



## Consular Corner

**May 2011**

by: Liam Schwartz\*

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### Preface

We're honored to introduce you to four very special people in this month's column.

**Andrew (Andy) Parker** is the U.S. Consul General at Embassy Tel-Aviv. His wife, **Sheryn Hilton-Parker**, is an accomplished actress, singer and dancer. Sheryn has been with Andy throughout his current three-year assignment in Israel, just as she's been with him during all the other postings in places such as Amsterdam, Lagos, Kingston, Georgetown and Frankfurt. Shortly before Andy and Sheryn head off for their next destination of Montreal, we interviewed them in what is Consular Corner's first interview with a Foreign Service (FS) couple. The interview spans a wide range of issues, from FS life to ACS emergencies; from the ups and downs of the DS-160 electronic application process to how best to communicate a visa refusal; and from immigration attorneys to Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young. We hope you'll agree that this interview is just bursting with wisdom, good sense and humor.

**Kris Fresonke** was an author and Professor of English at the most prestigious academic programs in her field before she gave it all up to join the Foreign Service and, eventually, adjudicate visa applications at the U.S. Consulate General in Mumbai, India. Kris's eye-opening account of a day in the life on the Mumbai visa line is reproduced below.

**Mark Thornburg** is an amazing Foreign Service Officer whose outstanding service makes the rest of us feel proud to be Americans. Mark voluntarily took upon himself one of the toughest diplomatic assignments of all: Winning the hearts and minds of the local Afghan population in Taliban country. And you know what? He's succeeding. Read Mark's riveting account of how he relied upon his consular skills in engaging a group of Taliban, below.

We hope you enjoy this edition of Consular Corner and welcome your comments to: [consularcorner.feedback@gmail.com](mailto:consularcorner.feedback@gmail.com).

### Interview With Andrew and Sheryn Hylton-Parker

**Consular Corner:** Andy and Sheryn, it's often been observed that the Foreign Service is not a job, but a way of life. This kind of professional lifestyle can be extremely tough on marriages. But despite it all, you share an abiding mutual

affection and admiration that is obvious to anyone who's ever seen you together. What is the secret to a successful Foreign Service marriage?

**Andrew Parker:** An FS lifestyle does add a whole other dimension to a marriage. Fortunately for us, we equally appreciate the opportunities we've had to live in diverse locales, to travel and be exposed to so much, to meet an enormously wide variety of people, and to represent the United States in each of these locales. Living and raising our children far from the rest of our families has compelled us to rely mostly on each other. That reliance contributes to appreciation, respect and love, which is what you see. We also have something in common – our love for my wife's homeland and for the place we built there in Jamaica. Having someplace to call home, even if we visit only once a year, helps keep our focus on something tangible for us as a family.

**CC:** Andy, the biggest change in the visa application process during your tenure in Tel-Aviv was probably the introduction of the online DS-160 application. A year after, what were the ups and downs of the DS-160 implementation process?

**AP:** The DS-160 introduced a quantum change in how we process visa applications. Although we had a team preparing over six months for the new system, the initial impact was great. Time required to open the application at intake and at the interview was excessive, families with multiple applications could not be processed efficiently, corrections were difficult to make, and our customers were frustrated and resistant to change. We experienced an unacceptable decline in productivity of 25 percent. Along with CA's fixes to the computer glitches to improve processing, the new system actually brought our staff together – local employees and officers – to identify the problem areas and develop solutions. We also took time to explain to travel agents and other visa service providers what we expected of them, that simply making up information such as U.S. contact information or putting "N/A" for names of parents would only slow down the process and cast doubt on an applicant's credibility. We also used our websites, Facebook page, webchats and outreach to student and business audiences to answer questions and educate potential applicants on the application process. That said, I believe we expect a lot from our customers. At the same time that CA has drawn our attention to the difficulties that elder Americans abroad may have in making use of computer technology, we have a visa application system that requires a high level of technical skills. This has not slowed visa demand, but it hurts when we hear from so many applicants who can't "save" their data or upload their photograph. I am confident that forthcoming software upgrades along with the new appointment system, which will soon come to Tel Aviv, will provide additional benefits to us and our customers.

**CC:** Andy, what are the things that an incoming first-time chief of an American Citizens Services unit really needs to know?

