition, including SIV-related resignations. For example, State and USAID temporarily transfer experienced local staff from other diplomatic missions to Afghanistan, and the agencies sometimes fill one position with two employees in anticipation of an SIV-related resignation. In addition, the agencies provide additional administrative support from Washington, D.C., beyond what is generally provided to other U.S. missions, and send U.S. personnel to Afghanistan on a temporary basis to fill staffing gaps caused by attrition.

State and USAID officials said that these agencies have not evaluated actions taken to mitigate the effects of Afghan staff attrition. Officials said agencies have not conducted such assessments because of resource constraints and the reactive nature of operations in such an unpredictable environment. Key principles of human capital management that GAO identified call for agencies to evaluate the contribution that such activities make toward achieving programmatic goals, including those related to the workforce. Without these assessments, it will be difficult for agencies to have information to determine the costs and benefits of actions taken and handle workforce-related needs in challenging environments in the future.

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Abbreviations

ISAF	International Security Assistance Force
OIG	Office of Inspector General
SIV	special immigrant visa
State	Department of State
TCN	third country national
USAID	U.S. Agency for International Development

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U.S. GOVERNMENT ACCOUNTABILITY OFFICE
441 G St. N.W.
Washington, DC 20548

December 3, 2015

The Honorable Robert Menendez
United States Senate

Dear Senator Menendez:

Local employees working for U.S. diplomatic missions overseas have long been eligible to apply for a special immigrant visa (SIV) to the United States if they have at least 15 years of faithful service to the U.S. government and meet other requirements.[1] In 2009, Congress established a special immigrant visa program for Afghan nationals with at least 1 year of service, because of the significant risk these employees face working for the U.S. government. Afghan local staff at the U.S. diplomatic mission in Afghanistan are key to implementing U.S. policies and programs because of their institutional knowledge, language skills, local relationships, and cultural understanding. At the same time, a high number of Afghan staff resigning after receiving SIVs could diminish the U.S. government's capacity to carry out its mission, especially because of short tours of duty by Department of State (State) and U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) American personnel in Afghanistan.

You asked us to assess State's and USAID's efforts to mitigate the loss of Afghan staff.[2] In this report, we evaluated (1) SIV-related resignations, including how, if at all, State's and USAID's workforces in Afghanistan have been affected in recent years; (2) the actions, if any, State and USAID have taken to mitigate any effects related to the attrition of Afghan staff, including SIV recipients; and (3) the extent to which State and USAID have evaluated mitigating actions related to the attrition of Afghan staff, including SIV recipients.

Our review focused on State and USAID Afghan staff working in Afghanistan. To assess SIV-related resignations and any effects on agencies' workforces, we analyzed data on the Afghan workforce for each

[1] 8 U.S.C. § 1101(a)(27)(D).

[2] GAO's work was undertaken in response to the December 2014 request from Senator Menendez, then Chairman, Committee on Foreign Relations.

calendar year from 2010 through 2014, and for January to August 1, 2015. Specifically, we analyzed information on overall attrition among Afghan staff, SIV-related resignations, tenure, and grade levels. We analyzed data and interviewed knowledgeable officials to assess data reliability, and determined the data to be sufficiently reliable for our purposes. To assess actions agencies have taken to mitigate any effects related to Afghan staff attrition, and agencies' efforts to evaluate those actions, we reviewed documents that included agency workforce plans, staffing analyses, and descriptions of proposed or implemented actions for addressing attrition among local staff. We also reviewed criteria for key principles in strategic human capital management, and compared agencies' efforts against these key principles.[3] For all objectives, we interviewed State and USAID officials working in Washington, D.C., and U.S. officials working in Afghanistan. See appendix I for more information about our scope and methodology.

We conducted this performance audit from January 2015 to December 2015 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

Background

Special Immigrant Visa Program for Afghan Nationals

All local staff who work for U.S. diplomatic missions overseas are eligible to apply for an SIV that allows them to immigrate to the United States, provided they meet certain conditions, such as having 15 years of employment with the U.S. government abroad.[4] Congress has enacted a series of laws since 2006 to enable certain Afghan nationals who have worked as translators or interpreters for the U.S. government in

[3]GAO, *Human Capital: Key Principles for Effective Strategic Workforce Planning,* GAO-04-39 (Washington, D.C.: December 2003).

[4]The special immigrant category includes numerous classifications, including the special programs for Iraqi and Afghan nationals, and for 15-year employees or former employees of the U.S. government abroad.

Afghanistan to be eligible for SIVs. In 2009, Congress authorized Afghan employees of the U.S. government in Afghanistan who meet certain criteria to be eligible for SIVs.

The first of these SIV programs is permanent and provides SIVs to eligible Afghans who have worked directly with the U.S. armed forces or under chief of mission authority for at least 1 year as translators or interpreters.[5] A maximum of 50 SIVs are currently granted annually for principal applicants, excluding their dependents, under this program.[6] The second program is temporary and was created through Section 602(b) of the Afghan Allies Protection Act of 2009 and provides SIVs to eligible Afghans who worked for at least 1 year in Afghanistan for the U.S. government, or for the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), who provided "faithful and valuable service" to the U.S. government or ISAF that has been documented by a supervisor, and who have experienced or are experiencing an ongoing serious threat as a consequence of employment by the U.S. government.[7] As the Congressional Research Service has reported, the program initially authorized no more than 1,500 principal applicants to be granted special immigrant status annually for fiscal year 2009 through fiscal year 2013, with a provision to carry forward any unused numbers from 1 fiscal year to the next. Congress subsequently amended the program to authorize up to 3,000 principal applicants for fiscal year 2014 with an additional 1,000 through the end of calendar year 2014, and up to 7,000 for fiscal years 2015, 2016, and 2017.[8] If the numerical limitation is not reached in a fiscal year, the balance of principal applicants who may be provided

[5]"Chief of mission" refers to the principal officer in charge of a U.S. diplomatic mission, generally the U.S. ambassador to a foreign country, who has full responsibility for the direction, coordination, and supervision of all U.S. government executive branch employees in that country, with some exceptions.

[6]If the numerical limitation is not reached in a given fiscal year, the numerical limitation for the following year is increased to allow for the difference. Principal applicants may also include their dependents in their SIV applications. Visas issued to dependents of principal applicants do not count against the total number of authorized SIVs.

[7]Afghan Allies Protection Act of 2009, Pub. L. No. 111-8, Div. F, Title VI, § 602(b), Mar. 11, 2009; codified at 8 U.S.C. § 1101 note. The recently passed National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2016 changed the requirement to 2 years of employment for applicants who submit a petition after September 30, 2015.

[8]8 U.S.C. § 1101 note; National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2016, S. 1356, 114th Cong., § 1216 (2015).

