



Highlights of [GAO-10-274](#), a report to congressional committees

## Why GAO Did This Study

Since the February 2006 bombing of the Al-Askari Mosque in Samara that triggered the displacement of thousands of Iraqis, the United States has taken a lead role in resettling the displaced. The administration has indicated its intent to assist those Iraqis who supported the United States in Iraq. In addition, Congress authorized the Departments of Defense (DOD) and State (State) to jointly establish and operate a program to offer temporary employment to Iraqi special immigrant visa (SIV) holders in the United States.

This report provides information on the (1) status of resettled Iraqis in the United States and the initial challenges they face, (2) benefits afforded Iraqi refugees and SIV holders, and (3) challenges they face obtaining employment with the federal government. GAO conducted this review under the Comptroller General's authority.

GAO analyzed data on Iraqi refugees and SIV holders in the United States, and laws and regulations on the benefits afforded to them. GAO also analyzed U.S. government employment and personnel security requirements. GAO interviewed officials from five key agencies regarding these requirements.

This report does not contain recommendations. DOD provided official comments. State and the Departments of Homeland Security and Health and Human Services (HHS) provided technical comments. GAO incorporated these comments, as appropriate.

[View GAO-10-274 or key components.](#)  
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## IRAQ

# Iraqi Refugees and Special Immigrant Visa Holders Face Challenges Resettling in the United States and Obtaining U.S. Government Employment

## What GAO Found

Between fiscal years 2006 and 2009, the United States admitted 34,470 Iraqi refugees under State's Refugee Admissions Program. In addition, State issued 4,634 SIVs to Iraqis pursuant to two programs, established by Congress to help Iraqis who previously worked for the U.S. government in Iraq. Resettlement agencies, working under cooperative agreements with State, have resettled Iraqis throughout the United States but particularly in California and Michigan. These agencies have found that Iraqis arrive in the United States with high levels of trauma, injury, and illness, which contribute to the challenges they face in resettling in a new country. In addition, entry-level jobs normally available to refugees are scarce and more competitive in the current economic downturn. Iraqi refugees generally have high levels of education, according to U.S. officials and representatives from the resettlement agencies. Nevertheless, Iraqis have struggled to find entry-level employment in the United States.

Iraqi refugees and SIV holders are eligible for resettlement assistance and public benefits upon arrival in the United States. State provides resettlement agencies \$1,800 per person to cover basic housing, food, and assistance for accessing services during their first 30 days in the United States; however, support may continue for up to 90 days if basic needs have not been met. Refugees automatically receive these benefits; Iraqi SIV holders must elect to receive them within 10 days of receiving their visas. In addition, qualified Iraqi refugees and, as a result of December 2009 legislation, qualified SIV holders can receive certain assistance for up to 7 years through public benefits programs. Prior to December 19, 2009, Iraqi SIV holders' eligibility for public benefits generally ceased after 8 months. Both groups can also receive up to 8 months of cash and medical assistance from HHS if they do not qualify for public benefits. In addition, HHS funds social services, including job preparation, English language classes, and assistance with job interviews, for which Iraqi refugees and SIV holders may be eligible for up to 5 years.

Iraqi refugees and SIV holders, including those who acted as interpreters and linguists for civilian agencies and military commands in Iraq, have limited opportunities for federal employment. Most federal positions in the United States require U.S. citizenship and background investigations; certain positions, including most positions related to Arabic or Iraq, also require security clearances, which noncitizens cannot obtain. However, GAO did identify positions at DOD's Defense Language Institute and State's Foreign Service Institute open to qualified noncitizens. Finally, State and DOD have not established the temporary program intended to offer employment to Iraqi SIV holders under authority granted the agencies in fiscal year 2009 legislation. Although both agencies have positions requiring Arabic language skills, neither identified any unfilled needs that could be met by employing Iraqi SIV holders through this joint program.