**AP:** Without a doubt, an ACS chief's first obligation is to get to know his or her staff. The local supervisors of Passports and Citizenship and of Special Consular Services (often the same person if it's a smaller post) are the ones we largely rely on. They not only know the way to the jailhouse and have a direct line to the airport immigration chief and the local police liaison, they usually enjoy the respect of the local American citizen community. If their new boss shows trust in them, their introductions to the key players and local communities and the honest knowledge and opinions they share will make for a smooth transition. Second critical item is to become familiar with crisis response plans and personalities, inside the Embassy or Consulate and beyond. We never know when an emergency will require us to mobilize our staff, calling on the organizational and leadership skills of the ACS chief. Best to be ready.

**CC:** Andy, the manner in which Consular Officers communicate a refusal to a visa applicant can mean the difference between whether the experience is an efficient and relatively painless encounter or whether security needs to be called to remove the applicant from the window. This may be particularly true in Tel-Aviv, since Israeli applicants do not always react with equanimity and stoicism when informed that their visa request has been refused. What "Best Practices" do you suggest to your line officers for communicating a visa approval or refusal?

**AP:** Given the deep bonds between our two countries and between so many Israelis and Americans, there is an understandable sense of entitlement that is a backdrop to every visa interview. That confidence is not misplaced, as 95 percent of Tel Aviv applicants are issued the visa they request. The best practices that our officers employ start with respect for each and every customer. Many of our customers are equally comfortable in English, which is fine, but if they prefer Hebrew or, for that matter, Arabic or Russian, that is not a problem. Second, our officers are polite in the questions they pose. In many cases, given the high-tech professions of many applicants, questions focus on the specifics of the work or education of the applicant. Questions are typically open-ended to allow the applicant to describe what they do. Often, these interviews end with a request for additional information to enable us to undertake required administrative processing, so the officer needs to clearly and politely explain to the applicant how they are to provide us with the information, what will happen next and how it may impact their travel plans. Finally, with the young-twenties crowd who have just left the military and are planning to travel or visit friends, officers need to allow them time to explain what they are doing currently, what their plans are and how they will accomplish those plans. Given the higher refusal rate among this age group along with the difficulty they have showing their intentions to respect the terms of their visas, officers need to explain that a refusal is not forever, that it simply means they should wait to reapply until they are more established in work, school or family life. They generally understand our concern that many young Israelis overseas are working in kiosks selling hair straighteners, cosmetics, etc., and that they are at a stage in their lives when they

are less likely to qualify. If the refused applicant is unwilling to accept the refusal even with patient explanation, I tell the officers to get up and walk around. Usually, even a difficult applicant will leave at that point. Besides, clearing your head is often the best medicine to prepare for the next friendly “yom tov” or “good day” at the interview window.

**CC:** Andy and Sheryn, you’ve successfully raised two beautiful and talented children as Foreign Service parents. What “Do’s” and “Don’ts” can you offer to FS couples who are starting families of their own?

**Sheryn Hylton-Parker:** Wow! Thank you! Whenever we hear such glowing remarks about our children we often wonder whether our ears are playing tricks on us. We are flattered of course!

We are proud of our children and, like you, we think they are beautiful, kind, smart and thoughtful world citizens. We raised both our children entirely in the Foreign Service, so they fit the definition of Global Nomads. I mentioned before that moving is not always easy and moving with children holds its own set of challenges. Starting a family is an important step to take and a life-changing experience. Starting one in the Foreign Service is even more challenging because of the “rootless” nature that comes with it. Of course the child born in the Service, always moving from one place to the next, knows nothing else and becomes restless after being in one place for too long. There is talk about how resilient these children are, and it might be so, but there is always a “grieving” period one experiences when one has to part with friends and sometimes favorite things and places.

We decided very early that, as parents, we should allow our children space to explore and to grow and gently guide them with words and through our actions whenever it became necessary, which was every single day in one way or another. We included them in everything we did; taking them on trips to almost everywhere we went. We encouraged them to participate in activities of interest; sometimes having to persuade them to try things they thought they didn’t like to make sure that that indeed it was so.

I really do not think we are in a position to give advice on DO’s and DON’Ts but surely I would suggest that as they grow, you should:

Involve your children with the bidding process. Let THEM feel as though they have SOMETHING to do with choosing the new Post.

Share everything you find out about your new post with them.

Encourage them to use the internet to find out as much as they can about where they will be attending school. Most schools set up a buddy system; have them participate. It helps when they arrive if they “know” someone.

