

Forbes

Endangered Wartime Interpreters: The U.S. Should Protect Those Who Protect Us

By: Doug Bandow – February 25, 2013

War is hell, said Union Gen. William Sherman. The most obvious casualties are the formal combatants, those seeking to kill each other on the battlefield. But others also are at risk, especially in today's unconventional wars.

In Iraq and Afghanistan the U.S. relied heavily on interpreters, most recruited from the local population. In Iraq a disproportionate number were Christians, semi-outcasts in the Islamic society. Those aiding American forces share combat dangers but also are targeted off of the battlefield for their work. By one estimate roughly 1000 interpreters so far have been killed in Iraq. Some 80 interpreters have died in battle in Afghanistan since 2007. To return home would be a death sentence for others.

Yet the U.S. government has refused to welcome those who have done so much to help America. For years the Bush administration refused to admit many Iraqis, including those who had worked for U.S. forces, apparently because doing so would demonstrate that the war had been less than a glorious success.

The Obama administration appears to be taking a similar approach to Afghanistan. Of 58,000 political refugees admitted in 2011, 9,388 were Iraqi. Just 428 were Afghan. Complained Zaid Hydari of the Istanbul-based Refugee Advocacy and Support Program: "Is there anything more than the apparent brutal truth: among the already unwanted, you are the least favored."

The problem is not new. In Southeast Asia the U.S. spent roughly a decade at war, allied with the Cambodian and South Vietnamese governments. After Washington left the regimes in Phnom Penh and Saigon collapsed. Unfortunately, those who worked for America were targeted for revenge. The U.S. government brought out those thought to be most vulnerable, and later accepted thousands of Vietnamese who fled as "boat people." But many friends of America were left behind.

In Iraq, at least, Washington's withdrawal did not lead to a state collapse. Nevertheless, those who worked for the U.S. remain at risk.

America only slowly opened the door. Starting in 2007 5000 visas were made available annually for Iraqi interpreters. However, the State Department approved few applications until after U.S. forces pulled out at the end of 2011. Becca Heller of the Iraqi Refugee Assistance Project criticized Washington's handling of asylum claims, but cited the recent improvement: "the U.S. government has really gotten its act together on Iraq."

Not on Afghanistan, however. And time may be short: the longevity of the Karzai government without U.S. military combat support is uncertain. Even if the regime survives Washington's coming withdrawal, it may be incapable or unwilling to protect former allied employees from retaliation.

Congress established Special Immigrant Visas for Afghan and Iraqi translators, but the number is limited to 50 annually. Roughly 400 Afghan interpreters received visas through general immigration programs before those avenues closed in 2010. In 2009 Congress established 7500 visas for U.S. government employees through the "Afghan Allies Protection Act." Congress recognized that those who aided American combat forces would be among the most obvious targets for Taliban retaliation.

Still, there's no easy trip to America. Applicants must travel to Islamabad, in neighboring Pakistan. The U.S. embassy in Kabul didn't process its first visa under the program until 2011 and has done little since then. Reported the *Washington Post* in October: "Of the more than 5,700 Afghans who have applied for U.S. visas under a special program tailored for those who have supported the American war effort, just 32 have been approved, the State Department says, leaving the rest in limbo as foreign forces begin their withdrawal."

Overall, Afghanistan doesn't rank in the top 20 countries for political refugees. China leads the pack for approvals—political persecution is pervasive in that nation, but asylum applicants aren't typically murdered there. A few other countries on the list suffer from significant violence. But in most, ranging from Armenia to Russia, Egypt to India, it is hard to argue that people are at greater risk than in Afghanistan. Especially people likely to be targeted for their service to America.

The State Department complained that it had received no increase in staff or other resources. Apparently for *three years*. But finally, one official told the *Post*, "It's absolutely a top priority for us now."

The administration obviously has a lot of ground to cover to catch up. Assuming it is serious.

In February 2010 the U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan Karl Eikenberry wrote to Secretary of State Hillary Clinton warning that the 2009 legislation "could drain this country of our very best civilian and military partners: our Afghan employees." Moreover, "If we are not careful" providing visas "will 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."

Allowing Afghan employees an early exit would be inconvenient for Washington. But they are risking their lives for Americans, including those in combat. Moreover, Eikenberry proposed changing the legal standard of "ongoing serious threat" to make it harder for interpreters to emigrate to America even after U.S. forces went home. That would be a grotesque reward for America's friends.

