



Afghan Allies Out of War

Addressing the Needs of the Afghan Special Operations Forces Community and their Families in the United States

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Trust After Betrayal

London School of Economics & Political Science (LSE)

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Disclaimer

This policy paper was prepared by Trust After Betrayal’s Principal Investigator, Dr. Erin K. McFee, along with Connor Christensen, and Luke Magyar within the framework of the “Out of War” oral history project on formerly armed actors (FAAs). Interviews and analysis were conducted with the support of Honor the Promise and The Corioli Institute. Special thanks to Trust After Betrayal Research Associate Marlon Davis, who also contributed supporting research.

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“[During the evacuation], you knew that you would never wear your uniform again or have your weapon to protect your people. Accepting that reality was so hard. The \$2.3 trillion the US spent, the international community money – the blood and treasure that both Afghans and Americans have spent – I felt accountable because I was doing it for a purpose: not for the leaders, not for another country, but for my own people, for my own nation, for my own values, for the democracy that was helping us to guarantee women's rights and human rights. I knew that purpose was right. I would have done that 100 times. And if I died 100 times, it would have still been worth that purpose.”

*Veteran Afghan National Army
Special Operations Command (ANASOC) Commander
Alexandria, VA*

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ACRONYMS

AAPA	Afghan Allies Protection Act (Of 2023)
AMPAA	Afghan Medical Professional Association of America
ANA	Afghan National Army
ANASOC	Afghan National Army Special Operations Command
ANASOF	Afghan National Army Special Operations Forces
ANMA	Afghan National Military Academy
ANP	Afghan National Police
ASFF	Afghan Security Forces Fund
CAKs	Combined Arms Kandaks (Afghan)
CI	Corioli Institute
CoGS	Chief of General Staff (Afghan)
CSAR	Combined Situational Awareness Room
CSKs	Cobra Strike Kandaks (Afghan)
DoD	Department of Defense (United States)
DoS	Department of State (United States)
FAA	Formerly Armed Actors
FTP	Female Tactical Platoon
GoA	Government of Afghanistan
GWOT	Global War on Terror
HtP	Honor the Promise
ISAF	International Security Assistance Force
ISKP	The Islamic State - Khorasan Province
KKA	Ktah Khas (Premier Afghan counter-terrorism unit)
LPR	Lawful Permanent Resident
LSE	London School of Economics
MAVNI	Military Accessions Vital to National Interest
MENA	Middle East-North Africa
MoD	Ministry of Defense (Afghan)
MoI	Ministry of Interior (Afghan)
MOS	Military Occupational Specialty
MSKs	Mobile Strike Kandaks (Afghan)
NMB	National Mission Brigade (Afghan)
NSS	National Security Strategy
OAR	Operation Allies Refuge
OAW	Operation Allies Welcome
OEF	Operation Enduring Freedom
PI	Principal Investigator
SFKs	Special Forces Kandaks (Afghan)
SIV	Special Immigrant Visa
SOBs	Special Operations Brigades (Afghan)
SoE	School of Excellence (Afghan)
SOF	Special Operations Forces
SOFMKs	Special Operations Forces Maneuver Kandaks (Afghan)
SOKs	Special Operations Kandaks (Afghan)
TAB	Trust After Betrayal
TPS	Temporary Protected Status



TABLES AND FIGURES

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The ex-Afghan National Army Special Operations Command (ANASOC) soldiers made unparalleled sacrifices fighting alongside U.S. military special operations forces during the last 10 years of the war in Afghanistan. Existing legislation and visa provisions for Afghan allies who emigrated to the U.S. after the takeover of the Taliban, however, do not account for populations beyond translators and interpreters. Moreover, many ANASOC veterans in the U.S. struggle financially and from the strains of family separation while also lacking the necessary counseling, training, and employment opportunities that they deserve in return for their unwavering service to their country and the United States.

This policy paper delves into the experiences of former Afghan National Army Special Operations Command (ANASOC) soldiers who have resettled in the United States after the tumultuous withdrawal from Afghanistan and presents a nuanced set of recommendations to effectively support their livelihoods and dignified integration into this new context. It is grounded in mixed-methods research based on life history interviews and surveys with 36 ANASOC veterans (including two women from the Female Tactical Platoons (FTP)), shedding light on the multifaceted (psycho-)social, economic, and legal challenges faced by these individuals as they transition from military service to civilian life in the United States.

Key Findings:

- 1. Leadership Dynamics:** The paper underscores the arduous circumstances that ANASOC veterans encountered in the days leading up to and following the withdrawal. Left to defend their positions against the Taliban, some interviewees reported their commanders abandoning them, leaving them as the last line of defense.
- 2. Evacuation Disparities:** A critical disparity between commanders and soldiers during evacuation is highlighted. Some commanders prioritized their evacuation, often bypassing their troops, creating a sense of betrayal and disillusionment.
- 3. Family Reunification Struggles:** The paper illuminates the intricate challenges that hinder ANASOC veterans' efforts to reunite with their families in the United States. These challenges encompass bureaucratic hurdles, threats from the Taliban, and difficulties accessing necessary documentation.
- 4. Language and Education Challenges:** Language barriers emerge as significant impediments to ANASOC veterans' successful integration into U.S. society. The lack of accessible specialized language courses hinders employment prospects and higher education opportunities, particularly for veterans with service-related injuries.
- 5. Psychosocial Support Needs:** The transition to civilian life for ANASOC veterans is marked by a complex interplay of trauma, family separation, and isolation. This emphasizes the necessity for tailored psychosocial support services that acknowledge their unique challenges.



Policy Recommendations:

- 1. SIV Eligibility for ANASOC Veterans:** Designate ANASOC veterans as eligible for Special Immigrant Visas (SIVs) or adopting a tiered preference system within the asylum process, acknowledging the invaluable service they provided.
- 2. Prioritize Family Reunification:** Streamline the family reunification process, tackling logistical bottlenecks, addressing security concerns, and devising strategies to protect ANASOC veterans' families who remain in Afghanistan.
- 3. Facilitate Military Service Pathways:** Temporarily waive Green Card requirements and establish specialized pathways for ANASOC veterans to contribute their skills within the U.S. military, security agencies, and public service roles.
- 4. Language and Education Support:** Implement accessible English language courses, higher education opportunities, and job readiness programs tailored to the needs of ANASOC veterans.
- 5. Comprehensive Psychosocial Support:** A support framework to address ANASOC veterans' distinct physical and psychosocial needs, acknowledging their service and aiding in a seamless transition to civilian life.

Benefits and Implications:

The comprehensive implementation of these recommendations extends beyond moral obligations to the sacrifices of former ANASOC service members, contributing to broader strategic objectives. By enabling the successful resettlement of ANASOC veterans, the United States reaffirms its commitment as a reliable global ally while tapping into a pool of skilled individuals who can enhance national security endeavors and augment the American workforce.

This policy paper advocates for a targeted and empathetic approach to support ANASOC veterans' integration into American society. By addressing the intricate challenges they face and providing tailored assistance, the United States not only fulfills its ethical responsibilities by fostering healing and establishing a sense of normalcy among ANASOC veterans but also leverages the potential contributions of these individuals for the betterment of American society and the reinforcement of their global partnerships.

About the Publishers

The present study represents a collaborative effort between Trust After Betrayal (TAB), hosted at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE), Honor the Promise (HTP), and the Corioli Institute (CI). For more information on these organizations and initiatives, as well as their missions and mandates, see **Appendix A**.



RATIONALE

The U.S. financial costs for the War in Afghanistan reached \$2.313 trillion by the end of FY2022.¹ More importantly, as of August 3, 2023, Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) cost 2,350 American service members' lives (out of 243,000 deaths directly attributed to the war on all sides), resulting in 20,149 wounded in action.² Furthermore, by June 21, 2021, 30,177 U.S. service members had died due to suicide following the post-9/11 wars.³ The blood and treasure expended in this long and complicated war are unparalleled in United States history. In August 2021, the coalition effort evacuated some 120,000 people from Kabul.⁴ Within six months, nearly 85,000 Afghan nationals had arrived in the United States as part of Operation Allies Refuge (OAR) and Operation Allies Welcome (OAW).⁵ Advocacy efforts continue to honor the promise made to those who remain left behind. And yet, some debts remain unpaid.

Nestled within the financial costs of \$2.313 trillion for the War in Afghanistan, the United States appropriated approximately \$80.7 billion to the Afghan Security Forces Fund (ASFF) from FY 2005 to FY 2021, which included creating, training, equipping, and sustaining the Afghan National Army Special Operations Command (ANASOC) following its formation in 2011.⁶ That year, the Department of Defense (DoD) budget request for Afghan National Army (ANA) support reached approximately \$11.6 billion.⁷ In FY2021, the same year the Government of Afghanistan (GoA) collapsed and saw the withdrawal of all Western forces from the country, the U.S. allocated approximately \$1.15 billion to sustain and grow ANASOC.⁸

The present analysis and policy recommendations focus on this community of Afghan veterans and their families whom the U.S. and allies spent the last decade and billions of dollars creating, training, and fighting alongside. It draws from a mixed-methods study design that employed surveys and life history interviews from 36 ANASOC veterans (including two women from the Female Tactical Platoons (FTP)) resettling in the United States in California, Florida, Illinois, Kansas, Kentucky, Massachusetts, Missouri, Nebraska, New Jersey, Texas, Virginia, and Washington DC. One FTP respondent was interviewed in London. (For a detailed explanation of the Methods and Participant Demographics, see **Appendix B**.) The findings draw from over 100 hours of interview data and policy recommendations and connect to current legislation and advocacy initiatives intended to benefit these individuals.

¹ Watson Institute. '*Human and Budgetary Costs to Date of the U.S. War in Afghanistan, 2001-2022 | Figures*'. *The Costs of War*, 2021.

² DCAS. '*U.S. Military Casualties - Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) Casualty Summary by Month and Service*'. *Defense Casualty Analysis System*, 3 Aug. 2023.

³ Suitt, III, Thomas Howard. '*High Suicide Rates among United States Service Members and Veterans of the Post-9/11 Wars*'. Watson Institute of International & Public Affairs, 21 June 2021, p. 35.

⁴ NATO. '*NATO and Afghanistan*'. NATO, 31 Aug. 2022.

⁵ Nysten, Alexandria J., et al. '*Then, We Lost Everything: Afghan Evacuee Experiences of Operation Allies Refuge and Operation Allies Welcome*'. Center for Human Rights and Humanitarian Studies and the Refugee Dream Center, Apr. 2023, p. 74.; U.S. Department of Homeland Security. '*Operation Allies Welcome Announces Departure of All Afghan Nationals from U.S. Military Bases*'. 19 Feb. 2022.

⁶ Sopko, John F. '*SIGAR Quarterly Report to the United States Congress July 30, 2021*'. Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction - US Government, 30 July 2021, pp. 30-32.; Venable, Lorin T. '*Audit of the DoD's Financial Management of the Afghanistan Security Forces Fund*'. Audit, DODIG-2023-082, Inspector General for the Department of Defense, 9 June 2023, pp. 1-2.