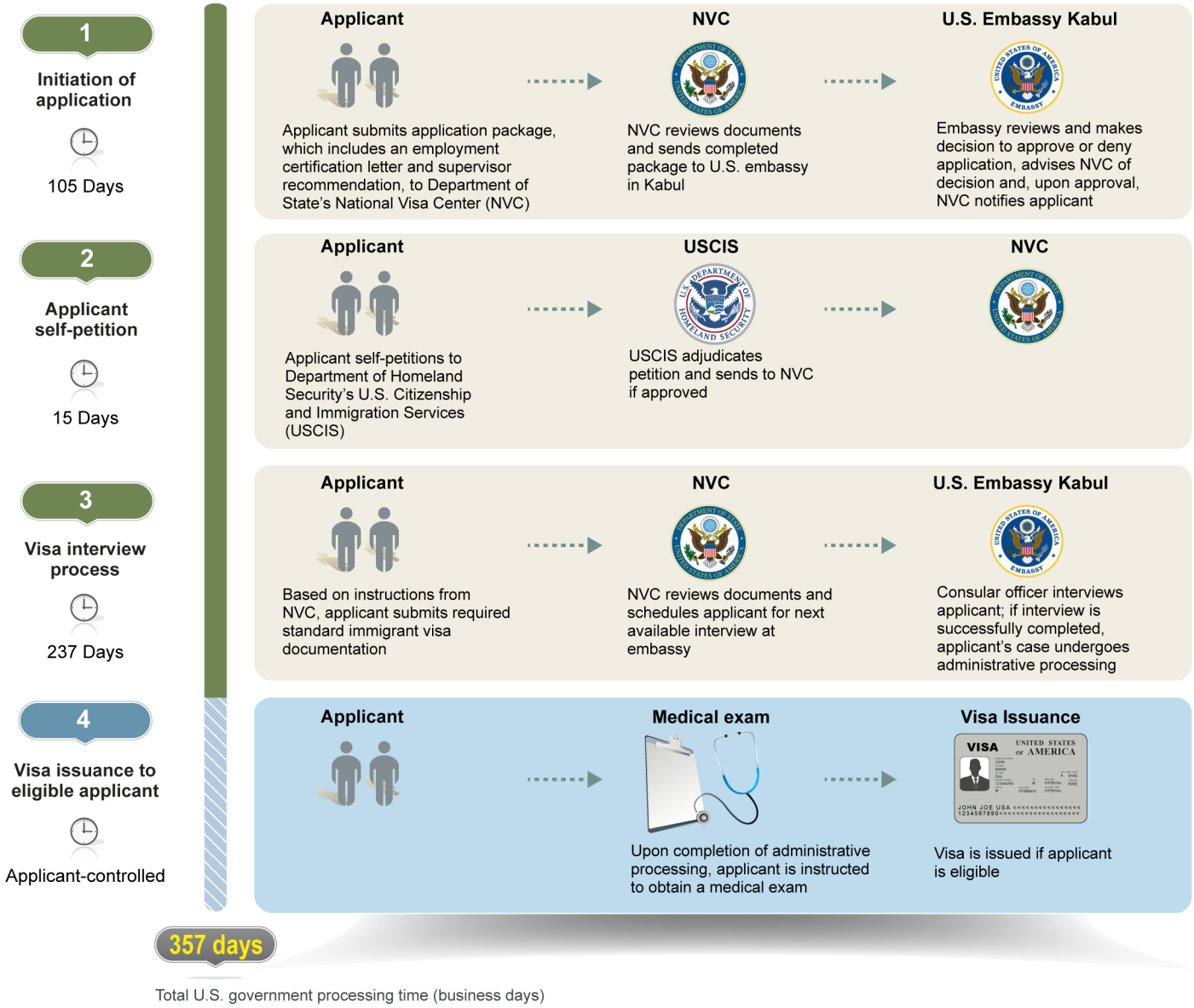
special immigrant status carries over to the following fiscal year. Principal applicants must apply to the chief of mission for special immigrant status by December 31, 2016, and the authority to issue visas under this program is scheduled to terminate on the date that such visas are exhausted.

Numbers of Afghan SIV Recipients

Though this report focuses on Afghan SIV recipients who were employed by State or USAID, Afghan nationals eligible for SIVs include current or former employees of the Department of Defense, other U.S. government agencies, and U.S.-funded contractors or implementing partners. More than 70 percent of SIV recipients have worked as translators, mostly for the U.S. military in Afghanistan. From fiscal years 2010 through 2012, 73 SIVs were issued to principal Afghan applicants.[9] Issuances of SIVs began accelerating in 2013, with 652 visas issued to principal applicants, and the annual total of SIVs issued to principal Afghan applicants rose to 3,441 in 2014. As of August 28, 2015, 2,372 principal applicants had applications pending in the initial stage of the SIV application process. Applications for 2,873 principal applicants were undergoing administrative processing, which is one of the final steps in the process. See figure 1 for more information on the various steps in the SIV issuance process.

[9]The data include individuals classified as special immigrants who adjusted to legal permanent resident status in the United States. Data reflect visas issued under the program for employees of the U.S. government, but do not include visas issued under the program for translators or interpreters. State reported all data on SIV issuances.

Figure 1: Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) Process for Afghan Nationals and Average Processing Times



Source: GAO analysis of Department of State information. | GAO-16-100

Note: Average processing times shown here are as of July 2015, and are relevant for Afghan nationals applying in Kabul for the SIV program. These averages assume all required SIV application documents are present and do not include stages of the process that are applicant controlled. Therefore, actual overall processing times are likely to be greater than what is shown here.

State and USAID Presence in Afghanistan

State and USAID rely on local staff to assist in accomplishing U.S. diplomatic objectives and in implementing and monitoring U.S. assistance programs in Afghanistan (see fig. 2). According to officials from State and USAID, staffing conditions in Afghanistan include the frequent turnover among American staff, who generally serve 1-year tours there and, as a result, may have limited institutional knowledge about their roles. Furthermore, the security situation in Afghanistan is dangerous and unpredictable, a fact that creates challenges for the international community and Afghan government to implement programs throughout the country. For example, in June 2015, we found that local staff (1) provide programmatic continuity, local knowledge, and language ability at posts where American officers may have short or interrupted tours of duty, and (2) often provide security and programmatic support in locations where American officials cannot safely or easily travel.[10] As of April 2015, the U.S. diplomatic mission in Afghanistan had 882 positions occupied by Afghan staff and 502 positions occupied by direct hire American personnel. Of that total, State and USAID combined had 869 positions occupied by Afghan staff and 471 by Americans.

[10]GAO, *Combating Terrorism: Steps Taken to Mitigate Threats to Locally Hired Staff, but State Department Could Improve Reporting on Terrorist Threats,* GAO-15-458SU (Washington, D.C.: June 2015).

