

'They considered me a traitor and a spy'

Helping U.S. forces made many Iraqi and Afghan interpreters targets in their own countries, and the visa program intended to help them has fallen under heavy fire

PHOTO BY CHRISTOPHER ONSTOTT

Omar Al-Kubaisi, an interpreter for U.S. forces in Iraq, now lives in Oregon thanks to a Special Immigrant Visa, or SIV. The SIV program is currently being overhauled in the Senate, which could severely reduce the number of visas offered in the future.

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Fifty-year-old Omar Al-Kubaisi says he wanted to give his people a voice and help prevent bloodshed. That's why, in the spring of 2003, he decided to work with the Americans after they invaded his home, Iraq.

Al-Kubaisi was a professor of linguistics and comparative literature in Iraq and Saudi Arabia. He's published numerous academic papers. He reads Latin. And along with Arabic he speaks Hebrew, French and English. He has a kind, studious face. "I always considered myself a bookworm," says Al-Kubaisi.

As unlikely a hero as he may be, when the time came Al-Kubaisi stepped up. He helped the United States confiscate weapons and rebuild the city of Ramadi's police force by acting as a mediator between U.S. forces and Iraqi leaders. But, this made him and his family targets.

"It was impossible to stay because of all the threats from Al-Qaeda," says Al-Kubaisi. "They considered me a traitor and a spy."

Al-Kubaisi and his family now live in Oregon thanks to a government effort created to help fast track the immigration process for Iraqis and Afghans who worked with the United States, as well as their loved ones. Known as Special Immigrant Visas, or SIVs, the effort to aid interpreters and others who assisted the United States has received strong bipartisan support among lawmakers.

Nevertheless, advocates say both the Iraqi and Afghan Special Immigration Visa programs have been poorly managed, lack transparency, and desperately need to be reformed. What's more, the programs' futures remain uncertain.

SIVs' Near Death Experience

The Iraqi SIV program was set to end on Dec. 31. However, a new 9-month extension for the program, as well as a number of reforms to it and the Afghan program are currently provisions on the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA), a budget bill that sets what the Department of

Defense can and can't spend money on. But it does much more. This year's bill sought to overhaul how the military handles sexual assault, and that nagging question: what to do with Guantanamo Bay prisoners? The new rules it created for the SIV programs is a mixed bag.

On Thursday, Dec. 12, just before lawmakers adjourned for winter vacation, the House of Representatives passed the NDAA. As this story goes to print, the Senate hadn't yet voted on the bill.

If passed, the NDAA will reform both SIV programs and extend the Iraqi program into next year. However, the bill will also cut the number of Iraqi visas from 25,000 down to a mere 2,500 over the next nine months.

The NDAA also does nothing to extend the Afghan SIV program. This was part of early bill language, but is missing from the final draft. Unless new legislation is introduced, the State Department will stop issuing Afghan SIVs on Sept.

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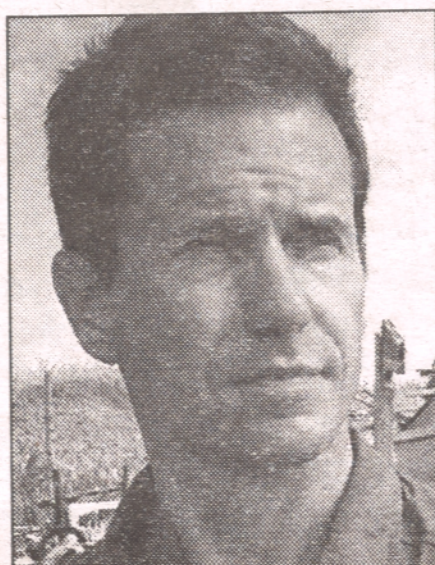
Unless new legislation is introduced, the State Department will stop issuing Afghan Special Immigrant Visas on Sept. 30, 2014.



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