⁷ DoD, United States. '*National Defense Budget Estimates for FY 2011*'. Office of the Under Secretary of Defense (Comptroller), Mar. 2010. pp. 26, Table 3-1.

⁸ Sopko, John F. '*SIGAR Quarterly Report to the United States Congress July 30, 2021*'. Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction - US Government, 30 July 2021, p. 75.



The present work argues that developing policies that promote and prioritize this community not only fulfills our moral obligation to our partners and allies and strengthens our global position but also supports the sustainable, dignified, and fulfilling integration of well-trained and capable soldiers and professionals into the United States – individuals and families who are as well-positioned to make substantive contributions to national and homeland security as they are to local economies.

Afghan National Army Special Operations (ANASOC) as Critical Allies, Actors, and Operators⁹

The ANA established a division-level special forces organization in May of 2011, marking the beginnings of ANASOC.¹⁰ ANASOC became a corps-level command on August 20, 2017, and aimed to double its force size by 2020 to approximately 23,000 personnel.¹¹ By December 2020, ANASOC was a 3-star General Officer command nested under the Afghan Special Security Forces of the ANA.

At the most senior level, the civilian Minister of Defense reported directly to the President of Afghanistan and was responsible for all Afghan military forces. The Minister of Defense's Chief of General Staff (CoGS) was responsible for all security functions of the Ministry of Defense (MoD), including overseeing and directing the execution of the Afghan military campaign plan. The CoGS, a 4-star General Officer, tasked a 3-star General Officer subordinate in the Director of General Staff position to oversee ANASOC and their units.¹²

The ANASOC Commanding General, a 3-star General Officer, had two 2-star direct subordinates, the ANASOC Chief of Staff and the ANASOC Deputy Commanding General. The Chief of Staff oversaw the headquarters staff, mirroring the U.S. military construct, including the G1-G8 staff. ANASOC also led the School of Excellence (SoE), where all ANASOC special forces conducted their qualification and selection training at Camp Morehead in Kabul.¹³ Operationally, ANASOC consisted of four regionally assigned special operations brigades (SOBs) and a national mission brigade (NMB.) Units housed under these SOBs included: 10x battalion-sized special operations kandaks (SOKs), 6x mobile strike kandaks (MSKs), 2x cobra strike kandaks (CSKs), 3x special operations forces maneuver kandaks (SOFMKs), and 7x supporting elements. As of 2020, SOKs were transitioning to combined arms kandaks (CAKs), a process that would integrate more ground maneuver forces into their ranks but would not alter their primary special operations missions. It is unclear if this process concluded before the collapse of Afghanistan. The four

⁹ This study recognizes that the Female Tactical Platoons (FTP) in Afghanistan have proven to be invaluable assets in the country's operations, standing shoulder-to-shoulder with their male counterparts and contributing significantly to operational successes. It is an acknowledged shortcoming of this report that these critical actors were not included in greater numbers in the first phase of data collection, though efforts are currently underway to recruit more FTP participants for a second dedicated phase of research intended to accord the recognition and policy consideration that they deserve for their vital role in enhancing the effectiveness of military operations in the Afghan National Army and serving as critical partners in U.S. operations.

¹⁰ Radin, C.J. *'Afghan National Army Update, May 2011'* Long War Journal, May 2011, Section: ANA Special Operations Command (ANASOC) brigade.

¹¹ Marty, Franz J. *'Expanding Afghanistan's Special Operations Forces: Doubling Their Success or Further Diluting Their Mission?'* Afghanistan Analysts Network, 2 Oct. 2017, Section: From Division to Corps.

¹² DoD, United States. *'Enhancing Security and Stability in Afghanistan: December 2020'*. Semi-Annual Report to Congress, 7-653B15D, U.S. Department of Defense, 31 Mar. 2021, p. 35. Figure 5.

¹³ ANASOC Org. Chart. Afghan Ministry of Defense, U.S. Department of Defense. Accessed 1 Aug. 2023.; DoD, United States. *'Enhancing Security and Stability in Afghanistan: December 2020'*. Semi-Annual Report to Congress, 7-653B15D, U.S. Department of Defense, 31 Mar. 2021, pp. 43-44.



SOBs were regionally assigned, with the 1st Brigade in Balkh Province (North), the 2nd in Herat Province (West), the 3rd in Kabul Province (East), and the 4th in Kandahar Province (South). Each brigade had 2-3 SOKs assigned under it, with each SOK consisting of approximately five companies and an estimated 100-120 commandos per company, emulating U.S. special operations platoons.¹⁴

The National Mission Brigade was the Afghan military's premier rapidly deployable special operations force. It functioned with direct support from the 6th SOK (later becoming the 1st Special Forces Kandak), the Ktah Khas (KKA), and two additional Special Forces Kandaks (SFKs.) The 6th SOK/1st SFK functioned as the national-level mission unit for ANASOC and was assigned to the NMB, operating primarily from Kabul with nationwide operational reach. The KKA was the light infantry special operations arm of the NMB. It consisted of eight support companies, including the Afghan Recon Unit (ARU) and the FTP, playing vital roles in enabling special missions across the MoD and Ministry of Interior (MoI). Lastly, the SFKs consisted of approximately seven companies with an estimated 147 SF soldiers per company. These SFKs provided the NMB with a small-team special operations capability paralleling the U.S. Green Berets in their mission to operate across Afghan National Defense forces and civilian populations while supporting SOBs as necessary.¹⁵

These special operators contributed more than any local partner to U.S. and coalition successes in Afghanistan, conducting an estimated 80% of ANA offensive operations in 2018 while constituting only 6% of the force.¹⁶ Much in the same way that the US DoD increased its reliance on its own Special Operations Forces (SOF), the Government of Afghanistan increasingly relied on ANASOC to expand capabilities and mission sets beyond the original scope of the organization.¹⁷ Data from U.S. government reports paired with an outpouring of support and references from U.S. special operations and military partners highlights the outsized impact of a relatively small force.

Ambiguities in Visa Eligibility and Uncertain Immigration Status

These critical partners remain unaccounted for in current legislation. While proposed legislation like the Afghan Allies Protection Act (AAPA) of 2023 makes significant progress in bettering the situation of Afghans in the United States, it does not explicitly account for populations beyond translators and interpreters.¹⁸ Many ANASOC soldiers identified commitment to the development and stabilization of their country and a desire to impact positively their fellow Afghans as a driving force behind their decision to join the military and fight. They also sought to ensure that Afghanistan would emerge from decades of

¹⁴ DoD, United States. *'Enhancing Security and Stability in Afghanistan: December 2020'*. Semi-Annual Report to Congress, 7-653B15D, U.S. Department of Defense, 31 Mar. 2021, pp. 40-42.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, pp. 42-44.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, pp. 63, Par. 1.; Marty, Franz J. *'Expanding Afghanistan's Special Operations Forces: Doubling Their Success or Further Diluting Their Mission?'*. Afghanistan Analysts Network, 2 Oct. 2017, Section: Misuse and Changing Mission.; Nicholson, John. *'Press Conference Statement by General John Nicholson, Commander, NATO Resolute Support Mission.'* Resolute Support Public Affairs Office. 24 Aug. 2017.; Sopko, John F. *'SIGAR Quarterly Report to the United States Congress April 30, 2017'*. Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction - US Government, 30 Apr. 2017, pp. 95, Par. 3.

¹⁷ U.S. Government. *'Special Operations Forces: Additional Actions Needed to Effectively Manage the Preservation of the Force and Family Program'*. no. GAO-22-104486, Preservation of Force and Family Program, GAO-22-104486, U.S. Government Accountability Office, 16 Dec. 2021, Section: Why GAO Did This Study.

¹⁸ Shaheen, Jeanne, and Roger Wicker. *'To Amend the Afghan Allies Protection Act of 2009 to Authorize Additional Special Immigrant Visas, to Require a Strategy for Efficient Processing, and to Establish Designated Senior Special Immigrant Visa Coordinating Officials, and for Other Purposes'*. MCC23671 7R4, no. S.1786, S.1786, 1 June 2023.



conflict, having successfully secured democratic ideals. These soldiers who strove to help create a stable and prosperous Afghanistan free of terrorism for the safety of their compatriots and the world could not have foreseen the speed and intensity with which the country would collapse.

Due to this lack of anticipation regarding the displacement of ANASOC, there is currently no established U.S. legislation to safeguard and support this group of at-risk Afghan individuals. However, the failure to predict the downfall of the Afghan Government should not deter policymakers from implementing sensible measures to aid this community, which undoubtedly warrants dedicated immigration avenues like those afforded to other vulnerable groups. Many ANASOC members currently residing in the United States remain suspended in humanitarian parole or temporary protected status while pursuing asylum applications to rebuild their lives in this country - even after two years of fleeing their homes to ensure survival. Moreover, the vague language used in previous legislation related to the Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) program has created uncertainty regarding the eligibility of this community for SIV status, further complicating their prospects for resettlement in the United States and reunification with their families.

Specifically, the SIV program is available to those individuals “who have worked as translators, interpreters, or other professionals employed by or on behalf of the United States government in Afghanistan or Iraq.”¹⁹ ANASOC operators were employed by the Afghan National Army (and not the United States), which resulted in their technical exclusion from this program based on prevailing interpretations of its scope. Despite this, those who “performed activities for the United States Military personnel stationed at International Security Assistance Force (ISAF)”²⁰ remain SIV-eligible in the AAPA of 2023. This language does not identify what activities or organizational criteria must be met for SIV eligibility or what groups fall under this umbrella.

Thus, it is likely that a population whose sacrifices outshine many and who operated shoulder-to-shoulder with U.S. SOF will remain ineligible for the SIV program. Based on the ambiguities in visa eligibility and the uncertain immigration status of the ANASOC veterans, it is evident that legislation needs to address further the inclusion of critical partners beyond translators and interpreters. The present study sought to research the nuances of these individuals’ lived experiences leading up to, fighting in, and resettling after the War in Afghanistan to provide an evidential basis for related policy moving forward.

¹⁹ Immigration Forum. ‘*Fact Sheet: Overview of the Special Immigrant Visa Programs*’. Immigration Forum, 2021, p. 3.

²⁰ Shaheen, Jeanne, and Roger Wicker. ‘*To Amend the Afghan Allies Protection Act of 2009 to Authorize Additional Special Immigrant Visas, to Require a Strategy for Efficient Processing, and to Establish Designated Senior Special Immigrant Visa Coordinating Officials, and for Other Purposes*’. MCC23671 7R4, no. S.1786, S.1786, 1 June 2023, p. Pg. 5, Lines 14-19.



FINDINGS

While the ANASOC experiences vary across individuals and contexts, qualitative data analysis revealed specific trends that support the formulation of generalized conclusions. These trends stem from the commonalities observed in the experiences of multiple participants. All cited quotes are *representative* (rather than exceptional) in nature.