Figure 2: An Afghan Employee at the U.S. Embassy in Kabul

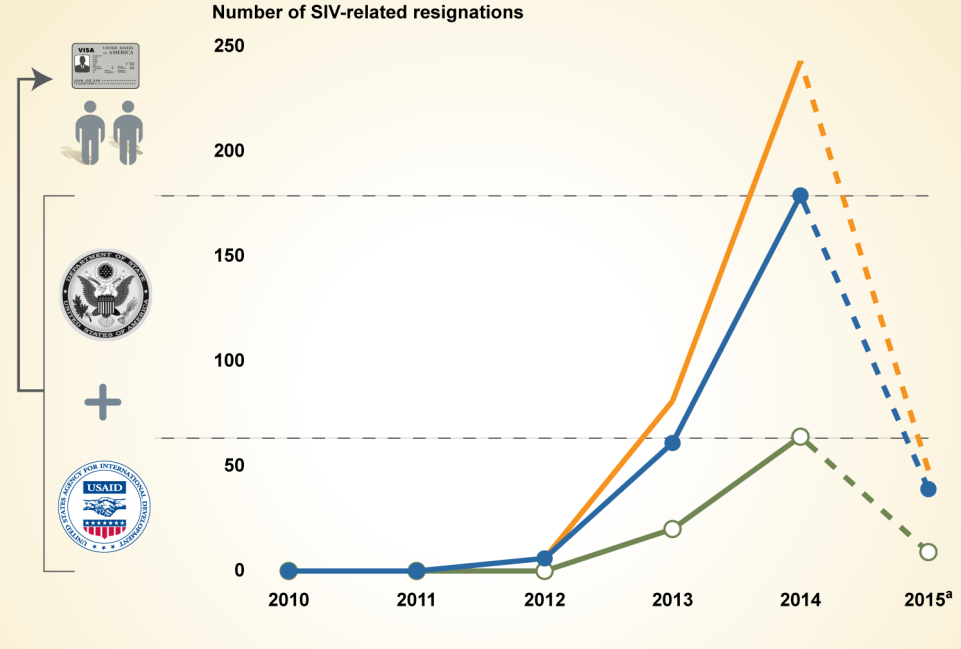
Source: U.S. Embassy Kabul (photo). | GAO-16-100

SIV-Related Resignations in Afghanistan Are Likely to Fall from 2014 Levels, and Have Had Varied Effects on State's and USAID's Institutional Knowledge

From 2010 to 2015, a total of 378 Afghan local staff resigned from their positions at State and USAID in Afghanistan after receiving SIVs (see fig. 3).[11] State and USAID had a high of 243 SIV-related resignations in 2014, but the number of resignations will likely be lower in 2015 than in 2014, based on both the number of such resignations as of August 2015 and the number of Afghan staff who have currently completed an initial step in the SIV application process. Furthermore, resignations have had varied effects on institutional knowledge at State and USAID. Average tenure among both agencies' Afghan workforces decreased slightly. In addition, embassy officials said that local staff attrition has affected some program coordination with the Afghan government. Nonetheless, officials reported that recruiting qualified applicants to replace those local staff has not posed a problem.

[11]SIV-related resignations are based on data State and USAID provided regarding Afghan staff who departed their positions after receiving an SIV. Data are reported as of June 2015 for State and August 2015 for USAID.

Figure 3: Special Immigrant Visa (SIV)-Related Resignations in Afghanistan, Department of State (State) and USAID, 2010 to 2015



	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015[a]
Department of State	0	0	6	61	179	39
USAID	0	0	0	20	64	9
Total	0	0	6	81	243	48

Source: GAO analysis of Department of State and USAID data. | GAO-16-100

[a]Data are reported as of June 2015 for State and August 2015 for USAID. Dashed lines in the figure represent partial year data for 2015.

Few State and No USAID Afghan Staff Resigned from 2010 through 2012 after Receiving an SIV

From 2010 through 2012, 6 State and no USAID Afghan staff resigned after receiving an SIV. Prior to 2012, State and USAID issued relatively few employment certification letters, which verify Afghan staff eligibility for the SIV program. The employment certification letter is the first step in the SIV application process; therefore the number of Afghan local staff receiving SIVs will likely be smaller than the number of these letters

provided.[12] State and USAID issued 6 letters in 2010 and 37 in 2011. Additionally, agency officials have noted that SIV processing was relatively slow during the early years of the program. State officials acknowledged that, prior to 2013, as a result of delays in administrative processing, relatively few SIVs were issued.

SIV-Related Resignations Reached Their Highest Level in 2014

In 2013, the number of SIV-related resignations began to increase substantially and reached its highest level in 2014. A total of 81 State and USAID Afghan local staff resigned after receiving SIVs in 2013, and 243 in 2014. In 2013 and 2014, State reported that SIV-related resignations became the single largest cause of attrition among all Afghan local staff employed at the Kabul embassy. From 2010 to 2012, security clearance revocation had been the primary cause of attrition among Afghan staff. The following factors may help explain the increase in SIV-related resignations in 2013 and 2014.

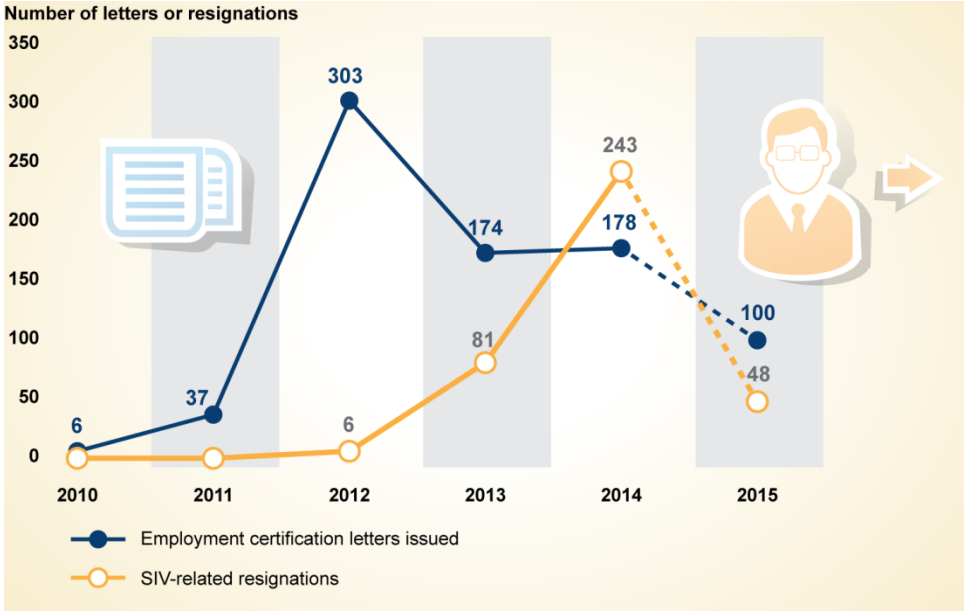
- In December 2013, changes to the law authorizing SIVs for Afghan nationals altered eligibility requirements for the SIV program. Previously, Afghan local staff who had experienced or were experiencing an ongoing serious threat as a consequence of their U.S. government employment qualified for the visa. While this standard still applies, the 2013 amendment to the law allowed credible sworn statements depicting dangerous country conditions to be a factor in determining the threat to local staff. According to State officials, this enabled all Afghans who met U.S. government employment requirements to be considered eligible. State officials noted that this change allowed the broad threat environment to be used to consider individual cases, alleviating the need for applicants to demonstrate any specific threat incident to determine eligibility. State officials said that these changes helped speed up SIV processing.
- In fiscal year 2013, State dedicated additional resources to help process SIVs at the Kabul embassy, including creating a position for a U.S. direct hire at post to help administer and address accumulated

[12]The number of staff who receive SIVs will likely be smaller than the number of certification letters issued because not all letters may be used for SIV applications, and not all applicants ultimately receive or utilize their visas. Furthermore, one State official indicated the rejection rate for SIV applications may be over 20 percent.

backlogs in the initial approval stage of the process, and four additional staff positions.