Sitting down [at meals] together as often as possible, especially when you first move to a new post, is a sure way of staying abreast of how everyone's settling in. Talk a lot! Encourage dialogue all the times; ask questions!

Know your kids' friends and get to know their parents also. Be sure to know where and with whom they are.

Maintain family traditions in the new place and encourage and maintain frequent contact with family at home.

**BE THERE FOR ONE ANOTHER ALWAYS.**

**CC:** Andy, you were instrumental to the success of AILA's Rome District Conference in Tel-Aviv. Immigration attorneys and consular officers came together to share information, exchange viewpoints, and deepen their appreciation for each other's roles in the visa application process. But absent their ability to occasionally get together with consular officers at conferences, what can immigration attorneys do to earn an appreciation by conoffs of their role in the visa application process?

**AP:** Your Consular Corner is certainly one effective means for consular officers to familiarize themselves with mutual issues of concern. Although limited, most of our contact with attorneys revolves around E visa applications. In these cases, complete applications are the most useful. Attorneys who organize their submissions, answer the key questions about a business and are ready to respond to additional questions, create a positive atmosphere for cooperation. Occasionally, we have attorneys advocating for an applicant who has been refused a visa but without addressing the points that prompted the refusal, such as questions about corporate structure. Clearly, this does not strengthen their case or reputation. From a consular perspective, immigration attorneys who do not handle clients looking to skate around the requirements of a visa category, especially work visas, gain our respect. When both sides understand we have similar objectives of promoting legitimate travel and facilitating transnational work opportunities according to law, we have a much better chance of appreciating each other.

**CC:** Sheryn, you are an accomplished singer and actress who once said of herself: "Anywhere there was a piano being played, I was there to sing." How have you been able to nurture your passion for music and theatre as you've sojourned with Andy across the Caribbean, Europe, South America, North America and the Middle East?

**SHP:** Liam, theatre IS my passion! Our first assignment together was to Amsterdam. Having just completed Method Acting at Lee Strasberg Theatre

Institute in New York, I could not have asked to be in a better place. Armed with a professional portfolio and a monologue I wrote, I hit the ground running as the saying goes, calling on theater managers, agents and directors. Within six months of our arrival I signed on to do a film with Canon Tuschinski in Amsterdam, sold the idea of my one-woman show to a reputable theater and began freelancing in commercials for the print media also. Later on I toured Holland, Belgium, London and the British Midlands with the show and joined a professional theater group as an actress/singer in Arnhem in a production of a Greek tragedy by Aeschylus.

As you can see I got off to a really good start. That I believe was largely due to the fact that we were in Holland, where there is a great appreciation for the arts and where everyone can work at various levels depending on their skill and training. As our family began to grow and we began to travel to other regions of the world, my focus changed and the “role” of the traditional mother became the major performance. I always managed though, to work or volunteer in some aspect of entertainment, whether assisting in the classrooms of the schools our children attended (I am a certified teacher in Drama in Education – learning through play), community theatre or “producing” fundraising events for local charities. Very early in our tour to Israel I volunteered to be the Master of Ceremonies at a fundraising event, saying I would do so only if the producers allowed me to “wing it.” It paid off, I believe; as I have found myself on stage quite frequently throughout the three years we have been here, playing the role of MC. My only regret is I didn’t start charging!

**CC:** Andy, in January 2009 you led a highly successful international evacuation of Americans and nationals of 25 other countries from the Gaza Strip. Can you describe some of the activities you undertook in order to exert control over a fluid situation and ensure the success of such a large-scale logistical and coordination challenge?

**AP:** When COGAT, the Israel Defense Force agency responsible for controlling the Gaza border crossings, asked us to assume responsibility for a multi-national evacuation, we needed to act fast to bring control to the efforts of the 26 countries scrambling to assist their nationals. We first assembled a team of officers under the guidance of then-DCM Luis Moreno. That same afternoon we called foreign Embassy representatives to a meeting in our Chancery conference room. Attendees ranged from consular officers to defense attaches to Ambassadors. We made it clear that COGAT would only deal with one entity and that they had asked us to assume that role. Canada had evacuated its nationals a few days before, so we shared information we gleaned from them. We created a roster with contact information, tasked the representatives with getting us the names and other available information on their nationals. On the fly, we developed a system that would have ACS chief Elisa Greene using her top-notch organizational skills to collate information from the IDF, the embassies and from other sources and to release it on a daily schedule to each of the missions. This daily system of