Legal Status

1. **The visa and asylum processes are opaque, inconsistent, and excessively slow.** . Most respondents simultaneously seek pathways to permanent citizenship and ways to get their immediate families (spouses, children, siblings) out of harm's way in Afghanistan (see **Appendix B, Figures 8 & 9** for breakdown). However, the process for applying and tracking their status is opaque, inconsistent, and painstakingly slow, given that most of the individuals interviewed arrived in the United States between August 2021 and February 2022. Some have retained legal counsel but have found that the utility of that counsel ends once the application is enmeshed within the bureaucratic processes of the government. When asked about the status of his application, one respondent stated, "We applied for asylum. It's been taking a long time, and I don't know what has happened."

Many respondents maintain friendships among themselves and other ANASOC members and Interpreters eligible for SIV status. These serve as sources of solidarity and critical information for navigating the documentation requirements. However, networks of mutual support fall short when inconsistent processes and unexplained delays and denials contradict commonly shared understandings of how to manage their immigrant status. The frustrations are understandable, as one interviewee stated, "I can do work here. No problem. Hard work. Everything. I can support my family here. If only [I could] help my family, my brother...His life is not safe in Afghanistan."

In addition to the existential uncertainty that this generates, and the conditions of fear and anxiety experienced over the safety of family back home, these delays in processing threaten livelihoods. "Right now, I have a case for me, but I don't know what's going on there," one respondent explained, "but I [also] applied for re-parole because I don't want to lose my job license. I've started a small business now, and I just want to have all of the legal documentation."

Socioeconomic Integration

1. **Many grapple with the legacies of the impossible choice of whether to leave and find a way to reunite with their families following the evacuation or remain and face what was believed to be certain death.** Roughly 67% of those interviewed for this study remain separated from their families. One respondent spoke with difficulty about the frequent and painful WhatsApp calls home to his wife, eight-year-old daughter (who fears for his safety if he returns), and ten-year-old son (who begs him to return to fight the Taliban together). He misses this son, whom he has never met in person, as the child was born after he came to the United States and has just learned to walk. "Sometimes I go outside to the park for a couple of hours, but then I see the kids playing soccer. This is very hard, so I come home." His brother, who was also in the KKA, has not been authorized to



come to the United States and remains on the move in Afghanistan, changing locations every 15 days to avoid Taliban capture.

“Sometimes money is good. But sometimes we just need our family.”

In addition to the struggle with longing for family members, many respondents noted that they are also actively in contact with and looking for ways to support the evacuation of fellow ANASOC members who remain in Afghanistan and live under constant threat and persecution. “Many people that worked with us – like 250 or 260 people – are still in Afghanistan. Right now, we have 20 people (ANASOC) there,” one individual reported of his previous unit.

- 2. Significant portions of earnings are sent back to families and friends in Afghanistan.** ANASOC veterans’ families have lost a critical provider with the combined fall of Afghanistan and the departure of their husbands and fathers. Additionally, working wives and daughters can no longer do so under Taliban control. One respondent’s mother was a hospital director, another’s wife was a program manager for an international development initiative supporting orphans in Afghanistan, and a third respondent’s wife is currently conducting her doctoral studies in the United States. These family members – now excluded from the professional realm in their home countries – represent important earners and contributors to their communities in science, public health, and professional services.

Among those interviewed, some also send money back to the families of their fallen brothers in arms in addition to the earnings they send to their immediate families (mothers, brothers, wives, and children).

“A mother’s son was working in the Army. He [died] from an IED. For six months, he was married. He was a young man – a good man. He has one son, and he asks, “Where is my father?” It’s been two years, and he (the son) is talking and walking; he looks like his father. I send a wire transfer to them and sometimes I ask my brother to check in on other families.”

- 3. With a few notable exceptions, many individuals are under-employed.** Some interviewed struggle to find employment, while others struggle to make ends meet with what they can find in a way that enables them to send money home to their families – as dishwashers, hospital maintenance technicians, hotel staff, and truck drivers. One noted jokingly that, compared to operating in Special Forces, his new job in customer service “was the dangerous job.” This same individual shares a two-bedroom apartment with three others because of the low pay despite working 70-hour work weeks.

In a few cases – and generally, because of existing networks that predated August 2021 (e.g., West Point alumni, familial political influence) – interviewees were successfully able to secure fulfilling employment that built on their respective areas of training and expertise (i.e., in technology or



operations management). Nevertheless, most still sought something well-suited to their skill sets and interests. And while a significant proportion of respondents desired to join the U.S. armed forces (see finding 6), others looked to start entrepreneurial ventures – e.g., construction and logistics. Uncertainty around immigration status and family reunification also contributed substantially to employment anxieties.

“This is hard. I am an Army man...so it is hard coming here and being a dishwasher.”

- 4. The language barrier remains a significant challenge for resettlement.** There is a wide range of English capabilities among the ANASOC population. For some, however, the language barrier impedes more dignified, economically productive, sustainable resettlement and social integration into their communities. One respondent noted, “Some [private citizens] paid for a teacher, but then that ended. I practice with YouTube, but it is not the same as a class.” It is worth noting that, in the case of the FTP interviewee in the United Kingdom, she has received government support for ongoing English courses and adult education courses since her arrival in the fall of 2021. The language barrier results in low wages and a sense of social isolation at the community level due to challenges with integration.

Health & Wellbeing

- 5. The (in)visible wounds of war remain untreated.** One respondent suffered hearing loss and acute tinnitus from an RPG exploding next to his head in Afghanistan and struggled to find an English course to accommodate this condition. Another found limitations in available work options due to physical constraints resulting from a broken back when he was blown out of a second-story building by the Taliban in the days leading up to the evacuation, exacerbated by the long and frigid Chicago winters. “I started with construction,” he explained. “But because I am injured, I cannot do much in cold weather.”

In addition to the long list of physical injuries and chronic ailments from combat, demanding training regiments, and extensive periods undernourished and otherwise under-provisioned at remote outposts, experiences of profound loss lingered in the respondents’ accounts of their lives and potential futures. One showed the interviewer a photo of himself with six friends, all of whom had died. “These were my friends. Here’s me. He has died, he has died, he has died, he has died, he has died. That one without the hair. He also died...They all have big families with kids.” Alluding to the moral injury created by his military leadership’s rapid and preemptive departure in the earliest days of the fall of Afghanistan, he continued, “This is very hard for me. They all died in action - died for Afghanistan, for saving Afghanistan. They wanted a good Afghanistan. But they died, and Afghanistan was given to the Taliban.”

Many photos and videos of the Taliban committing acts of brutality against civilians, women, and children were shown to interviewers, and all respondents lost friends in the war. Steering clear of the realm of diagnosis, it is nevertheless clear that these individuals often experienced multiple and



overlapping traumatic and morally injurious events – not least of which was the final evacuation from the country they had served.

“It was the hardest moment. I didn't feel it that hard when I lost my father (to the Taliban). I didn't feel it that hard when I lost everything I had in life. [But] to lose my uniform, to lose my country, to lose the pride and the honor of [serving] and not being able to continue my support and my service to the nation. Because we knew the outcome (what would happen when the Taliban took control).”

Currently, those on Humanitarian Parole who make less than \$19,000 annually are eligible for Medicaid. These veterans have no additional medical (physical or psychological) service provisions. In Washington, DC, this represents a maximum monthly after-tax income of just over \$1,300 even to be eligible for Medicaid, which itself lacks integrated and responsive care options. After that, and anywhere near that income threshold, private insurance and care linger prohibitively out of reach.

Finally, loneliness and isolation are a severe concern for ANASOC members. If the strains and horrors of evacuation weren't enough, many endured prolonged journeys of multiple months-long stays at refugee camps and military bases before finally arriving at a new home in the United States. Though Honor the Promise provides a network of former ANASOC members and service referral capabilities, those living outside the Mid-Atlantic Region or lacking access to regular transportation often find themselves isolated and at the margins of American society.

“When I was in Afghanistan, I was in the Army. Now I am in the U.S. and I don't have parents or friends. I don't have anyone; I am alone.”

And though many groups such as former US service members, military academy alums, employers, private citizens, and the Afghan diaspora have mobilized tremendous support leading up to and since August 2021, none can fill the gaps in everyday life that have followed. Academic and policy literature have long argued for the importance of social networks for facilitating veteran reintegration and the risks of isolation and social disconnectedness for veteran populations' overall health and well-being.²¹ Additionally, normative cultural practices within Afghan societies heavily emphasize frequent social and familial relations and interactions, rendering the circumstantial isolation more deeply injurious.

²¹ Angel, Caroline M., et al. 'Team Red, White & Blue: A Community-Based Model for Harnessing Positive Social Networks to Enhance Enrichment Outcomes in Military Veterans Reintegrating to Civilian Life'. *Translational Behavioral Medicine*, vol. 8, no. 4, July 2018, pp. 554–64.; Demers, Anne. 'When Veterans Return: The Role of Community in Reintegration'. *Journal of Loss and Trauma*, vol. 16, no. 2, Mar. 2011, pp. 160–79.



“I was sitting alone...for almost two years alone. In America, people prefer to stay alone...In our country, we don't do that. If you stay alone, people will start laughing at you and say [that you're] crazy. Because you need people at some point in life. You cannot stay alone forever. You need someone to talk to, to argue with, to go outside with. You need someone to interact with, you know? The sense that a human gives to you; the comfort that another human gives to you - nothing else in the world can give [that] to you.”

Military Service

- 6. More than half of resettling ANASOC veterans desire to serve in the United States Armed Forces in some capacity.** 57% of respondents desired to serve in the United States military. As one succinctly concluded, “I want to serve my country. I am eating here. I am drinking here. I am [wearing] clothes in this country. Then, I should defend this country. Anywhere they want me to go, I'll go.” Citing their exceptional training alongside the U.S. Army Green Berets and extensive experience as fighters, they often noted a deep dissatisfaction with the work in which they currently found themselves – e.g., dishwashers, truck drivers, maintenance specialists. Such difficulties with transitions from highly trained operators and, often, battle-hardened warfighters to unrelated civilian labor are not without echo among the American operator community.

“How can I start from zero here?...I have physical fitness and good experience fighting...We would sleep with the weapons and wake up with the weapons and it is hard coming here and being a dishwasher.”

One noted that it would be the “ideal situation” to join the U.S. armed forces. All respondents who desired to serve were stalled due to Green Card restrictions.

“So where I work [as a security guard]: it's not the place I want to work. All I have is a radio on me; that's it. I'm grateful. I appreciate that; it's everything for me. But the thing is, I know my own abilities. It's not this [work]. I want to work and try [special operations] again. That's why we are here. We want to be like that.”

Beyond military service, some respondents either already worked in or expressed a desire to work in the service of other refugees going through the immigration process. Their motivation stems from a sense of solidarity and a belief that their experiences can be valuable in aiding others through the same journey.



“Now I always work some volunteer activity, like as a Dari interpreter with IRC [International Rescue Committee]. At some point, they reached out to me with some workshops, and I helped them because I like to improve my English language and gain experience here. Now, I am a volunteer translator and interpreter with IRC in New York. I think it’s important because I serve these people who are newcomers here, new refugees. Because I already have had the experience of facing a lot of problems, I feel with them, I want to help them.”