- The number of employment certification letters issued to Afghan staff increased after 2011. In 2012, State and USAID issued 303 letters (see fig. 4). Given, in part, visa-processing times, this increase in employment certification letters would lead to an increase in SIV-related resignations beginning in 2013.

Figure 4: Employment Certification Letters and Total Special Immigrant Visa (SIV)-Related Resignations, Department of State (State) and USAID, 2010 to 2015



Source: GAO analysis of Department of State and USAID data. | GAO-16-100

Note: Data on employment certification letters and SIV-related resignations are reported as of June 2015 for State and August 2015 for USAID. Dashed lines in the figure represent partial year data for 2015. As of July 2015, U.S. government processing of SIVs took an average of 357 business days, but this estimate does not include stages of the process that are applicant controlled. Therefore, actual overall processing times are likely to be greater.

State and USAID Are Likely to See Fewer SIV-Related Resignations In 2015

State and USAID are likely to experience fewer SIV-related resignations in 2015 than in 2014. From January to August 2015, a total of 48 Afghan local staff resigned from State and USAID after receiving an SIV. State officials indicated that it is difficult to determine whether SIV issuances for the rest of the calendar year are expected to continue at the same pace as in prior months. However, the number of employment certification letters issued to State's and USAID's Afghan local staff have remained lower than the high of 303 letters in 2012. State and USAID issued 174 letters in 2013, 178 in 2014, and 100 from January to August 2015.

State and USAID officials provided several explanations for why some Afghan local staff may forgo the SIV program altogether. In 2014, as part of a worldwide adjustment to salaries of local staff at U.S. diplomatic missions, State raised salaries for all Afghan local staff by 45 percent. State reported this salary increase has helped the embassy retain local staff. Additionally, State and USAID officials stated that Afghan SIV recipients who have relocated to the United States often face challenges integrating and obtaining adequate work opportunities and have communicated those challenges to Afghan staff employed at the embassy in Afghanistan.[13]

Afghan Staff Attrition, Including SIV-Related Resignations, Has Had Varied Effects on Agencies' Institutional Knowledge

According to our assessment of changes to average tenure and grade level of Afghan staff, Afghan staff attrition, including SIV-related resignations, has had varied effects on State's and USAID's institutional knowledge. The average tenure of each agency's Afghan staff, one measure of institutional knowledge, has decreased slightly since the SIV program began, while average grade level, another measure, has remained relatively stable.[14] From 2010 to June 2015, average tenure among both agencies' Afghan workforces decreased slightly (see table 1). During this period, average tenure among State's Afghan local staff has decreased by less than 3 months, while average tenure among USAID'S Afghan local staff has decreased by approximately 5 months.[15] Afghan staff attrition, including SIV-related resignations, has also had no substantial effect on average grade levels among USAID'S Afghan local staff.[16] From 2010 to June 2015, the average grade level among USAID's local staff in Afghanistan has remained consistent over time at the level that includes management and technical positions. Additionally, the grade

[13]GAO has previously reported on challenges Iraqi SIV recipients faced in obtaining working opportunities in the United States, including limited opportunities for federal employment. See GAO, *Iraq: Iraqi Refugees and Special Immigrant Visa Holders Face Challenges Resettling in the United States and Obtaining U.S. Government Employment,* GAO-10-274 (Washington, D.C.: March 2010).

[14]Agencies categorize grade levels for local staff on a scale from 1 through 12, with grade level 1 positions being entrance level for routine, unskilled types of work and grade level 12 being the highest level of professional or specialist positions.

[15]While average tenure provides an overall summary of yearly trends, a relatively small drop in average tenure can be associated with a relatively larger increase in the number of newly hired Afghan staff.

[16]State did not provide similar data on the grade levels of its Afghan workforce.

levels from which State and USAID had the most SIV-related resignations differed from the grade levels that agency human resources officers reported difficulty filling in 2013.

Table 1: Total Number of Afghan Staff and Average Tenure, Department of State (State) and USAID

	State		USAID	
Year	Total local staff	Average tenure (in years)	Total local staff	Average tenure (in years)
2010	553	3.8	162	3.1
2011	664	3.9	162	3.2
2012	685	3.9	217	3.1
2013	624	4.1	176	3.9
2014	615	3.5	182	2.8
2015[a]	613	3.6	200	2.7

Source: GAO analysis of Department of State and USAID data. | GAO-16-100

[a]State reported data as of May 31, 2015 and USAID reported data as of May 19, 2015.

State and USAID officials also identified a number of other effects that Afghan staff attrition, including SIV-related attrition, may have on operations in Afghanistan.[17] USAID officials noted that it can take several years for local staff to build effective relationships with Afghan government officials. When Afghan local staff resign, these contacts are often lost, a result that may affect operations by slowing down program coordination with the Afghan government.

Attrition can also affect program management. For example, State has reported that experienced staffing in grants management is needed to ensure accountability and proper oversight. Likewise, USAID officials said that the ability of American staff to perform some aspects of the agency's work, such as program monitoring and evaluation, can be affected by increased demands on their time caused by local staff attrition. Attrition can lead to American supervisors' taking on additional responsibilities that they would not be expected to perform at other posts. For example, State

[17]Outside of SIV-related attrition, there are a number of other reasons for attrition in Afghanistan, such as dismissals because of security clearance revocations and performance issues. Agency officials generally shared insights on the effects of Afghan staff attrition as a whole, and not specifically on SIV-related attrition.

and USAID officials said that American personnel spend significant amounts of time training and bringing replacement staff up to speed on embassy processes and operations as a result of attrition. These officials stated that these additional responsibilities can present challenges for maintaining adequate management controls and program oversight in some areas.

Attrition, including SIV-related attrition, may also affect the training and productivity of Afghan local staff. State officials said that Afghan staff may need up to 2 years to receive the necessary training and skills to perform their jobs at a high level. However, the period of highest productivity can be short because these staff are eligible to apply for an SIV after 1 year of employment with the U.S. government. For example, according to USAID officials, the agency invests in the training and certification process for contracting officer representatives. When these Afghan staff resign, USAID fills the vacancies and goes through the process of recertifying replacement staff. Embassy managers have reported hesitation about investing in training because they may not see an adequate return on their investment. In July 2014, State's Office of Inspector General reported that, at that time, only one Afghan staff member in the embassy's Consular Affairs office had received supervisory or advanced consular training, and none of the Afghan staff in the information management section had received supervisory training.