information sharing kept all parties looped in, minimized the circulation of misinformation, and asserted an element of control on our part. This was necessary given the inherent difficulty in getting all the permissions and moving pieces lined up in a war zone, and dealing with the anxieties of the missions to evacuate their civilians. We also liaised closely with the U.S. Consulate General in Jerusalem, which is responsible for American citizens in Gaza, and with the U.S. Embassies in Cairo and Amman. They were responsible for contact with U.S. citizens in Gaza and for organization of transport from the border onwards across Israeli territory to Jordan. Within the Embassy we had the invaluable support of Van Reidhead, a political officer who had close contact with COGAT officials, and with the RSO, who was essential in ensuring, to the extent possible, our security when we finally got permission to meet our nationals at the border. While we waited for permission, we broke the evacuation into two parts because the total number of more than 750 evacuees could not be processed across the border on one day. Finally, after more than ten days of waiting for a window, the ground war ebbed and we were able to give the go-ahead to our multinational group to head for Gaza. On the ground, the processing went well, with only a handful of cases requiring further scrutiny by Israeli officials. For our consular officers who spent a couple days at the border welcoming our American citizens who had been through some terrible times, it was a moving experience. We felt we were part of the essence of consular service.

**CC:** Andy, much of your formative years were during the Rock & Roll revolution of the late '60s and early '70s. Was there a particular band or album from these years that had an especially meaningful influence on you?

**AP:** Music was the organizing tool of the counterculture. In my opinion, no group carried the message better than Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young. Their music not only rocked, it expressed views an entire generation could identify with. Living at home in the summer of '69, I was fortunate to enjoy three days of "peace and love" at Woodstock. Over that rainy weekend, their song, Marrakech Express, played like a broken record over the speaker system during every rain delay. It became a personal anthem, reminding me at times that life is an exotic adventure. It's interesting that a couple years ago we marked 40 years since Woodstock energized a generation, and this may we commemorate 30 years since the passing of Bob Marley, a musical giant whose message of struggle and hope still resonates. Over the decades, rock and reggae are two music forms that have remained strong and continue to inspire and enliven new generations of listeners.

**CC:** Andy, as you rotate out of Tel-Aviv and head off to Washington and then to Montreal, what is the process for getting "up to speed" to handle the challenges of your new position as Principal Officer at this small but critical immigrant visa processing post?

**AP:** Honestly, life at this post tends to be so hectic that focusing on the next assignment can be problematic. Since I was assigned, I have worked on improving my French language skills, thanks in part to some fantastic French speakers in our consular section. I've have an ongoing dialogue with the current CG and several others at post to get a sense of issues relevant management issues. I will continue reading in about the country, the city and our bilateral relationship while I take some weeks of language training and schedule various Washington consultations, to include CA, of course, before I head to post.

It is always personally disruptive to disengage from the life we have created and from colleagues and friends, but that's our life. Sheryn and I have been fortunate to have three enriching years in Tel Aviv. We can only hope that our next assignment in its unique ways will offer similar satisfaction at work and at play.

**CC:** Sheryn, what are some of the things you need to do as an "FS spouse" to prepare for this new chapter in your lives?

**SHP:** The short answer is I need to stay calm! Take deep breaths and count to ten constantly! Moving is never easy, even when the packing is done by professionals. There is the dreaded part of sorting through the stuff one's accumulated before the movers come and making sure that things like closing local accounts and paying off bills, etc., are taken care of. This time with both our children now in universities in the U.S., school applications and registrations and arriving in time for the beginning of the school year are no longer considerations. Housing, the kind of help available, knowing what other resources are available at post is always useful information to have; our Management Office provides us with almost everything we need to know in that regard.

Andy will be the Principal Officer on our next assignment to Montreal, Canada and learning the other official language spoken at post (French) has been a priority for several months now. This is a representational position and hosting several official events will be required of us. Knowing as much as one can about the country/city before arriving, especially what's socially acceptable, for example, is very important and while one has access to general information on the Internet, the Foreign Service Institute in Washington provides the information, support and training we need to do the best job we can in representing the United States abroad.

I/we will spend the summer brushing up on French and taking other preparation courses before taking up our assignment.

### **A Day in the Life of a Consular Officer – Chennai, India**

Nonimmigrant visa (NIV) processing at the U.S. Consulate General in Chennai, India has skyrocketed in recent years: from 7,500 NIV applications in 1992, the

post now handles well over [140,000 NIV's a year](#), ranking it the busiest of all 5 visa-issuing posts in India. As a result, NIV processing issues in Chennai feature high on the list of issues currently discussed by the Department of State with its visa stakeholders.