- 7. ANASOC fighters were often the last men on the front lines in the days leading up to and following the withdrawal.** Interviewees reported defending their positions against the Taliban, even long after their own commanders had left.

“[The Taliban’s] plan was to attack the headquarters [in Mazar-i-Sharif], which was the only headquarters controlling the whole nine provinces. They were only a mile away...When it got dark, my commander left and said he was going back to the corps headquarters, and I was left with five other personnel. [The Taliban fired multiple RPGs], and due to the explosion, I fell from the second-floor stairs. The guy who had the M240 was already dead, and the other one had a lot of cuts on his right arm, so I took him down to the third floor. He wasn’t able to move...By the time I got him down to the floor, I couldn’t move my left leg, and there was severe pain in my lower back...When we got [medevaced] to the hospital inside the corps, I couldn’t see any doctors...I asked one of the guys in the hospital what was going on.

Interviewees reported watching in the last days at HKIA as commanders boarded planes - in at least one instance, with up to 100 family members in tow and walking past the line of their soldiers who would be displaced from the flight to accommodate the swollen ranks of their ostensible family members and friends. While recounting the evacuation, one respondent traced the timeline: he and his unit had arrived at HKIA on the night of August 17. They waited through the night and into the following afternoon. The generals left around 14:00 without them. When asked why the generals left while they stayed behind, he stated, “They are made like this. First, they would go, and then we would go, and that’s how they were.”

With a few exceptions (4) in which respondents spoke highly of their military leadership, interviewees provided accounts that consistently reaffirmed these dynamics. They reported observing a wide range of instances in which commanders benefited disproportionately from international support while the soldiers suffered. For example, one interviewee said he and his men survived solely off reduced rations of plain, unsalted rice for 45 days at a remote outpost. They were so remotely positioned that the recovery of killed-in-action men did not occur until the bodies had already “popped” from the heat. Corruption (directing jobs and contracts to family and friends, qualified or otherwise) and embezzlement (ending meat purchases for the unit so the commander



could pocket the money) were also widely reported, especially in the later years of operations. One respondent vividly described the poor communication and lack of commitment to the ongoing struggle of some commanders in the final months of the war:

“Kabul was captured by the Taliban and my friends were calling me [in Parwan] telling me they were arrested and that the Taliban took their weapons. We didn’t understand how they could be arrested. Our commanders didn’t tell us anything...For six months, [the Taliban] fought with me [in Charchino] and couldn’t take my one tower: how can they take all of Afghanistan in two months? In the last days, I would wake up and some people would post on social media that the Taliban captured Parwan. I would sit there and say, ‘How is that possible? Because I am here [in Parwan] fighting.’

Then my commander said, ‘I am leaving, and you are the commander now. Do what you want. If you want to give up your weapons, give them up. If you want to fight the Taliban, fight them.’”
He said, ‘Sir, there’s no one. No one is left in headquarters.’”

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following constitute the policy recommendations emerging from the data collection and above analysis.

- 1. Explicitly identify ANASOC veterans as SIV-eligible (by passing the Afghan Adjustment Act or similar legislation).** If ANASOC veterans remain SIV-ineligible— as is the case with current legislation— the asylee route remains the only viable legal pathway to long-term residence in the U.S. However, the asylum process does not consider cases on any tiered-preference scale, despite precedence for tiered preferences in immigration law, like those applied to family-based immigration for lawful permanent residents (LPRs).²² Furthermore, processing for asylum applications has a widely reported backlog of over 500,000 pending cases as of the 4th quarter in FY2022, not including 60,000 additional forms received in that same period.²³ With no tiered preference system for asylum applications, these Afghan special operations partners are pooled with over half a million other applicants without regard or recognition for their service and sacrifice for both Afghanistan and the U.S. By passing the Afghan Adjustment Act - which received bipartisan co-sponsorship in both the House and Senate - or similar legislation that accounts for the sacrifices of ANASOC, the U.S. will meet its moral obligation to a deserving population and reap the rewards of what they bring to the country. Alternatively, legislation could implement a tiered preference category into the asylum process with consideration for service time and weight for combat experiences alongside U.S. forces, of which ANASOC has plenty.

²² USCIS. *Green Card for Family Preference Immigrants*. United States Citizenship and Immigration Services, 10 Jan. 2022.

²³ USCIS. *Number of Service-Wide Forms, By Quarter, Form Status, and Processing Time: July 1-2022 - September 30, 2022*. United States Citizenship and Immigration Services, 2022, p. 3.



1. Prioritize family reunification efforts. Backlogged asylum cases and processing delays paralyze family reunification efforts for the ANASOC community. On January 12, 2023, nearly a year and a half after the collapse of Afghanistan, the U.S. Department of State (DoS) launched the Afghan Family Reunification Platform, creating a pathway for Afghans in the U.S. on TPS (including ANASOC) to seek reunification with their remaining family members who are still abroad.²⁴ Though the DoS remains “committed to helping U.S. citizens and Afghans in the United States reunite with their family members who remain in Afghanistan, ” significant hurdles exist to ANASOC family reunification. These include application backlog, issues with launching a new DoS system (technical, manning, blind spots), the inability to access necessary documentation due to safety concerns and the hurried nature of their evacuation, and consistent harassment by the Taliban of their families still in Afghanistan.

“One of our neighbors called my wife and told her a group of people came to the house and were searching for your husband. They’re asking us to pressure you to tell them where he went. Luckily, I had already told my family to leave and go to a different house.”

Extensive research has demonstrated the positive effects of the presence of significant others, family, and military peers in supporting combat veterans’ transitions to civilian life.²⁵ In migration and refugee studies, research on transnational families has highlighted the criticality of family reunification in economic, social, affective, and relational terms.²⁶ Scholars have found that such separations are the most significant impediments to successful reintegration and contribute directly to depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress, and low psychological quality of life.²⁷

Comparative studies have found that Afghan refugees who work with U.S. or Coalition forces have the added fear and uncertainty of danger facing their loved ones back home, which contributes to significant ambivalence regarding resettlement.²⁸ Feelings of loss and a lack of cultural familiarity and guidance mark Afghan accounts of challenges experienced during resettlement without their families. While individual differences result in differentiated dispositions towards reunification (for example, one interviewee for this study felt that his extended family was better off in Afghanistan because of their cultural preferences), the denial of family reunification can be experienced at an acute economic and emotional cost. This study’s participants indeed echoed this sentiment. This recommendation thus calls for prioritizing family reunification in the United States for ANASOC veterans. This will contribute to local economies by reducing the remittance flow out of the United States and increasing the contributions to local skilled labor (e.g., former government officials,

²⁴ DoS, United States. ‘[State Department Afghan Family Reunification Platform Launches New Parolee Form](#)’. Office of the Spokesperson. 12 Jan. 2023.

²⁵ Wilcox, Sherrie. ‘[Social Relationships and PTSD Symptomatology in Combat Veterans](#)’. *Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice, and Policy*, vol. 2, no. 3, 2010, pp. 175–82.

²⁶ Tan, Yan, et al. ‘[Transnationalism, Diaspora, and Development: A Purposive Review of the Literature](#)’. *Geography Compass*, vol. 12, no. 12, 2018, p. e12413.

²⁷ Choumanivong, C., et al. ‘[Refugee Family Reunification and Mental Health in Resettlement](#)’. *Kuitui: New Zealand Journal of Social Sciences Online*, vol. 9, no. 2, Oct. 2014, pp. 89–100.; Miller, Alexander, et al. ‘[Understanding the Mental Health Consequences of Family Separation for Refugees: Implications for Policy and Practice](#)’. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, vol. 88, no. 1, 2018, pp. 26–37.

²⁸ *Ibid.*



hospital directors, and businesswomen). Most importantly, the reunification of families will support the health, well-being, and dignity of ANASOC veterans already living within US borders by delivering the only people who can make one's new country home.

- 2. Temporarily waive the Green Card requirement for service and facilitate pathways to the armed forces for qualified and vetted individuals.** As noted in the findings and corroborated by public reporting, many still desire to serve.²⁹ Creative implementation of these highly trained and dedicated former service members into the U.S. national security, homeland security, immigration, and public service spheres would represent a net gain for the United States. However, this potential can only be realized through prioritized and dedicated pathways to a stable immigration status for these veterans and their families.

All ANASOF have existing US government records and are biometrically enrolled. Furthermore, within ANASOC, the Ktah Khas passed through extensive background checks and polygraph screenings. They are uniquely positioned and already vetted to offer substantive combat, language, and experiential expertise to the same military that trained them and operated alongside them in Afghanistan.

Furthermore, service-to-citizenship is not without precedent. The Alien Enlistee Program of 1950 (the “Lodge Act”) recruited Eastern European foreign nationals to serve in the US military in return for eventual citizenship. These individuals swore allegiance to their branch (rather than to the United States, as they were not yet citizens), and the program successfully recruited 211 men who made substantive contributions to the early development of Special Forces and doctrine on unconventional warfare and counter-insurgency operations.³⁰ The Military Accessions Vital to National Interest (MAVNI) Recruitment Program, which began in 2009, targeted the recruitment of certain classes of legal aliens whose skills were “considered to be vital to the national interests.”³¹ These skills included medical capabilities, cultural competencies, and language skills. MAVNI recruited roughly 10,000 troops over its lifetime; it was frozen and eventually terminated in 2017.³² However, analysts have recently called for a revival of this program to strengthen critical U.S. language capabilities and serve as a “force multiplier” of mutual understanding and goodwill for building generative partnerships on the ground.³³ Both the Lodge Act and MAVNI programs faced bureaucratic and implementation challenges familiar to all those obtaining visas of any class in the United States. Therefore, this policy recommendation calls for specific and transparent criteria and the necessary support in terms of organizational and technological infrastructure to ensure the successful execution of the proposed measures.

²⁹ Broadwater, Luke, and Ava Sasani. ‘*Afghan Women Who Fought With U.S. Military Seek Legal Immigration Status: Members of an All-Female Tactical Combat Unit in Afghanistan. Who Were Evacuated during the United States Withdrawal, Are Asking Congress to Grant Them Permanent Legal Status*’. *The New York Times*, 27 Apr. 2023.

³⁰ Livermore, Douglas A. ‘*Time for a New “Lodge Act”: Refocusing the MAVNI Program to Meet the Requirements of Future Conflicts*’. *The Drop*, Winter, 2016, pp. 30–43.

³¹ Department of Defense. ‘*Military Accessions Vital to National Interest (MAVNI) Recruitment Pilot Program*’. Department of Defense, 2016.

³² Gonzales, Richard, and Tom Bowman. ‘*Pentagon Considers Canceling Program That Recruits Immigrant Soldiers*’. *NPR*, 3 July 2017. *NPR*.

³³ Seck, Hope Hodge. ‘*For More Effective Irregular Warfare, Bring Back the MAVNI Recruitment Program*’. *Irregular Warfare Initiative*, 4 Aug. 2023.