Agencies Reported That They Have Successfully Identified Qualified Afghan Staff to Fill Vacancies

State and USAID reported they were successful in identifying qualified replacements to fill vacancies for local staff positions. State officials reported receiving applications from qualified candidates to staff all but three vacancies from 2010 through 2014. State and USAID officials provided several insights that may help explain the availability of qualified Afghan workers. These officials stated that the U.S. government drawdown and the reduction in civilian organizations' staffing levels have increased the availability of qualified applicants because fewer potential applicants are now employed by the U.S. government and international organizations. In addition, officials from both agencies report that the SIV program is often perceived as a recruitment incentive for qualified applicants. State officials said that some Afghans may be willing to take comparable or even lower salaries to have the potential benefit of the SIV program.

Agencies Have Taken Steps to Mitigate Attrition among Afghan Local Staff, Including SIV-Related Resignations

State and USAID have taken a number of actions to help mitigate the effects of attrition among Afghan local staff, including local staff who resigned their positions after receiving an SIV. State and USAID officials said they conduct recruitment to fill positions that have been vacated as a result of SIV-related resignations and for other reasons, such as dismissal due to losing a security clearance. State and USAID officials said they temporarily assign American personnel and local staff from other diplomatic missions overseas to Afghanistan in order to fill staffing gaps and provide experienced staff who can train and supervise Afghan staff. USAID also assigns local staff from other diplomatic missions for longer-term assignments that can last up to several years. Both agencies' headquarters have provided additional administrative support to their missions in Afghanistan beyond what is generally provided to other overseas missions. Both State and USAID are considering moving additional functions from the U.S. embassy in Kabul to other diplomatic missions in the region. State and USAID officials said they sometimes fill one position with two employees in anticipation of an SIV-related resignation. In 2014, as part of State's worldwide effort to normalize salaries for local staff, the embassy in Kabul raised salaries for all Afghan local staff by 45 percent, and State and USAID officials said this has helped to retain local staff.

Recruitment

Despite 243 resignations in 2014 as a result of receiving an SIV, State and USAID officials said they were able to recruit and hire personnel to replace those lost because of attrition. These officials stated they have to constantly advertise and fill vacant positions within the local workforce as a result of relatively high local staff attrition in Afghanistan, including SIV-related resignations. In 2014, State posted 219 job vacancy announcements and received an average of 555 applications for each vacancy announcement that was posted. From June 2014 through May 2015, State reported it had hired about 120 Afghan staff. USAID officials reported they posted 130 vacancy announcements from April 2014 to April 2015, and USAID officials said they have not had difficulty recruiting qualified replacements.

State and USAID officials said that one of the biggest challenges to the recruitment process is the amount of time needed to conduct security screenings for new employees, and typically it may take 6 to 8 months to fill a position. USAID officials said efforts have been made to shorten the security screening process, and State human resources officials said the embassy maintains a queue of qualified applicants in an effort to speed up the hiring process. Similarly, USAID officials said they prescreen

applications in Washington, D.C., in order to alleviate some aspects of the recruitment process for USAID in Afghanistan. In addition, USAID officials said the agency streamlined its hiring strategies in 2014, and reduced the amount of time to hire a new employee by 60 days, from 10 months to 8 months.

Temporary Assignments of Other Personnel to Kabul

State and USAID officials said they send U.S. direct hire employees to Afghanistan on a temporary basis to fill staffing gaps caused by Afghan staff attrition or to provide additional support to American personnel. Temporarily assigned personnel may work for a few days or several months. According to State and USAID officials, these employees can help to supervise and train Afghan staff recently placed in new positions. The number of these temporarily assigned personnel in Afghanistan anytime varies by the needs of individual offices, as well as security concerns and available housing and office space. The embassy at times restricts these personnel from entering Afghanistan because of security concerns, according to State officials. In fiscal year 2014, the embassy's Consular Affairs office received approximately 600 staff days' worth of temporary assignments from U.S. consular officers and local staff from other diplomatic missions.

State and USAID officials also reported they recruit local staff from U.S. missions in other countries, referred to as third country nationals (TCN), to fill key positions at the U.S. embassy in Afghanistan. TCNs are experienced State and USAID employees who have expertise in key areas and are able to build capacity among Afghan staff and provide training. According to State and USAID officials, TCNs tend to have a high level of experience and are familiar with State and USAID policies and procedures, and therefore can work more independently than newer Afghan staff. According to USAID officials, USAID employs TCNs on a short-term basis, typically 6 months, and also utilizes a TCN program where local staff from other diplomatic missions work in Afghanistan for at least 1 year with the option to renew. USAID had 34 TCNs supporting the USAID mission as of September 2015. State also uses TCNs on a short-term basis, and has proposed a TCN program similar to the USAID program, where local staff from other diplomatic missions work for 1 year or longer in Afghanistan. State has identified 20 key positions for TCNs that would provide the continuity, expertise, and training lacking in several offices within the embassy.

State and USAID officials noted TCNs are more expensive for the mission than Afghan staff because they receive higher salaries, incur travel

expenses associated with deployment to Afghanistan, and have other benefits and costs not associated with Afghan staff. In addition, the diplomatic missions from which TCNs are transferred have expressed concerns regarding their own workforce needs. Short-term TCNs create temporary vacancies at the diplomatic missions that send them, and TCNs who accept long-term positions must resign their positions at their current diplomatic missions, creating vacancies that must be filled.

Offshoring Support

State currently performs some administrative functions outside of Afghanistan on behalf of the embassy in Kabul. For example, State headquarters in Washington, D.C., performs financial and security in-processing functions for American personnel who are going to Afghanistan. Officials said that these are functions usually performed at an overseas mission. In addition, the embassy has started to conduct procurements from the U.S. embassy in Amman, Jordan, and State's Regional Procurement Support Office in Frankfurt, Germany.[18]

USAID's Afghan Hands program supports the mission in Afghanistan with 20 available U.S. direct hire positions at USAID headquarters in Washington, D.C. The Afghan Hands personnel work directly on USAID programs and projects in Afghanistan, and provide management and oversight to USAID implementing partners. According to USAID officials, Afghan Hands personnel are expected to travel frequently to Afghanistan for short-term assignments. As of May 2015, 17 of the positions were filled, according to USAID officials. Many of the Afghan Hands personnel have previously served at the USAID mission in Afghanistan and have institutional knowledge of USAID programs and procedures in Afghanistan. Afghan Hands personnel perform functions that are often performed by American personnel or Afghan staff in Afghanistan.

State and USAID have proposed to offshore additional administrative functions to other U.S. missions in the region. In August 2014, USAID proposed to offshore 9 positions in Almaty, Kazakhstan, in order to provide dedicated support for USAID's financial management, acquisitions, and the economic growth and infrastructure team. The USAID proposal notes that Afghan staff attrition has created a continuous

[18]State officials noted that offshoring certain functions is a common agency practice used to consolidate processes and create efficiencies.

need for training of newly hired Afghan employees, which could be provided by offshore staff on temporary assignment in Afghanistan. Furthermore, in this proposal, USAID estimated the total annual costs for a fully staffed Afghanistan Support Team in Kazakhstan.[19] According to State officials, State is considering offshoring some procurement functions to provide continuous support, similar to what is provided in Amman, Jordan. However, State officials said that other diplomatic missions may find it difficult to reassign their local staff to provide functions for the U.S. mission in Afghanistan or may be limited in the amount of available office space.