The risks for interpreters just begin on the battlefield. Farhat, a 21-year-old who served as an interpreter for three years, saw his family threatened and cousin kidnapped. Irshadullah's family also was threatened. Twenty-seven-year-old Yewazi, severely injured by shrapnel four years ago, was unable to return home: "I'd be killed

and beheaded because I have worked for coalition forces and everyone knows that in my area.”

Taki, who started with U.S. forces at age 17, said he has received threatening phone calls; “It’s been more than four years and now I can’t apply for other jobs,” since companies don’t want someone who other Afghans will not trust. Rafi cited “intimidation and threats against me and my family.” Abdul discovered a Taliban member searching his home; the police released the latter while detaining Abdul, who subsequently received death threats.

The risk will increase as Washington further reduces its presence. Two years ago an Iraqi observed: “We’ve lost our source of livelihood and we face regular death threats.” As violence rose he noted that “there’s already a hint of the score-setting that we so fear.”

Afghanistan threatens a similar result. Becca Heller told the *Washington Post*: “I get contacted daily by Afghan interpreters and the Americans they served beside, terrified about the consequences of not receiving their visas before the military withdrawal.” Almost as frustrated as the interpreters are their American military mentors. One anonymous officer told the *Washington Post*: “The visa process is a black hole. We haven’t heard a word about a single application.” While U.S. and allied personnel are skeptical about the loyalty and value of Afghan police and army, few doubt the importance of interpreters. Former Army officer Erik Malmstrom called their role “pivotal” and told the *Washington Post*: “We focus on the sacrifices Americans make, but they pale in comparison to the sacrifices the people on the ground bear. I fear for these guys.”

The U.S. government is not alone in its penury. Interpreters working for Great Britain and New Zealand face similar obstacles to emigration. The Western coalition has demonstrated little gratitude for loyal service.

Political asylum should be an easy issue. But no, explained the Congressional Research Service: “Some assert that asylum has become an alternative pathway for immigration rather than humanitarian protection. Others argue that—given the religious, ethnic, and political violence in various countries around the world—it has become more difficult to differentiate the persecuted from the persecutors. Some express concern that U.S. sympathies for the asylum seekers ... could inadvertently facilitate the entry of terrorists.”

Indeed, the latter fear has tarred refugees the world over. Contact with armed groups, including those fighting against governments viewed as *enemies of America* years or even decades ago—the Karen, Hmong, and Montagnards in Burma, Laos, and Vietnam, for instance—has been deemed as providing “material support” for terrorists. Refugees similarly barred from entering America include a woman forced to cook for the Liberian rebels who raped her and a Colombian teenager forced by his paramilitary captors to bury his murdered parents.

Afghans who fought against the Soviets have been blacklisted by the same rules. Jamshid, who fled Afghanistan in 1988, and then served the U.S. as an interpreter after returning home, was denied refugee status in 2008. The State Department decided that he had aided terrorists because decades before he helped the National Islamic Front of Afghanistan, part of the *U.S.-supported Mujahideen which battled Moscow*.

Often interpreters receive no explanation for denials of their applications. In February the *Washington Post* profiled Tariz, who has worked as an interpreter for seven years, since age 17. Like most of his countrymen he grew up under the Taliban; his family is from Kandahar, a Taliban stronghold. Perhaps that is why his application was denied. Declared the State Department, he “may be a terrorist or may have provided material support to a terrorist organization.”

Which probably would surprise the Pentagon, which *continues to employ Tariz at Kandahar Airfield*. As well as to the U.S. military officers who back his application. One noted Tariz’s support for “the U.S. presence in Afghanistan” and the fact that he had placed “himself and his family at risk.” Another called him “a role model to his fellow citizens.”

Americans should enthusiastically welcome political refugees to “the land of the free and the home of the brave.” Especially people who have been—and sometimes continue to be—trusted with the lives of U.S. military personnel. Whatever the exceptions and cautions, America’s door should remain open.

Marshall Wilde, who advised allied forces in Kabul, complained: “This abject moral failure reflects poorly on us as a country and threatens our ability to recruit allies in the future.” He is right. The government is failing those who helped Americans. In doing so, it also is failing Americans.

The U.S. is leaving Afghanistan, as it must. No one knows what the future holds for Afghans, but the past offers little optimism. Most vulnerable will be those who aided America and other Western nations. Washington should repay their service and trust by allowing them to share America’s future with the rest of us.