- 3. Provide access to English language courses, higher education, and job readiness programming that accommodate service-related disabilities.** Competency with the English language remains challenging for many interviewed for this study. Unsurprisingly, this contributes to challenges with obtaining gainful, dignified, and fulfilling employment over the long term or accessing higher education. Since 2022, Honor the Promise conducted interviews with its beneficiaries to appraise the appetite for higher education among the population. Of the 102 beneficiaries, 94 (92%) affirmed their interest in pursuing this option in the U.S. While many interviewees took advantage of free online language resources, these were not productive for those who had service-related injuries (e.g., hearing loss), and formal adaptive courses often proved to be cost-prohibitive. The government of the United Kingdom, through its Operation Warm Welcome program, has provided funding for English lessons with specialized teachers for Afghan refugees, as well as for adult education courses, transportation, and guaranteed placement for children in schools. This was explicitly developed to help families integrate within their communities. The UK FTP respondent reported it contributed significantly to her resettlement and job search in the country.³⁴ It is recommended to offer comparable support to ANASOC and their families in the United States.

Furthermore, numerous national and local programs support veteran job readiness in the United States. Three key challenges in this area include 1) translating time in service to resume formats in a way that is legible to employers, 2) teaching culturally appropriate forms of resume writing, and 3) finding the new “why” for a service member who may be faced with the challenge of identifying their next steps in a job market that does not readily lend itself to comparison or continuity (i.e., “veteran identity strain”).³⁵

- 4. Provide referral pathways and support for access to physical and psychosocial support services akin to those offered to US military veterans.** Specifically, many interviewees possess all of the factors that contribute to difficult transitions from military to civilian life, as identified among US military veterans: experience of traumatic events, past serious injury, status as a post-9/11 veteran, married while serving, service in combat, and knowing someone who was killed or injured in combat. These difficulties are only compounded by resettlement in a foreign country, separation from family, and socioeconomic isolation and marginalization.³⁶ While it is true that these individuals were never formally employed by the DoD, they were trained by and fought alongside the US against the Taliban and were, as some Special Operations Forces have suggested, as much a part of their teams as their fellow American soldiers.³⁷ They should thus receive comparable support measures in their civilian life transitions. Preference should be given to those organizations and associations that are either Afghan-led or have demonstrated cultural competency working with Afghan veterans and their families.

³⁴ Government of The United Kingdom. '*Operation Warm Welcome under Way to Support Afghan Arrivals in the UK*'. Gov.Uk, 2021.

³⁵ McAllister, Charn P., et al. '*From Combat to Khakis: An Exploratory Examination of Job Stress with Veterans*'. *Military Psychology*, vol. 27, no. 2, Mar. 2015, pp. 93–107.; Zogas, Anna. '*US Military Veterans' Difficult Transitions Back to Civilian Life and the VA's Response*'. Watson Institute of International & Public Affairs, 2017, p. 14.

³⁶ Morin, Rich. '*The Difficult Transition from Military to Civilian Life*'. Research Report, Pew Research Center, 8 Dec. 2011.

³⁷ Booz, Lydia. '*We Must Honor Our Promise to ANASOC Allies*'. SOAA. 20 Dec. 2022.



CONCLUSIONS

While the experiences of ANASOC veterans and their families resettling in the United States are not homogenous, the above analysis of nearly 100 hours of interview data and accompanying quantitative analysis reveals trends and commonalities that support the formulation of generalized conclusions and relevant policy recommendations, as well as the challenges and best practices that can improve current legislation. The above recommendations are adapted to the specific needs of this population group and are entirely attainable, not least because only a small number of individuals were able to achieve this elite special operator status. An estimated 14,000-20,000 ANASOC remain in Afghanistan, and HTP has registered 200 already in the United States.³⁸

In addition to benefits to national security, homeland security, immigration programs, the American workforce, and the national economy, supporting ANASOC resettlement, stable immigration status, and family reunification provides an unmistakable signal to future local partners that the United States remains a dedicated and reliable ally in times of peace, conflict, and transition. In the Middle East-North Africa (MENA) region, a key tenet of the 2022 National Security Strategy is to “combine diplomacy, economic aid, and security assistance to local partners to alleviate suffering, reduce instability, and prevent the export of terrorism or mass migration.”³⁹ The policy recommendations developed here constitute a necessary component for achieving this strategy.

The U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan resulted in significant reputational damage among partners and allies and fueled adversaries’ abilities to gain a foothold in the global competition landscape. Potential partners and allies around the world have a choice. Whether between global powers like the U.S. and China or growing regional powers like Iran, local partners have an increasingly diverse menu of actors to choose from for support as competition for influence increases globally.⁴⁰ If the United States plans to “work in lockstep with our allies and partners,”⁴¹ as stated in the National Security Strategy, our allies and partners must remain confident in our steadfast relationship and commitment to them in the most challenging of times. By creating a dedicated expedient pathway to stable immigration status for one of our most active and capable local partners in the past decade, current and future local partners will come to understand the U.S. as the preeminent ally. Repairing trust and confidence in U.S. reliability will strengthen “integration with allies and partners”⁴² - a vital pillar of the integrated deterrence strategy outlined in the 2022 NSS - promoting national security interests abroad.

Furthermore, supporting former ANASOC and their families would benefit U.S. institutions and service members. The DoD would see an inflow of mission-oriented and service-driven staff with a wide range of SOF-assisted training and skill sets. Immigration services will benefit from a reduced backlog of asylum

³⁸ Booz, Lydia. ‘*We Must Honor Our Promise to ANASOC Allies*’. SOAA, 20 Dec. 2022. ; Posil, Benjamin. ‘*Radio ANASOC*’. *www.Army.Mil*, 15 Apr. 2019.

³⁹ Biden, Joseph R. ‘*Biden-Harris Administration’s National Security Strategy*’. United State of America, Oct. 2022, pp. 42, Par. 5.

⁴⁰ Eslami, Mohammad, and Maria Papageorgiou. ‘*China’s Increasing Role in the Middle East: Implications for Regional and International Dynamics*’. *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs*, June 2023.; Foreign Affairs Committee, ‘*China Regional Snapshot: Middle East and North Africa*’. U.S. House of Representatives, 25 Oct. 2022.; Stronski, Paul. ‘*Russia’s Growing Footprint in Africa’s Sahel Region*’. *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 28 Feb. 2023.; Robinson, Kali, and Will Mellow. ‘*Iran’s Regional Armed Network*’. *Council on Foreign Relations*, 1 Mar. 2021.

⁴¹ Biden, Joseph R. ‘*Biden-Harris Administration’s National Security Strategy*’. United State of America, Oct. 2022, pp. 2, Par. 2.

⁴² Biden, Joseph R. ‘*Biden-Harris Administration’s National Security Strategy*’. United State of America, Oct. 2022, pp. 22, Par. 2.



applications and gain access to a community of potential counselors, translators, and consultants. National security organizations would reap the dual rewards of a reputational boost in terms of fulfilling commitments to partner nations and a new eligible pool of regional experts with deep strategic, tactical, geopolitical, and cultural expertise. And current U.S. service members and Global War on Terror (GWOT) veterans – many of whom have publicly spoken out against the impact of Afghanistan’s collapse after a 20-year war – will see renewed evidence of commitment to valuing their service, contributing to their moral repair.⁴³ Thus, by creating policies supporting clear, timely pathways for ANASOC members and their families to resettle permanently in the United States, the nation honors its promise and creates new avenues for opportunity and healing with battle-tested partners and allies.

“The day [my daughter] came to America, I told her: your dreams have come true. You have the opportunity to live a better life in America, to learn, to work, and to serve the American nation. And in the future, if you want, you can serve your country. But this is the life. Welcome to your new life.”

⁴³ Selber, Katherine, and Will Selber. ‘[MORAL INJURY, AFGHANISTAN, AND THE PATH TOWARD RECOVERY](#)’. *War on the Rocks*, 19 June 2023.



APPENDIX A: PARTICIPATING INSTITUTIONS AND ORGANIZATIONS

Within the framework of **Trust After Betrayal**, hosted by the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE), the "Out of War" project aims to develop a global database of life history interviews of formerly armed actors (FAAs). The project defines FAAs as individuals who understand themselves as having engaged in violence as a function of their membership in a group (e.g., military veterans, former insurgents, ex-gang members, among many others). The underlying premise is that while individual, group, and contextual differences among these populations are legion, there exist dynamics related to their transitions – e.g., role exit, redefining purpose, and multiple aspects of human security - that serve as valuable points of comparison for improving the current conditions and future possibilities.

Trust After Betrayal and the "Out of War" project represent two components of the work of the **Corioli Institute**, which has a tripartite mission:

- 1. Be the global vanguard of research on the integration of formerly armed actors and their families and communities.** Operating in more than one dozen countries worldwide, researchers engage and include FAAs from cartels, transnational criminal organizations, militaries, guerrilla groups, violent extremist groups, militias, international legions, and returning foreign fighters, among others. Research and action design are fully participatory and holistic, engaging those living the everyday realities of reintegration (including families, communities, practitioners, and street-level bureaucrats) in creating and implementing initiatives. Monthly newsletters, original research briefs, academic publications, and an aggressive publishing calendar in both popular and academic outlets ensure timeliness, relevance, and continuity of contributions to advancing knowledge on the science and practice of FAA reintegration.
- 1. Align provision with need, preparing contextualized emergent reintegration practices for successful application to (inter)national donor streams.** The work of the Corioli Institute addresses a critical gap identified through more than a dozen years of on-the-ground experience: those organizations and associations best able to secure donor funding are not necessarily the best situated to deliver the intended outcomes. In every setting, there exist contextualized processes and approaches that are best suited to navigating the constellation of stakeholders and social, economic, and structural conditions. However, these initiatives often lack the technical capabilities to present their work, assess and evaluate their impact, and connect with donor streams and funding calls legibly to these organizations and institutions. The Corioli Institute conducts the ethnographic fieldwork that agencies concerned with localized approaches desire but can rarely do because of the temporal, budgetary, and mandate constraints within which they operate. In short, the Institute finds what works. Then, it supports local initiatives and organizations in the professionalization processes required to obtain sustainable funding streams for scaling their efforts *in situ*. The "sandwich" theory of change engages stakeholders from donor agencies, government ministries, and local officials with local project leaders in selection, scoping, and evaluation to best match provision with capabilities and needs. The ultimate objective is a "zero waste" funding stream in which every dollar spent results in the intended outcome. Outputs include policy papers, organizational ethnographies, impact evaluations, and contributions to academic fields such as organizational studies, international development, and reintegration programming.



- 2. Rebuild trust and social cohesion among conflict-affected communities worldwide, prioritizing climate and food security initiatives.** The fundamental premise of the Corioli Institute is that policies and programs intending to facilitate the reintegration of formerly armed actors will be more likely to succeed when they 1) benefit the entire receiving community and 2) do not require that FAAs and conflict victims continue to re-perform these particular identities in perpetuity to obtain access to support. Given the urgency of climate change and environmental degradation, the Institute prioritizes initiatives that promote social cohesion and inclusive leadership, decision-making, and conflict resolution through implementing sustainable environmental management practices that support food and human security. By co-creating a shared vision of a better future, our research has found that participants are better equipped to build a foundation of interpersonal trust that is the basis for all social life while ensuring a more resilient and sustainable future for all.