Double-Encumbering Afghan Staff Positions

According to State and USAID officials, these agencies sometimes double-encumber positions when a local employee reports that he or she is in the process of applying for an SIV. Double-encumbering occurs when agencies fill one position with two employees in anticipation of an SIV-related resignation. As of September 2015, State had 36 positions that were double-encumbered, and USAID had 11 as of May 2015, according to State and USAID officials. State and USAID officials reported that the embassy allows for agencies to start recruiting for a currently filled Afghan position when the Afghan staff person occupying that position informs his or her supervisor that an application for an SIV has been initiated.[20] State and USAID officials said the employee expecting to depart an embassy can train his or her replacement. State officials said that sometimes this practice results in two employees filling the same position if the original employee's application is delayed or rejected.

Salaries and Benefits

As previously mentioned, the U.S. mission in Afghanistan provided a 45 percent salary increase to all agencies' Afghan staff in July 2014, as part of State's effort to raise the salaries of local staff worldwide to better

[19]USAID officials told us that as of October 2015, USAID has chosen not to follow this course of action.

[20]Federal law requires that State records pertaining to the issuance or refusal of visas shall be considered confidential and generally shall be used only for the formulation, amendment, administration, or enforcement of immigration laws. 8 U.S.C. § 1202(f). Agency officials said that under the confidentiality requirements, officials may not ask Afghan staff whether they have applied for an SIV. However, officials may take action if Afghan staff volunteer this information.

reflect the median wage rate of similar and comparable organizations. State officials said the salary increase was part of a State effort to update salaries at diplomatic missions worldwide, and was not in response to the SIV program. However, State and USAID officials said higher salaries help to recruit and retain well-qualified employees. Human resources officials at the embassy in Kabul reported that the pay increase was a strong incentive for Afghan staff to postpone SIV applications and remain employed by the U.S. government.

The U.S. mission provides 25 percent additional compensation for local staff in Afghanistan given the extra measures they may take to avoid or endure terrorist threats or harassment. State provides local staff at selected diplomatic missions additional compensation as a percentage of their salary because of potential harassment or threats of violence related to their U.S. government employment. In 2015, State designated 21 posts, including Afghanistan, as offering such allowances.

Officials Said Agencies Have Not Evaluated Efforts to Mitigate Effects of Afghan Staff Attrition

While State and USAID have made a number of efforts to mitigate the effects of Afghan staff attrition, according to officials, agencies have not formally evaluated the extent to which these actions have addressed effects on the workforce or programs. Key principles of human capital management call for agencies to evaluate the success of human capital strategies, such as actions taken to mitigate attrition among staff, by using performance measures to assess the extent to which these activities contribute to achieving programmatic goals.[21] An evaluation of actions taken to mitigate effects related to local staff attrition can help determine if an agency has effectively filled gaps in institutional knowledge from attrition among Afghan staff, and identify reasons for any performance shortfalls resulting from those gaps. Without such evaluations, agencies will be limited in having information to determine the costs, benefits, and relative effectiveness of actions taken. Further, in August 2014, State's Office of Inspector General (OIG) noted that mission operations may be negatively affected without a programmatic approach

[21]GAO, *Human Capital: Key Principles for Effective Strategic Workforce Planning,* GAO-04-39 (Washington, D.C.: December 2003). To develop this information, we reviewed documents from organizations with government-wide responsibilities for or expertise in workforce planning models and tools, and selected federal agencies. In addition, we met with officials from these organizations concerning existing workforce planning models and lessons learned from their workforce planning experiences.

to addressing attrition among Afghan staff. State and USAID officials have also noted that American personnel's 1-year tours in Afghanistan create challenges with institutional knowledge. Evaluations can provide critical information to enable knowledge transfer among American staff in Afghanistan and minimize duplication of efforts that have already proven to be ineffective or resource intensive.

For example, agencies can measure whether actions such as hiring, training, and retention have changed the skill level of the workforce or affected the U.S. mission's capabilities related to maintaining its overseas presence in Afghanistan. In its draft proposal to employ TCNs in Afghanistan, State noted that if the program were to proceed, the agency would need to demonstrate the benefits associated with the employment of TCNs and justify increased costs.[22] However, in its proposal, State did not identify any potential measurements to evaluate the benefits of using TCNs or the additional costs that would be incurred to attract these individuals to long-term positions in Afghanistan. USAID identified cost information that could be utilized to evaluate human capital efforts in its strategic staffing document for Afghanistan, which outlines a number of proposals to potentially address staffing challenges there. The document includes examples of resources required and cost analyses of some of the proposals to mitigate the effects of attrition, such as the option to offshore positions that may be vacated by Afghan staff to another embassy in the region. However, USAID officials also said they were not aware of any completed evaluations of actions taken related to mitigating the effects of attrition.

State and USAID officials noted that agencies operate in a reactive state and face resource constraints managing a large diplomatic mission in a dangerous and unpredictable environment such as Afghanistan. Accordingly, agencies may not fully document or evaluate certain efforts. Key principles for human capital management note that evaluations of human capital strategies may help agencies determine if they met human capital goals and whether those strategies helped or hindered the agencies from reaching their programmatic goals. While the State OIG has reported that increased security risks in Afghanistan hinder employees' ability to assess programs, inadequacies with such

[22]According to officials, this proposal is in development as of November 2015, and the program has not been fully implemented.

assessments can impair program performance. Nonetheless, State's evaluation policy calls for evaluations to improve programs, projects, and management processes. USAID's evaluation policy also notes that though security concerns can pose challenges to conducting evaluations, creative approaches can be utilized to measure achievements in such environments.

Conclusions

Local staff are a vital component of the success of U.S. diplomatic missions overseas. The U.S. mission in Afghanistan faces a number of uncertainties and challenges that make the presence of its Afghan staff all the more important, including an unpredictable security situation, relatively short tours among U.S. personnel, and an evolving diplomatic presence that relies on the U.S. military for security support. State and USAID have taken a number of actions to mitigate the effects of Afghan staff attrition, including SIV-related resignations, such as increasing recruiting efforts and augmenting staff with experienced local staff from other U.S. missions overseas. However, State and USAID have not evaluated their actions to address the effects of Afghan staff attrition to assess the costs or effectiveness of these actions. Information gained from such evaluations could inform agencies' workforce planning efforts, including strategies related to hiring, training, and staff development and could improve how agencies manage attrition of Afghan staff in the future, whether because of SIVs or other reasons. Agencies could also share information learned from these evaluations with one another, particularly if an agency conducted evaluations on resource-intensive efforts to mitigate the effects of attrition. For example, USAID has a program in which third country nationals from U.S. missions in other countries are employed for periods of 1 year or longer to help mitigate the effects of attrition among local staff in Afghanistan—a practice that is more costly than employing Afghan staff and one that can pose challenges for the U.S. missions that send them. If USAID had evaluated its program, USAID could have informed State's assessment of a similar proposal. Furthermore, without evaluation of mitigating actions that agencies have previously undertaken, agencies may be unable to weigh the costs and benefits of actions being implemented, and may be unable to identify the strategies that are most effective for handling future workforce-related needs in challenging environments.