A few years ago, Foreign Service Officer Kris Fresonke provided an excellent description of a day in her life on the visa line at CG Chennai, in an article dated October 2008 and published in *Inside A U.S. Embassy*.<sup>\*</sup> We hope that re-publishing this article will advance the current stakeholder dialogue by promoting an understanding of the professionalism to be found behind the Chennai hard line.

**8:55 A.M.** Visa interviews have been going on for an hour and there are still a hundred people in the lobby waiting for their turn. Officers sit at several windows, conducting interviews through microphones, a sheet of bulletproof glass between officer and applicant. There is a buzz of American English and Indian English in hectic conversation. My shift is about to begin.

**9:00 A.M.** I raise the blinds on Window 2 to find an applicant already there, sliding his folder through the slot. It contains his passport and application form. In about two minutes of conversation, I determine that he is who he says he is; has a legitimate travel purpose; and has sufficient ties to India to ensure his likely return. I issue the visa and thank him.

**9:05 A.M.** I conduct the same interview 99 more times during the next four hours. The U.S. consulate in Chennai is a “visa mill,” an off-putting term for a truly vital service: issuing visas in areas of high demand. Other high-volume visa posts include Mexico, Brazil, and China. Visa officers at high-volume posts work long hours at a difficult task, interviewing potential travelers and judging speedily whether or not the travel is lawful and valid. In Chennai, we usually have a dozen visa officers “on the line,” who conduct an average of 1,200 to 1,400 interviews per day in total. We’ve even done 1,800 in one day. Without our work making legitimate travel possible, the American economy would instantly feel the adverse effects. Without our care in deterring fraud, the United States would face significant dangers.

**10:00 A.M.** An applicant wishes to travel to the United States to buy machinery. He cannot explain what machinery he wants to buy, why he wants to buy it, or who is selling it to him. This set of answers alone makes my refusal a simple matter; I then cross-check some of his application information. Two other applicants have been issued visas using the same data, which means a vendor has been selling the same package of fake business documents to several different people. I send him to the fraud prevention unit so my colleagues can get more information on this scheme.

**10:30 A.M.** It’s a heavy fraud day. This applicant claims he works at a major IT company (we learn later that they fired him), that he will work for a big U.S.

company (we learn later that he illegally paid \$3,500 for the documents), and that he has the sponsorship of a local business association (we learn later that he bought their stationery on the street). He is smiling and jovial throughout the interview, trying not to lose face in front of the visa officer.

**10:50 A.M.** Up come moms and dads. Dozens of them. The high-tech industry has brought so many Indians to the United States on work visas that legions of Indian parents are setting out to see for themselves what their successful children have made of their lives. I interview 10 sets of parents, all retirees traveling abroad for the first time. More than one couple bless me for issuing their visas.

**12:45 P.M.** I speak with a *shilpi*, a stone carver who adorns Hindu temples with images of the gods. The vocabulary he uses to speak about his work has not changed in centuries. Immediately afterward, I speak with a software engineer, whose technical terminology changes every few months. These two workers offer a microcosm of India: a high-tech future and a deep-rooted classical past, right next to each other in the visa line.

**1:00 P.M.** Lunch break. I eat at my desk and read e-mails, and then order a few Christmas presents online.

**2:04 P.M.** I'm late getting back to my window, and in those few minutes I miss the fraud unit interview nearby with the man buying machinery—an eventful exchange, because the applicant faints and crashes to the floor. From terror? From skipping breakfast? We send him home.

**2:35 P.M.** Another applicant is “buying machinery.” The cases are almost identical. Visa denied.

**2:55 P.M.** We finish 1,200 interviews today. I conduct more than 100 of them, with a refusal rate of 20 percent, average for Chennai. Next I review documents sent to me by work-visa petitioners. I'm trying to determine whether the sponsoring companies are real entities with actual work available, or whether they're just a cover for bilking illegal “petition fees” from applicants, who sometimes end up trapped in nonpaying jobs.

**4:40 P.M.** I am late for a meeting I'm supposed to lead. We are starting a Virtual Presence Post for Bangalore. A local staff member and I are writing Web pages related to this neighboring city—about visas, cultural events, American citizen services, and business promotion.