The “**Out of War**” database has three objectives, which support elements one and two of the mission of Trust After Betrayal and the Corioli Institute:

- 1. Compile Primary Data:** The project seeks to gather first-hand accounts and life history interviews from individuals who directly participated in armed conflicts. By collecting and documenting their lived experiences, the project aims to gain a deeper understanding of the complexities, challenges, and motivations of FAAs during times of conflict and in the years that follow. This primary data is invaluable in shedding light on the human aspects and impacts of war and its legacies.
- 2. Inform Programs and Policies:** The database serves as a foundation for developing relevant, feasible, and measurable programs and policies to support the reintegration and resettlement of FAAs. Armed conflicts can leave deep scars on individuals, and successful reintegration into society is critical for individuals and the communities they return to. By studying and understanding these life histories, these individuals, policymakers, and practitioners can gain insights into effective strategies for supporting sustainable and fulfilling reintegration and resettlement processes. This may include psychological support, vocational training, education, documentation, and other initiatives to facilitate their transitions.
- 3. Contribute to the Science and Practice of FAA Resettlement and Integration:** The Out of War database is not meant to be a one-time project but a lasting resource for future scholars and practitioners. The complexities of FAA reintegration and resettlement require continuous research and learning to refine existing practices and develop new insights. By preserving these life history interviews in a structured and accessible manner, the project aims to advance knowledge in the science and practice of FAA reintegration. This will enable researchers and practitioners to build upon the experiences and lessons of the past, leading to more effective approaches for dealing with post-conflict situations in the future.

This research was carried out in collaboration with **Honor the Promise**. This non-profit organization assists newly arrived members of the Afghan Special Operations community and their families in building resilience as they resettle in the U.S. to live their American Dream, become contributing members of American society, and feel a sense of belonging. HTP’s programs focus on long-term resilience and thus are designed to be implemented after a refugee has established their most basic needs, such as housing, social



services benefits, initial employment, and healthcare. Once their basic needs are met, refugees can focus on the more complex and challenging tasks of resiliency and long-term, generational growth.

Honor the Promise operates three lines of action: community engagement, holistic health, and workforce development.

1. The **community engagement** line of action organizes nationwide Catalyst and Connections Events so Afghan newcomers can meet other local community members. These events will provide the foundation to hold two routine events at the community level: peer networks that bring together Afghan newcomers with members of the Afghan diaspora and community dinners that bring together Afghan newcomers with members of their local communities, especially U.S. veterans.
2. Within the **holistic health** line of action, HTP partners with experts in financial wellness and literacy, mental health and resiliency, and group support networks to provide education designed for the family and loved ones of ANASOC service members.
3. To support **workforce development**, HTP provides various synchronous and asynchronous options for English language programming. Additionally, HTP focused on highlighting the unique background and experience of Afghan Special Operations Veterans to encourage employers to hire, diversify, and strengthen the U.S. workforce and ensure Afghans have both purpose and pride. A key focus for HTP is ensuring their beneficiaries leverage networking and hiring tools, such as LinkedIn, so they can connect with Americans who value their skills and experiences.

The "Out of War" project with LSE, Trust After Betrayal, and the Corioli Institute supports HTP's primary research agenda within the holistic health line of action, and the data from the study will be used to develop and deliver data-driven programming to support the well-being of Afghan veterans and their families. "Out of War " additionally contributes to HTP's community engagement work through a collective effort to develop an oral and written history of their lives and experiences in resettlement.



APPENDIX B: METHODS AND PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS

This study uses a mixed methodology of quantitative surveys and loosely structured life history interviews that broadly cover participants' lives leading up to enlistment and throughout their military services and transition and resettlement following the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan. The research team comprised four individuals, the Principal Investigator (PI) for Trust After Betrayal (TAB-LSE), an additional researcher and Director of Projects and Programs for the Corioli Institute, and two research associates, all of whom conducted life history interviews. The first author (PI) designed the study, building off of more than a dozen years of experience researching and implementing reintegration programming worldwide. The second and third authors are veterans of the U.S. Navy and Marine Corps, respectively. The diverse composition of the research team contributed to agility in terms of building trust and rapport with interviewees of different genders, backgrounds, and dispositions toward speaking about the realities of life in and following the war.

The PI led an initial training and orientation to Trust After Betrayal and the “Out of War” project, which included life history interviewing, qualitative data coding, and ethics in research with human subjects. All researchers were trained in ethical human subjects’ research through the CITI program. The ethical component of the study included assurances of anonymity when requested among study participants and protection of data on a secure server. Researchers informed participants that they reserved the right to withdraw at any time without penalty and that their participation was uncompensated, and they received a consent form detailing the purpose and uses of the study and its data. The data was coded using MAXQDA software and segmented by key themes that came to light through the interviews, ensuring the policy recommendations found here were driven by ANASOC members’ stories and experiences and not by the research team’s own biases.

Additionally, the authors drew from open-source research from government, academic, and international sources to inform the analysis and policy recommendations and provide corroborating quantitative backing to the qualitative data. The authors also sought counterarguments to the themes and narratives emerging from the analysis to further limit any internal biases, ensure impartiality, and produce research and recommendations from a holistic knowledge base. All available information was used to create empirically grounded recommendations that are feasible, non-partisan, and that avoid placing undue burden on concerned parties.

TAB collaborated with HTP to refine the research objectives and HTP recruited participants from their membership pool throughout the United States. The research team conducted life history interviews with 34 former ANASOC (32 men, 2 female FTP veterans) located throughout the United States, with one interviewee located in the United Kingdom. Interviews ranged from 1.5-5.5 hours and occurred between one and two sessions with each interlocutor. Respondents were prompted to share stories and respond to emerging questions related to their experiences growing up in Afghanistan, as FTP and ANASOC, as partners of U.S. Special Operations Forces, throughout the evacuation, and in their current transition as they resettled in the United States.



The life history interview methodology is an effective tool for forming the empirical basis to understand the experiences, needs, and capabilities of a population.⁴⁴ This approach allows researchers to gain deep insights into the experiences, challenges, and strengths of individuals over time, providing a comprehensive understanding of their lives. For former combatants, life history interviews can provide insight into the following domains, which are necessary points of departure for evidence-based policy design and program development: contextualizing experiences, providing a longitudinal perspective, including personal narratives and emotions, identifying unmet needs, humanizing the research, exploring resilience and coping strategies, tailoring support services, validating existing approaches, and complementing quantitative data.⁴⁵

The quantitative survey instrument captured the following items:

- Ethnic Group and religious affiliation.
- Languages, birthplaces, areas lived, and urban or rural background.
- Age, gender, education, and marital status.
- Employment activity since arriving in the U.S.
- Years of military service and combat experience.
- Branch of service and Military Occupational Specialty (MOS).
- Immigration status and desired long-term place of residence.

Questions focused on identifying non-personally identifying qualities and aspirations of participants while seeking to build a privately accessible database of participants' demographic information and characteristics. This demographic information informs researchers of possible similarities or differences among the survey population and may assist analytical projects in identifying high-saturation characteristics across the population. These high-saturation characteristics open inroads to a multitude of future research topics such as military service biographical indicators, language proficiency among partner forces, immigrant employment placement correlation (or failure to align) with proven skills, and the number of combat-related injuries incurred by local partner forces, to name a few. For now, the data highlights basic demographic considerations about the survey population and seeks to build a picture of the diverse group of Afghans who served in ANASOC.

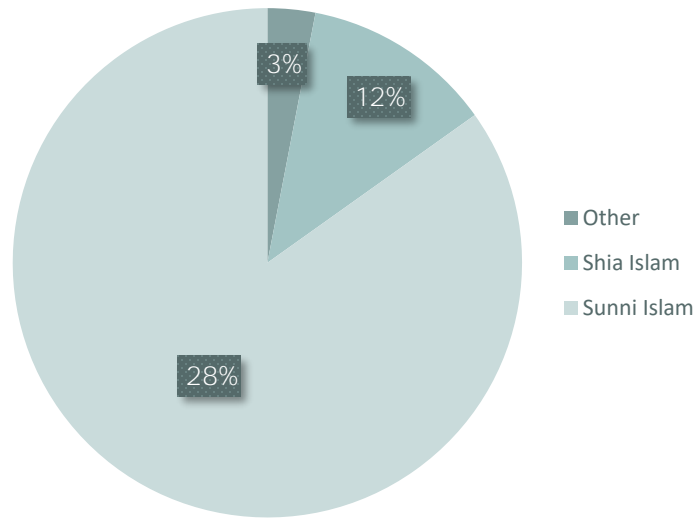
Key demographic characteristics of the survey population are found below in **Figures 1-11** and **Tables 1-2**. Note that the life history interview sample included 34 individuals, but one did not complete the quantitative survey ($n=33$).

⁴⁴ Freedman, Deborah, et al. 'The Life History Calendar: A Technique for Collecting Retrospective Data'. *Sociological Methodology*, vol. 18, 1988, pp. 37–68.; Goodson, Ivor, and Pik Lin Choi. 'Life History and Collective Memory as Methodological Strategies: Studying Teacher Professionalism'. *Teacher Education Quarterly*, vol. 35, no. 2, 2008, pp. 5–28.

⁴⁵ Cole, Ardra L., and J. Gary Knowles. *Lives in Context: The Art of Life History Research*. 1st ed., AltaMira Press, 2001.; Maringira, Godfrey. 'Militarised Minds: The Lives of Ex-Combatants in South Africa'. *Sociology*, vol. 49, no. 1, Feb. 2015, pp. 72–87.

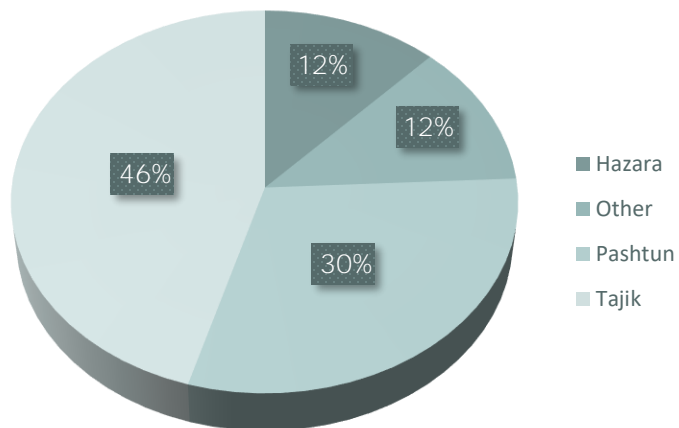


Figure 1: Religious Group



Note: Participant who responded “other” self-identified as simply “Islam” and did not denote Sunni or Shia differentiation.

