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keeps a list, then they're not sharing." Getting a handle on the SIV numbers is difficult. Since it was created, the Iraqi program's visa allotments have changed. Lawmakers had at one time allotted the program 25,000 visas over its lifetime. According to State Department numbers, the government has issued 6,675 SIVs to Iraqi interpreters and other Iraqi workers since the program began. Add family members, and the number brought over on SIVs goes up to 15,000, according to a recent op-ed in USA Today written by the State Department's Patrick Kennedy, who helps oversee the SIV programs.

The Afghan numbers tell a similar story. Of the 8,750 visas allotted for Afghan SIVs, only 1,648 have been granted to Afghan workers. Over 2,000 visas have been issued to their dependents.

Reisner and others have pointed to these numbers as proof that the programs are being neglected. What's more, she says that because the government doesn't know how many nationals it has worked with, the programs' quotas are in reality nothing more than educated guesses grasping at the real need that's out there.

One reason for the data shortage is this: Many nationals who helped the United States weren't government employees but were hired by outside contractors. This is one interpreter's story.

A man's voice told him in Arabic, "Your turn has come." He immediately ripped out his cell phone's SIM card and smashed it. He didn't want another call like this, or worse. This was the call that made an interpreter we'll refer to only by his initials, K.A., decide to leave Iraq.

K.A. told Street Roots this call wasn't his first threat. He was often verbally harassed — called a traitor — when seen with U.S. troops. While on patrol with soldiers hunting for a suspected cache of weapons in Baghdad, K.A. was trapped in crossfire. He received shrapnel in his back, leg and forehead from the incident. His doctors did a nice job. His facial scar is barely noticeable.

"Of course when I was working I would receive threats," says K.A. "but they weren't directed at me personally." That changed. "Hello, American Pig," were the words on the next call.

K.A. now lives in the United States with his wife and daughters, but throughout the Iraq War he worked with U.S. troops mostly via private companies with defense contracts. His experience isn't unique.

In both Iraq and Afghanistan, the military outsourced most of its interpreting work. In Iraq, the big winners of these lucrative government contracts were companies such as Titan Corp., Global Linguist Solutions and L-3 Communications. K.A. says he worked for all of them.

Between March 2003 and March 2008, the San Diego-based Titan Corp. — which was purchased by L-3 Communications in 2005 — hired more than 8,000 interpreters in Iraq.

According to an investigation by ProPublica and the Los Angeles Times, in that same period at least 360 interpreters — most of them Iraqis — were killed. About 1,200 were injured.

The average interpreter made about \$12,000

a year. K.A. says it was good money and — even given the job's dangers — very hard to say no to.

By contrast, Amnesty International estimates Titan Corp./L-3 received roughly \$3 billion from taxpayers over its five-year contract. In 2007, Titan lost its government deal to Global Linguist Solutions, a joint venture between DynCorp and McNeil Technologies. DynCorp currently has a deal to train the Afghan Police, among other government contracts. The 2007 translation contract earned the company \$4.65 billion.

K.A. says, when his visa was being processed, he relied heavily on recommendations from supervisors in the companies he worked for — this also included a subsidiary of engineering behemoth Kellogg Brown and Root — and they didn't always answer his requests. He also received recommendations from individuals in the units he worked with. He says he and his family didn't come over on SIVs but via a separate refugee program.

As to how many nationals worked for contractors, that number — like how many worked with the government — is still a big unknown. Also unknown, says Reisner, is how many people have applied for SIVs and how many have been denied them. The new reforms are supposed to change that.

**The Reforms**

The NDAA reforms call for greater transparency that, in effect, asks the government to open its books. It also grants applicants the right to hire lawyers and dispute their cases if their SIVs are denied. That, says Reisner, is a welcome change.

"What we see again, again, and again is that people get denied at that initial stage (of the SIVs process) for no conceivable reason," she says. "There needs to be some kind of oversight mechanism."

Responding to criticism that the SIVs process takes too long, the new reforms now require that — national security concerns not withstanding — all applications be processed within nine months of all the necessary materials being submitted.

The reforms also establish the creation of two staff positions to oversee the SIV programs, one at the embassy in Kabul, the other in Baghdad. The positions were created because the SIV programs are the joint responsibility of the State Department, the DOD, Homeland Security, and the FBI. As Reisner puts it, "There really isn't anyone where the buck finally stops."

Leading the reform effort in the House is Oregon Rep. Earl Blumenauer, one of creators of the SIV programs. He says Americans owe a debt to those who helped them.

"I thought the war in Iraq was a disastrous policy," says Blumenauer. "But we engaged thousands and thousands of Iraqi nationals and later Afghans who put their lives on the line to help Americans...I think we have a moral obligation to try to keep them safe."

Blumenauer voted no on the NDAA citing his concerns that, among other things, the bill approves \$7.9 billion for nuclear weapons.

"We continue to give too much to the wrong people to do the wrong things," he says.

Blumenauer also laments the SIV reforms couldn't have done more and that much of his

original, more far-reaching proposals were rejected in the final bill. He plans on pursuing legislation that will keep the Afghan program alive past September 2014. He says he'll also work to once again extend the Iraqi program. Even still, the future of the SIV programs remain uncertain. That's because giving them a more permanent footing has been tricky at best. Take just this year.

Over the summer, Blumenauer attempted to get SIVs into the immigration reforms being debated. Then, immigration reform floundered. Before its December deadline, the Iraqi SIV program was first set to end in September 2013. This fall, amidst the government shutdown, Blumenauer and supporters of SIVs pushed to extend the Iraqi program another three months. SIVs were then attached to the NDAA. What all this means is stories like Bandar's and Al-Kubaisi's could become rare in the coming years.

**The Colonel's letter to Omar**

Al-Kubaisi props himself up in bed. It's a cold December day when I interview him and he's trying to stay warm. He pulls aside his green blanket and shows me his scars.

Al-Kubaisi is wearing a pair of dark shorts. His scars run the length of both shins. That's where they put in the metal rods after the explosion, he says. At the foot of the bed rest his crutches. Because of Al-Qaeda, he can't walk without them. His bedside table is covered in prescription pill bottles. When the pain is really bad, he says he needs the pills to sleep. But Al-Kubaisi's wounds run deeper than the metal in his legs.

He hands me a letter from Col. Bryan Groves. This was the letter that helped get him and his family to America. It outlines Al-Kubaisi's work for the US government. Groves' letter also describes the bombing that left Al-Kubaisi bedridden, and it tells how in 2005, two years after Al-Qaeda took his ability to walk, the terrorists robbed him again, this time of two of his daughters. It was another bomb.

I ask if the price he paid for working with the Americans was worth it. He says of course he couldn't foresee all the consequences. He tears up and talks about his family, and his daughters' deaths. But, he says, with his remaining family now in America, they're living a life that would've been unthinkable in Iraq. "What I lost is..." he pauses. "What do you call it? My loss is their gain?"

I ask if he thinks he made a positive difference in Iraq. He responds, "I know I helped the U.S. troops in getting and confiscating a lot of weapons. Those would have been used against U.S. troops and our people over there...Nobody knows except God how many people would have been killed from both sides. I am so very, very proud of what I have done."

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— REP. EARL BLUMENAUER  
D-OREGON

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