**5:20 P.M.** I am scheduled to introduce a film, “The Sting,” at the Madras Film Society. Having spent my day untangling fraudulent documents and scams, I laugh remembering the confidence tricks in the complicated plot of this movie.

**6:15 P.M.** The director of the film society greets me as I arrive, and even though I'm a repeat visitor, he places a garland around my neck. It's made of jasmine and

cardamom and smells fabulous, a whiff of an eastern bazaar in the middle of a shabby movie hall. As protocol in India demands, I thank him and immediately take the garland off (it's considered uncouth to keep it on, as if you think you deserve the honor).

**8:00 P.M.** The audience clearly loves the convoluted plot of "The Sting," and afterward a movie fan asks me, "Are all classic American films about outlaws?"

**9:20 P.M.** The consulate car drops me at home, and I enter a dark house, my family asleep. My husband has left a plate of our cook's remarkable South Indian cooking in the fridge, so I reheat it, open a Kingfisher beer, and eat dinner on the balcony. Outside, a bull and farmer are clip-clopping down the street as SUVs and rickshaws speed past them. I can smell chai, cooking oil, and incense. The bells at the local temple are ringing. At moments like this, visas are just one small part of the Indian landscape."

\**Inside a U.S. Embassy: Diplomacy at Work* is "the essential guide to the Foreign Service" from the American Foreign Service Association (AFSA), the professional association of the U.S. Foreign Service. The all-new third edition of *Inside a U.S. Embassy*, published just last month, is available here: [http://www.afsa.org/inside\\_a\\_us\\_embassy.aspx](http://www.afsa.org/inside_a_us_embassy.aspx).

The above piece, which appeared in the 2011 edition of *Inside a U.S. Embassy*, is republished with the permission of AFSA and Kris Fresonke.

Parenthetically, in order to understand the quality of the people who've served on the Chennai visa line, it's actually *Dr. Kris Fresonke*, former Assistant Professor of English at Adelphi University and Associate Professor of English at Iowa State University. A published author in the field of American literary history, Dr. Fresonke is a graduate of UCLA and Columbia University and was a Fulbright Scholar.

### **The Eyes of the Enemy**

Farah is a city in Southwest Afghanistan, on the crossroads between Herat and Kandahar. Alexander the Great was there, and so was Genghis Khan. Today, you can find a contingent of about 350 American and 400 Italian soldiers in the hot desert flatlands just outside of the city. American Foreign Service Officer Mark Thornburg lives with that contingent as part of a Provincial Reconstruction Team ("PRT") that is working to support recovery efforts in the fields of development, governance and agriculture -- everything from the construction of schools, hospitals, clinics and even vegetable markets, to advising the government on transparency and anti-corruption.

The PRT is not combat oriented, and reconstruction efforts can begin only after the fighting has ended. Mark says that the Taliban insurgency is something that "happens elsewhere." The Farah PRT is located in "an ocean of red mud studded

with occasional mountains, and there's neither greenery nor people as far as the eye can see: no trees, no villages, no roads or houses or signs of life."

But one day this March, Mark had an encounter with Taliban insurgents who approached the Governor's compound and asked to reconcile with the Afghan Government. According to Mark, his prior training as a consular officer proved absolutely invaluable to engaging the insurgents.

In his own words:

"They were reintegrating. There's a much ballyhooed Coalition program -- the Afghan Peace and Reintegration Program, though its names and subprograms seem to switch acronyms on an almost weekly basis -- that seeks to bring to bring insurgents and low-level Taliban back into Afghan society. The program on the Coalition side is managed by a charismatic British 2-Star named General Jones, who has visited Farah several times to discuss the program with the Farah Government. ('I'm implementing a nation-wide program,' he told us in his charming north-of-London accent, 'and I've only got two men and two dogs to do it.')

Jones runs the program on the Coalition side, but for the most part it's Afghan led and we take a largely hands-off approach, supporting from the background as needed. The idea is that non-ideological Taliban -- those who got swept up in the fighting for one reason or another but do not seek the eradication of all non-Muslims or the restoration of a pan-global Islamic caliphate -- can be given a means to honorably exit the fight and a small subsistence stipend to get them back on their feet. It's not intended to be a jobs program, nor is the very small stipend intended to be a reward for coming back; it's meant to be a means of grievance resolution and community building. It's one of our exit strategies.