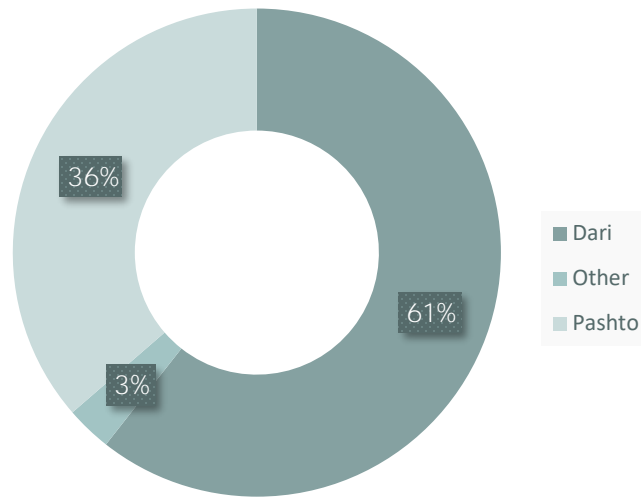
Figure 2: Ethnic Affiliation



Note: Participants who responded “other” self-identified as both Pashtun and Tajik or Nuristani, while one participant replied, “My tribe is commando.”

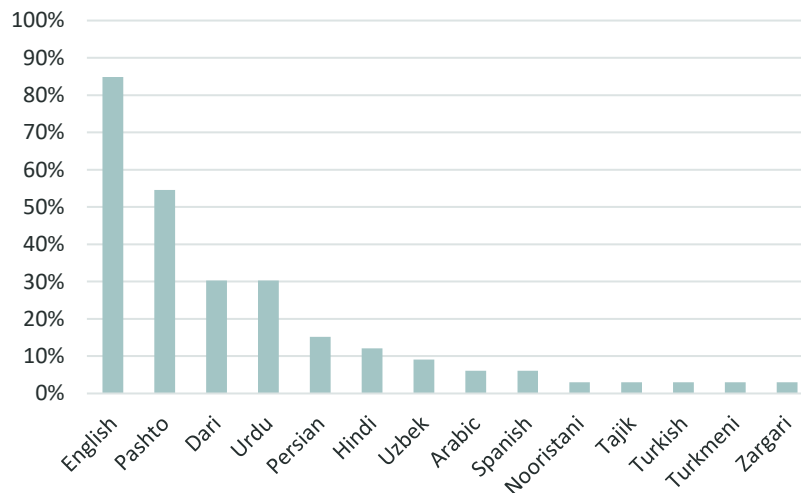


Figure 3: Maternal Language



Note: Participant who responded “other” self-identified as speaking Nuristani, a language primarily spoken in Nuristan Province in Northeastern Afghanistan.⁴⁶

Figure 4: Second Language Frequency (as percentage of overall survey population)

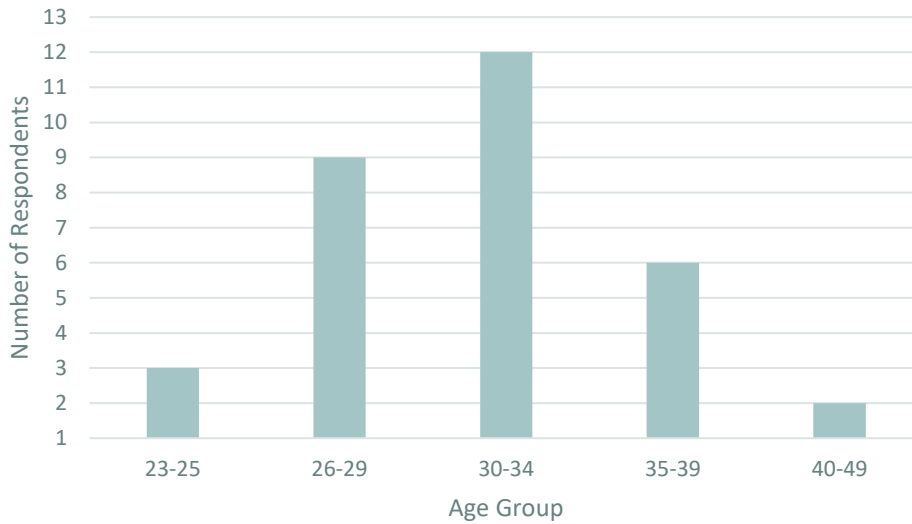


Note: Only 12% of the survey population spoke fewer than 3 languages, with the most prominent bilingual combination being some grouping of Dari, Pashto, and English. No survey respondents spoke only one language. For this report, we combined respondents who self-identified as speaking Farsi or Persian into the Persian dataset.

⁴⁶ Department of Linguistics. ‘[Nuristani Languages from an Areal and Typological Point of View](#)’. Stockholm University, 3 May 2023.

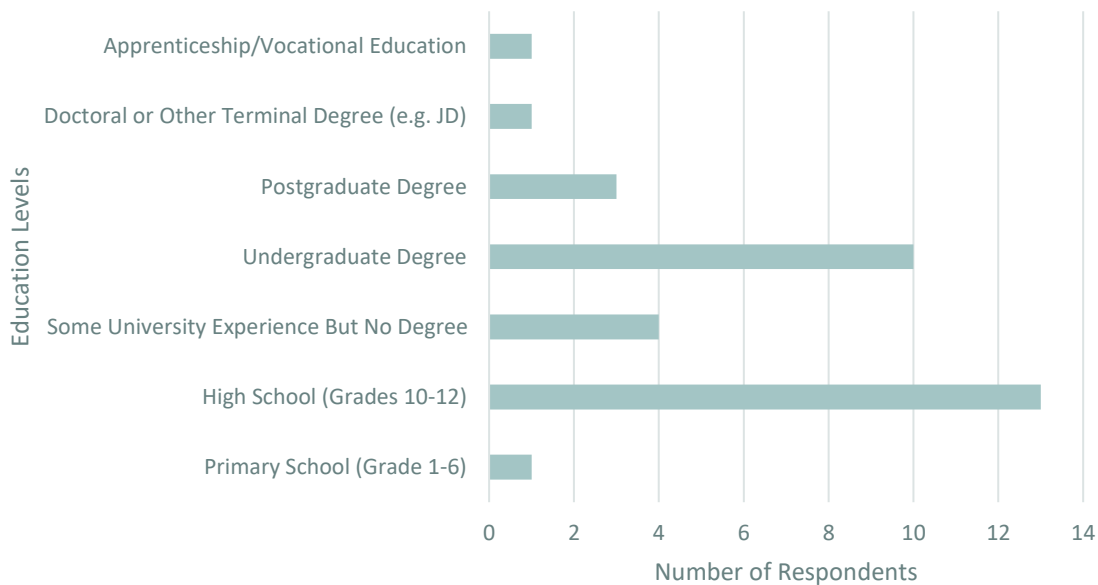


Figure 5: Age Set



Note: Both respondents in the 40-49 age group were high-ranking officers in ANASOC and members of the Afghan military in some fashion for more than a decade. In 2016, the Afghan military raised its enlistment eligibility age from 35 to 40 years old. However, these participants (in the 40-49 age group) had volunteered in the Afghan military well before 2016.⁴⁷

Figure 6: Education Level



Note: Both female participants in the survey population reported having above high-school level education, while most males reported having high-school level education and joining the Afghan military after graduation. At least one respondent

⁴⁷ Craig, Tim. *'Stretched by Its Fight against Taliban, Afghan Army Raises Recruitment Age'*. *The Washington Post*, World, 4 Feb. 2016.

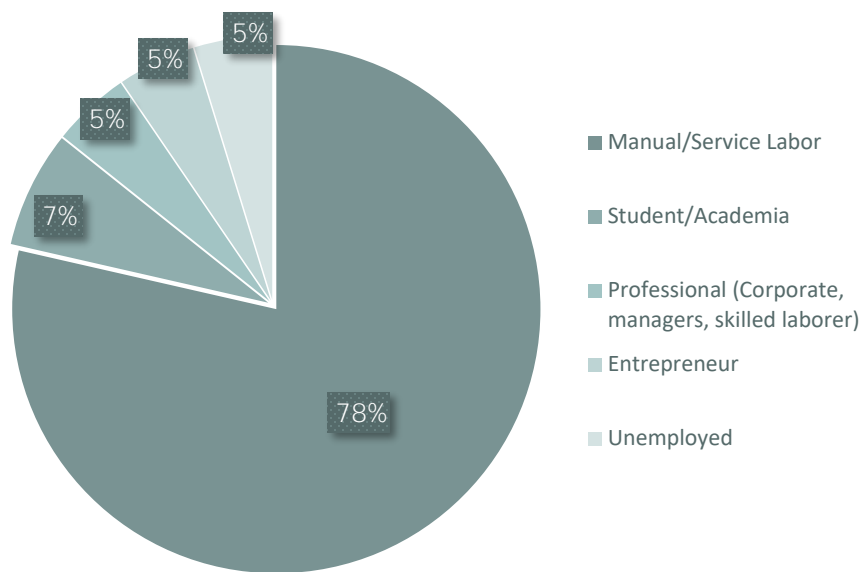


reported departing high school early to join the Afghan military. It should be noted that the Afghan National Military Academy (fashioned after the U.S. Army’s West Point Academy) is considered an undergraduate-level education and some respondents attended ANMA for their undergraduate degree instead of a traditional higher-education institution. At least one respondent also received their undergraduate degree from the India Military Academy through what the interviewee described as a foreign military officer training program.

Table 1: Gender and Marital Status

Gender	Total	Married	Single	Cohabitation
Male	31	27	4	0
Female	2	0	1	1

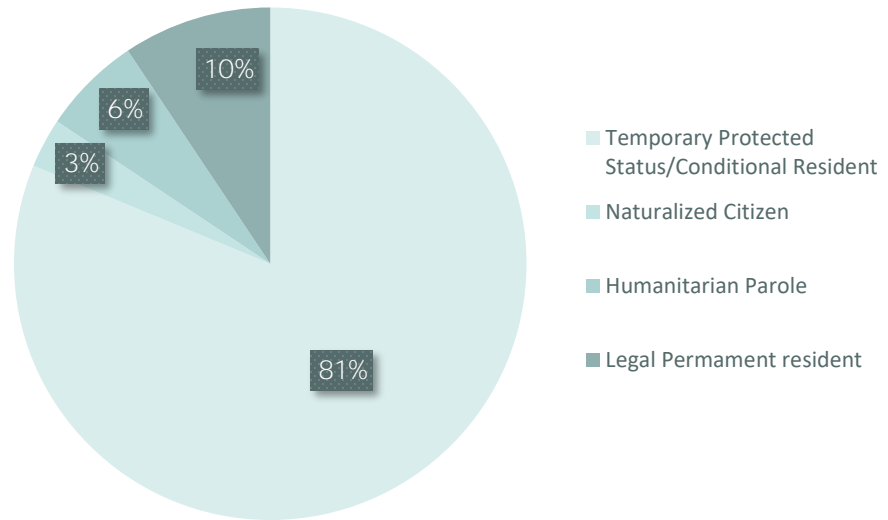
Figure 7: Employment



Note: Seven of the respondents reported working at least two jobs at the time of the survey. Each job is counted as 1x response in Figure 7 (above); thus, the overall count of jobs (42) is higher than the survey population (n=33.) Also, one respondent replied “helping Afghan refugees” when asked about their current employment. This respondent is included in the entrepreneur section of the dataset. Each respondent who identified as unemployed stated they are actively looking for employment in the United States.