Recommendations for Executive Action

To better understand the costs and effectiveness of actions to mitigate the effects of Afghan staff attrition, and to inform future workforce planning efforts, we recommend that

- the Secretary of State evaluate these actions, and
- the Administrator of USAID evaluate these actions.

Agency Comments and Our Evaluation

We provided a draft of this report for review and comment to State and USAID. In written comments, summarized below and reproduced in appendix II and III, respectively, State and USAID agreed with the recommendation to evaluate actions to mitigate the effects of Afghan staff attrition.

In its written comments, State agreed with the recommendation. State noted that the Afghanistan SIV program has had considerable impact on mission staffing levels and SIV-related resignations are currently the largest contributing factor for increased attrition among local staff. However, State wrote that many elements should be taken into consideration when looking at sustaining a workforce capable of meeting U.S. goals and objectives in Afghanistan. Further, State noted that strategically approaching workforce planning is complicated by, among other things, the unpredictable nature of events in a dangerous environment. State said that it evaluates staffing levels as part of its regular agency-wide review processes, and that a specific analysis of actions taken to mitigate attrition among Afghan staff would be reactive in nature and have minimal value added in a more complex staffing picture. Nevertheless, as we note in this report, an evaluation of the relative costs and effectiveness of specific actions taken to mitigate effects related to local staff attrition could help determine if State has effectively filled gaps in institutional knowledge from attrition among Afghan staff, and enable knowledge transfer among American staff in Afghanistan.

In its written comments, USAID agreed with the recommendation. USAID noted that it proactively tracks staffing levels in Afghanistan, and has taken steps to develop and implement creative approaches to staffing. For example, USAID said that, in addition to weekly and monthly staffing reports, from January to October 2015 it conducted seven ad hoc analyses regarding locally employed staff for internal and external audiences. In addition, USAID said it regularly discusses staff retention and recruitment and staffing mechanisms at strategic management meetings. According to USAID, these meetings serve as a venue to discuss, evaluate, and iterate strategies and other efforts to mitigate the

effects of local staff resignations. We will continue to work with USAID in monitoring the implementation of the recommendation.

State and USAID also provided technical comments that we incorporated, as appropriate.

We are sending copies of this report to the appropriate congressional committees, the Secretary of State, the Administrator of USAID, and other interested parties. In addition, the report is available at no charge on GAO's website at http://www.gao.gov.

If you or your staff have any questions about this report, please contact Michael J. Courts at (202) 512-8980 or at courtsm@gao.gov. Contact points for our Office of Congressional Relations and Office of Public Affairs can be found on the last page of this report. GAO staff who made major contributions to this report are listed in appendix IV.

Sincerely yours,

Michael J. Courts
Director, International Affairs and Trade

Appendix I: Objectives, Scope, and Methodology

In this report, we evaluated (1) special immigrant visa (SIV)-related resignations, including how, if at all, the Department of State's (State) and U.S. Agency for International Development's (USAID) workforces in Afghanistan have been affected in recent years; (2) the actions, if any, State and USAID have taken to mitigate any effects related to the attrition of Afghan staff, including SIV recipients; and (3) the extent to which State and USAID have evaluated mitigating actions related to the attrition of Afghan staff, including SIV recipients.

We interviewed agency officials at State and USAID in headquarters and at the U.S. diplomatic mission in Afghanistan, including consular officers, human resource officers, USAID mission executive officers, and State management officials to address all three objectives. We reviewed background on the SIV program for Afghan nationals, including relevant legislation and a report from the Congressional Research Service. In order to provide background information on the SIV program for Afghan nationals, we also utilized reports published by State and the Department of Homeland Security on the SIV program for Afghan nationals, primarily data on visa issuances and general processing times.[1]

To assess SIV-related resignations, and how, if at all, State's and USAID's workforces in Afghanistan have been affected by the resignations of SIV recipients in recent years, we obtained and analyzed data for each calendar year, 2010 through 2014, and for January to June or August 1, 2015.[2] We performed longitudinal analysis of the data in order to identify the initial extent of SIV effects, significant trends or changes over time, and any correlation between variables. We assessed data on Afghan staff for the following categories: the number of SIV-related resignations at State and USAID, the number of employment certification letters State and USAID issued to Afghan staff, average tenure of State's and USAID's current staff, and average grade levels of USAID's current staff.[3]

[1]To access these reports, see http://travel.state.gov/content/visas/english/immigrate/afghans-work-for-us.html.

[2]State reported 2015 data from January to June, and USAID reported 2015 data from January to August.

[3]Agencies categorize grade levels for local staff on a scale from 1 through 12, with grade level 1 positions being entrance level for routine, unskilled types of work and grade level 12 being the highest level of professional or specialist positions.

- We analyzed data on SIV-related resignations related to the special category of SIVs created by the Afghan Allies Protection Act of 2009. State and USAID provided these data, which included only Afghan staff who departed their positions after receiving an SIV and did not include those who departed employment for other reasons. These data were relevant to Afghan local staff but did not include third country nationals or other staff working in Afghanistan on a temporary duty basis. Agencies provided data on start and end dates of employment for those Afghan staff who resigned after receiving SIVs.

- We utilized data on average tenure and grade level of Afghan local staff as rough indicators of institutional knowledge. Both agencies provided start and end dates of employment, from which we calculated average tenure. While average tenure provides an overall summary of yearly trends, a relatively small drop in average tenure can be associated with a relatively larger increase in the number of newly hired Afghan staff. Agency data demonstrated this increase in the number of newly hired Afghan staff. For example, in June 2015, USAID had 92 Afghan staff with less than a year's tenure, representing about 46 percent of the agency's local staff, compared with 65 in December 2012, representing about 30 percent of the agency's local staff. In addition to calculating averages, we also calculated and examined yearly median tenure levels and considered the distribution of length of tenure. USAID provided staff grade levels but State could not provide similar data for its Afghan staff. We analyzed average tenure and grade level for a single-month slice of each year within the scope of our analysis (i.e., May 2015 and December for all other years). Accordingly, the data do not represent all Afghan local staff who worked for State or USAID over the course of any particular year. Average tenure rates were also affected by local staff separating from mission employment for reasons other than SIVs, such as retirements or terminations. The data the agencies provided did not report whether newly hired local staff had previously been agency employees and may therefore understate the actual experience these staff brought to their agencies.

We also utilized data related to recruitment of local staff from the 2010 through 2014 local compensation questionnaires for Afghanistan. This annual questionnaire gathers input from all U.S. agencies at an overseas mission across a range of topics related to the local workforce.

To assess the reliability of State's and USAID's data and responses to the local compensation questionnaires, we interviewed knowledgeable human resources officials from State in Kabul and solicited input from both agencies on their internal controls, potential data vulnerabilities, and any incidence of missing data. We determined the data to be sufficiently reliable for our purposes.