And so, when a pack of Taliban from central Farah Province decided to reintegrate, the Governor called us to let us know, and I and Commander Killjoy tagged along with a few other officer who were headed to assist with registering them in the program.

It is indescribably strange to stand talk to people who just days prior were holding arms against the United States. We were standing in the pleasant garden space just across from the Governor's office, outside a conference room used for large meetings, and exchanging the normal pleasantries that go along with meeting any Afghan, chatting like we were old friends instead two groups of people who, as of days ago, had been on opposite sides of the war. They were young -- early twenties or so, with scruffy beards and the black turbans favored by the Taliban. None of them had ever been to school for a day in their life, a fact which I, well-trained in reading faces from my visa tour in Islamabad once upon a time, could see in their faces without having to ask: it was etched into their eyes.

(After almost a year in Afghanistan, I can tell if someone is literate just by the

brightness in his eyes, and I can pick out who the important people are in a crowd just by how they carry themselves; the requisite visa tour that all entry level officers have to go through can seem like a soul-sapping waste of time, but I will concede that it taught me to read people -- and to trust my instincts -- better than any training ever could have).

The reintegrees spoke only Pashto and no Dari, and seemed wary of talking to me through an interpreter. But like a lot of Afghans, they could get by in Urdu, the primary language of Pakistan, and they opened up once we switched to a language they could talk to me directly in. They were rural poor, and claimed to have joined the insurgency for the wages it pays -- Ten Dollar Taliban, as they're known. One said he joined because it seemed like fun -- he was bored, and taking pot shots at passing soldiers seemed like something to do to break up the otherwise staid life of a rural farmer. The others nodded in agreement: it was a way to kill time.

I had expected that talking to members of the Taliban would be fascinating beyond any speaking of it: they were the physical incarnation of America's enemy -- actual, living examples of 'bad guys' who likely had taken up the cause of Death to America and all of that. It is not inconceivable that even a scant week prior, they'd possibly have tried to kill me if our paths had crossed and it had been convenient.

And yet, they were remarkably uninteresting. They were all sheepish about their past with the Taliban, and seemed almost embarrassed that they hadn't engaged in any major combat activities. Mostly they just wanted the bags of wheat they'd get as a subsistence allowance from the reintegration process. We talked about farming and tending the fields, but ended up having not much to say to one another.

I left the larger group of reintegrees to go inside with Commander Killjoy, who was set to begin talking to the self-identified leader of the group, the one who had ostensibly convinced them to come in and reintegrate. He, in a clean set of Afghan clothes and with a larger and more commanding turban than the others, claimed to have spent significant time in the Pakistani city Quetta, home of the Quetta Shura which ostensibly guides all Taliban activities.

And again the Consular experience kicked in: I was convinced that this man was lying to me. I wasn't sure what it was that he was lying about, if he was just stretching the truth or embellishing things, or if parts of his story were true and just small falsehoods had been studded in, but I was positive that he was lying.

Without realizing I had done so, I switched into visa officer mode and began interviewing him as if he were a suspected fraudulent applicant in the immigrant visa line at U.S. Embassy Islamabad. I started grilling him, trying to trip him up within his own story so I could figure out what was true and what wasn't. I knew what I was doing, but I thought that I was doing a good job of keeping it

lighthearted and friendly. 'Lighthearted? Are you f\_\_king kidding me?' the Commander told me later. 'I'm not sure you realize how intense you can be, sometimes. That was really, uh, really something to watch.'

(Commander Killjoy and I have since worked out a code word – 'cupcake' -- to use if either of us think the other is being too hostile with our interlocutors. I originally made it up to use on the off chance he went off the deep end, but the only time it's been trotted out has been to calm me down in the face of unreasonable and repetitive demands, something that makes me irrationally annoyed. The first time he used it ('did you get one of those cupcakes at lunch?'), I responded that I didn't see any cupcakes at lunch, and he sighed despondently about there being no point in having a code word if I refused to remember what it means).

And so I grilled him, through an interpreter since I don't speak Pashto and didn't want to give him the upper hand by speaking Urdu.

How often did you go to Quetta?  
*At least once a year.*

How did you get there?  
*By road, and then over the mountains.*

Through which cities? On which road?  
*Highway one, the ring road. And then through Spin Boldak and through Balochistan.*

You drove? Or someone else drove? Or you took a bus? How did you get there?  
*I told you, we took highway one. Everyone takes highway one -- even regular citizens. It's not out of the ordinary. Starting to get defensive.*

And when you got there, where did you sleep? What did the room look like? Did you have a bed, or a cot or did you sleep on the ground? How many other people slept in the room with you, and were you inside or outside? When you met representatives of the Quetta Shura, what did the room look like? Did it have a table or did you sit on the floor? What did you eat? Did you have to pay for the food or was it provided? How many meals a day?