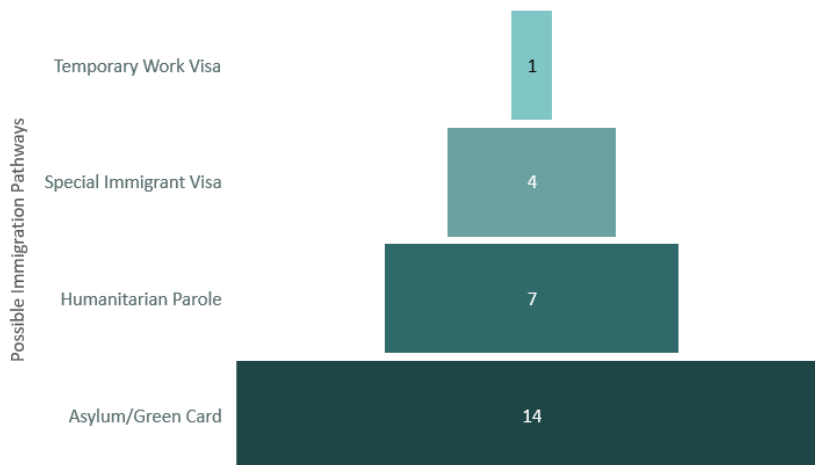


Figure 8: Current Immigration Status



Note: Many respondents expressed their concern with the uncertainty associated with their temporary protected status, as it is a program that requires confirmation by the U.S. Government every 18 months.⁴⁸

Figure 9: Selected Immigration Pathways

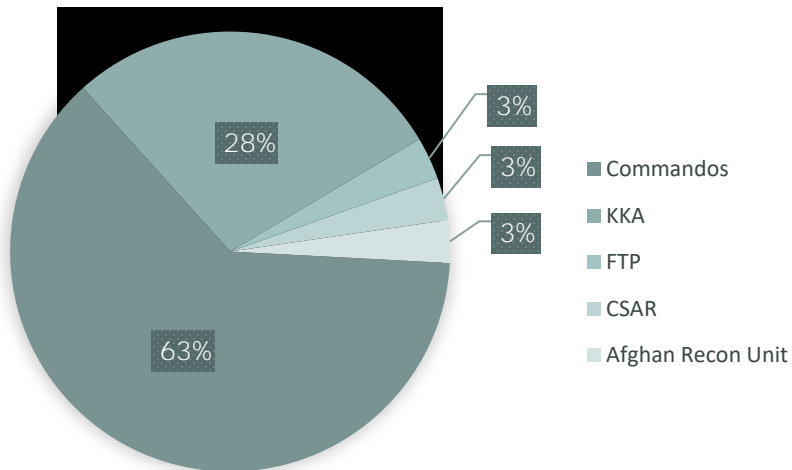


Note: Seven respondents did not specify their preferred immigration pathways. Translation issues during the survey may have contributed to misunderstanding the question, resulting in a non-answer. Of the 33 respondents to the question “In the long term, would you prefer to stay in the United States, go somewhere else, or return to Afghanistan?”, three expressed a desire to return to Afghanistan. Two of these three caveated that any return would be dependent on the Taliban no longer being in power or as the result of an inability (due to immigration delays/holds) to reunite with their family in the U.S (i.e., if their family could not join them in the U.S., they would consider risking a return to Afghanistan to be with their family.)

⁴⁸ Citizenship and Immigration Services, U. S. ‘[Designation of Afghanistan for Temporary Protected Status](#)’. Department of Homeland Security, 20 May 2022.



Figure 10: Military Occupational Specialty and Unit



Acronyms: MOS-Military Occupational Specialty, KKA-Ktah Khas (Afghan premier counterterrorism unit), FTP-Female Tactical Platoon, CSAR-Combined Situational Awareness Room.

Note: 97% of the respondent population identified as falling under the ANA, while 3% identified as falling under the Afghan Special Police Unit. This 3% constituted the FTP respondent population. However, the FTP reportedly supported both the ANA and the Afghan National Police (ANP).⁴⁹ The CSAR was a joint-awareness center established around 2020 meant to assist Afghan security forces during the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan.⁵⁰

Table 2: Years of Military Service and Combat Experience.

Years of Service	Number of Respondent Population	Have Engaged in Combat
0-4	2	2
5-9	18	14
10-14	10	9
15-20+	3	2
	Total=33	Total=27

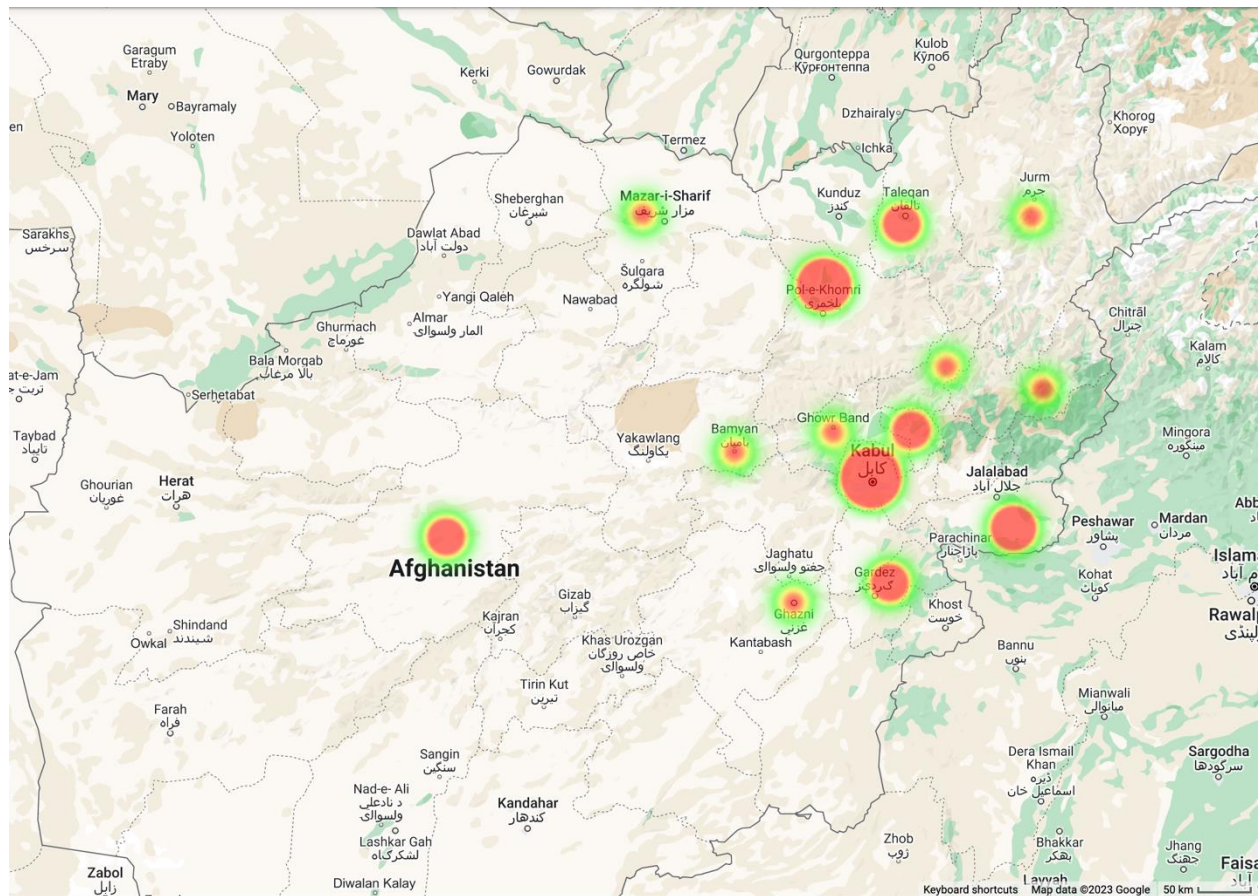
Note: 82% of the respondent population identified as having engaged in combat with the Taliban, Al Qaeda, Daesh (ISKP), or a combination of all three. Of those who responded as having engaged in combat, all 27 identified more than one location and time in which they'd actively combated enemy forces.

⁴⁹ DoD, United States. 'Enhancing Security and Stability in Afghanistan: December 2020'. Semi-Annual Report to Congress, 7-653B15D, U.S. Department of Defense, Dec. 2020, pp. 52, Par. 4.

⁵⁰ Lamothe, Dan. 'New Special Operations Network Will Serve as Security Backbone in Afghanistan Ahead of U.S. Withdrawal'. The Washington Post, National Security, 5 Mar. 2020, Par. 16.



Figure 11: Birthplace Density Heatmap



Source Note: Heatmap derived from Maptive publicly available software using Google map data on August 1, 2023. Two (2) respondents identified as being born outside of Afghanistan; therefore the data pool for this heat map consists of 31 survey respondents. Of the 31, the most common place of birth was Kabul province, Afghanistan with Baghlan and Nangarhar province rounding out the three most common provinces of birth for this respondent population. As the heatmap shows, the entirety of the respondent population was born in the North, East, or Central provinces of Afghanistan with no members born in Southern provinces. This data, though a small number of the overall ANASOC population, may inform future research questions regarding the pre-service geographical makeup of Afghan military forces. With our available data, we cannot draw substantiated conclusions regarding why this respondent population consisted of individuals from these geographical bounds. However, the Taliban’s outsized influence in Southern Afghanistan is widely reported as was the inability of the Afghan government and its supporters to make substantial headway in provinces further from Kabul.⁵¹

⁵¹ Postgraduate School, U. S. Naval. ‘*Southern Afghanistan*’. U.S. Naval Postgraduate School, Mar. 2017.; SIGAR. ‘*What We Need To Learn: Lessons From Twenty Years of Afghanistan Reconstruction*’. 11th Version, SIGAR 21-46-LL, Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction - US Government, Aug. 2021, pp. 61–68.; Sopko, John F. ‘*What We Need To Learn: Lessons From Twenty Years of Afghanistan Reconstruction*’. 11th Version, SIGAR 21-46-LL, Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction - US Government, Aug. 2021, pp. 40–46.; Thomas, Clayton. ‘*Taliban Government in Afghanistan: Background and Issues for Congress*’. Report to Congress, R46955, U.S. Congressional Research Service, 2 Nov. 2021, pp. 10–13.





DREAM BIG. USE
KIND WORDS. SAY
I LOVE YOU. LAUGH.
GIGGLE. BE SILLY.
SHARE. SAY PLEASE
AND THANK YOU.
BE GRATEFUL. KEEP
YOUR PROMISES.
HELP OTHERS.
DON'T WHINE.
TAKE A MOMENT TO
B R E A T H E.
TRY NEW THINGS.
KEEP CALM AND
CARRY ON. LAUGH
O U T L O U D.



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