To assess the actions, if any, State and USAID have taken to mitigate any effects related to the attrition of Afghan staff, including SIV recipients, we reviewed agency documents that described these efforts, including any analyses agencies had undertaken.

To assess the extent to which State and USAID have evaluated mitigating actions related to the attrition of Afghan staff, including SIV recipients, we reviewed criteria for key principles in strategic human capital management, State's and USAID's evaluation policies, and agency documents that included workforce-related planning and analyses.[4] We also reviewed State's August 2014 Office of Inspector General Inspection of Embassy Kabul, Afghanistan, for the recommendations it made to address challenges associated with attrition in the Afghan workforce. We compared State's and USAID's efforts against key principles in strategic human capital management.

We conducted this performance audit from January 2015 to December 2015 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

[4]GAO, *Human Capital: Key Principles for Effective Strategic Workforce Planning,* GAO-04-39 (Washington, D.C.: December 2003).

Appendix II: Comments from the Department of State

United States Department of State
Comptroller
Washington, DC 20520

NOV 10 2015

Dr. Loren Yager
Managing Director
International Affairs and Trade
Government Accountability Office
441 G Street, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20548-0001

Dear Dr. Yager:

We appreciate the opportunity to review your draft report, "AFGHANISTAN: State and USAID Should Evaluate Actions Taken to Mitigate Effects of Attrition among Local Staff." GAO Job Code 321059.

The enclosed Department of State comments are provided for incorporation with this letter as an appendix to the final report.

If you have any questions concerning this response, please contact Karen Keshap, Post Management Officer, Office of the Executive, Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs at (202) 647-3641.

Sincerely,

Christopher H. Flaggs

Enclosure:
As stated

cc: GAO – Michael Courts
SRAP – Laurel Miller, Acting
State/OIG - Norman Brown

Department of State Comments on GAO Draft Report

AFGHANISTAN: State and USAID Should Evaluate Actions Taken to Mitigate Effects of Attrition Among Local Staff
(GAO-16-100, GAO Code 321059)

The Department of State appreciates the opportunity to comment on the draft report *Afghanistan: State and USAID Should Evaluate Actions Taken to Mitigate Effects of Attrition Among Local Staff.*

The Department agrees with the GAO's recommendation to evaluate the costs and effectiveness of actions to mitigate the effects of Afghan staff attrition. The Department regularly evaluates the staffing levels in Afghanistan, both via formal reports and in on the spot analyses. The Department utilizes the Congressionally mandated rightsizing review process which was most recently completed for Mission Afghanistan in 2015. Mission Afghanistan also participates in the Department-wide annual Mission Resource Request process. Both of these vehicles are important to the planning process, and are regularly used to plan for and respond to staffing-related impacts. Staff retention is a focus of the Department, and is discussed regularly both in Washington and in Kabul.

The Department agrees with the GAO's report that the Afghanistan SIV program has had considerable impact on mission staffing levels. Since the inception of the program in 2010, the attrition rate has spiked to a more than 50% turnover rate in the Locally Employed (LE) staff workforce. Critical Mission operations are unsustainable under this workforce paradigm. In an effort to mitigate the adverse impact of SIV-related resignations, Embassy Kabul has taken many actions as described in the GAO's report. The Department believes that additional offshoring of support services could further mitigate the impact of SIV-related resignations.

Resignations related to SIV approvals are currently the largest contributing factor for inflated attrition rates. Many elements should be taken into consideration when looking at sustaining a workforce capable of meeting future U.S. goals and objectives in Afghanistan. The non-permissive security environment, unpredictable nature of events, decreasing direct hire staffing levels, changing program focus and the sheer magnitude of the workload at Embassy Kabul complicates the ability to strategically approach workforce planning. Specific analysis of Post's current stop-gap measures would be reactive in nature and have minimal value added in a much more complex staffing picture.

-2-

The Department of State thanks GAO for the opportunity to respond to the report draft and for the courtesies extended by GAO staff in the conduct of this review.

Appendix III: Comments from the U.S. Agency for International Development

GAO received USAID's letter on 11/10/2015

Michael J. Courts
Director
International Affairs and Trade
U.S. Government Accountability Office
Washington, DC 20548

Dear Mr. Courts:

I am pleased to provide USAID's formal response to the Government Accountability Office (GAO) draft report entitled "Afghanistan: State and USAID Should Evaluate Actions Taken to Mitigate Effects of Attrition among Local Staff" (GAO-16-100).

This letter, together with the enclosed USAID comments, is provided for incorporation as an appendix to the final report.

Thank you for the opportunity to respond to the GAO draft report and for the courtesies extended by your staff in the conduct of this audit review.

Sincerely,

Angelique M. Crumbly
Assistant Administrator
Bureau for Management
U.S. Agency for International Development

Enclosure: a/s

USAID COMMENTS ON GAO DRAFT REPORT
No. GAO-16-100

Recommendation 1: To better understand the costs and effectiveness of actions to mitigate the effects of Afghan staff attrition, and to inform future workforce planning efforts, we recommend that the Secretary of State and USAID Administrator evaluate these actions.

Response:
USAID agrees with the recommendation and, as acknowledged in the GAO draft report, has in place a number of actions designed to track, consider, and iteratively mitigate staffing level changes in Afghanistan.

USAID proactively tracks Mission staffing levels via regular and ad hoc analyses. From January to October 2015, in addition to our weekly and monthly staffing reports, USAID conducted seven additional ad hoc analyses around foreign service national (FSN) staffing for USAID leadership, Congress, and GAO. Combined, these actions allow USAID/Afghanistan to plan for and respond to staffing-related impacts.

USAID/Afghanistan also takes active measures to evaluate staffing levels' effects on operational capacity. For instance, staff retention is discussed in regular strategic management meetings such as bi-annual portfolio reviews and annual leadership reviews. These meetings also serve as a venue to discuss, evaluate, and iterate knowledge management retention strategies, strategic recruitment, creative staffing mechanisms (such as the Afghan Hands program), and other efforts to mitigate the effects of Afghan local staff resignations. USAID/Afghanistan benefits from what we learn in our evaluations and employs this knowledge to continue to develop and implement creative approaches to maintain a robust and qualified staff that are able to maintain the Mission's operational capacity and pass on its institutional knowledge.

Based on our ability to conduct comprehensive staffing analyses, regular and continued high-level management discussions, and our continuing efforts to develop and implement approaches to maintain USAID/Afghanistan's operational capacity and knowledge management, the Mission requests GAO's concurrence to close the recommendation.

Appendix IV: GAO Contact and Staff Acknowledgments

GAO Contact

Michael J. Courts, 202-512-8980 or courtsm@gao.gov

Staff Acknowledgments

In addition to the contact named above, Hynek Kalkus (Assistant Director), Jon Fremont, Farhanaz Kermalli, and Owen Starlin made key contributions to this report. Ashley Alley, Tina Cheng, Martin De Alteriis, Katie Bernet, Karen Deans, Thomas Gilbert, and Michael Silver provided additional support.

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