And so on. I remained steadfastly convinced that he was lying to me, but the Commander told me gently that it ultimately doesn't matter if parts of his story were made up or embellished or whatever. He had been accepted by our Afghan counterparts and was reintegrating, and that was the end of the story; where or about what he was lying was no longer relevant. The Taliban leader looked visibly relieved when I stood and left the room.

After Osama Bin Ladin was killed, I noted on Facebook that I have lived in Pakistan and even driven through Abbottabad, but was not involved with the

Operation that got him. I have spent exactly one day on the range and have never shot anyone, much less a major figure from the world of Islamic extremism or a terrorist leader -- such is not my role in this war. But I can say confidently that at least one member of the Taliban -- or ex-member, now -- will always remember me as the guy from the PRT who, for a period of twenty minutes or so, stared him down and made him bracingly uncomfortable. It's no take down of Bin Ladin, but there's still an odd sense of satisfaction to it."

Reprinted, with permission, from <http://theafghanplan.blogspot.com/2011/05/eyes-of-enemy.html>. If you'd like to contact d h, he can be reached at [mhthornburg@gmail.com](mailto:mhthornburg@gmail.com).

### **Changes to the Foreign Affairs Manual (FAM) – Monthly Report**

#### **Multiple-Year Validity Period for NIV Waivers (9 FAM 40.301 N6.2-3)**

The "default" validity period for a waiver of inadmissibility is one year. If a foreign national has already received two such waivers, a consular officer can recommend that the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) approve a waiver for a longer period. The maximum "longer period" used to be 10 years, but that's now been halved to 5 years by a change made late last month to the FAM.

This will certainly be an inconvenience for those foreign nationals who were able to work their way back up to a 10 year waiver period (which is essentially identical to a maximum-reciprocity B1/B2 visa). But, truth be told, that elite-yet-inadmissible club contains relatively few members, and the vast majority of nonimmigrant waivers in circulation will reflect the "default" validity period of 12 months.

#### **FGM Notification (9 FAM 42.73 PN11)**

The Department has provided consular officers with additional information about accessing Form G-1015 (DHS Fact Sheet on Female Genital Mutilation (FGM)). This form, translated where needed, is provided by consular posts to immigrant visa applicants from targeted countries where FGM is common practice. The goal is the form is to ensure that visa recipients are notified of the severe harm to physical and psychological health caused by FGM.

### **Are You Smarter Than A Consular Officer?**

1. Under what context does the Department of State instruct Consular Officers that they "are not expected to assume the role of guidance counselor"?
2. F-1 visas can be issued up to 120 days before the start of the academic program. How far in advance can J-1 visas be issued?

3. Adam, an F-1 student, received an Employment Authorization Document permitting him to engage in Optional Practical Training (OPT) for a local company. After he began working there, the employees' union at his place of work called a strike. What action must Adam take?
  - (a) Join the picket line.
  - (b) Work double-time in order to make up for the missing employees.
  - (c) Cease his work activities.
  
4. Name one of the five consular posts at which immigrant visas for residents of Iran may be processed.
  
5. Sasha obtained an F-1 visa and traveled to the United States to begin studying at University X. Some time later, she traveled back to her home country for a short while. She's now changed her mind and wants to attend University Y when she returns to the United States. Is it possible for her to use the old visa to do so?
  
6. According to the DOS Customer Service Statement to Visa Applicants, what are the three kinds of nonimmigrant visa cases which will normally be expedited?
  
7. According to 9 FAM, F-1 students who leave the United States for a break in their studies may automatically lose their F-1 status after how many months abroad?
  
8. Under what circumstances may a consular officer issue a visa to an individual with a possible claim to U.S. citizenship?
  
9. What is the *raison d'être* of the F-3 visa?
  
10. The FAM cites *Matter of Hira* as the source for the clearest definition of the difference between appropriate B-1 activities and activities that constitute inappropriate labor for hire. What was Hira's profession?
  - (a) Accountant
  - (b) Diamond Trader
  - (c) Executive Secretary
  - (d) Poet
  - (e) Tailor

**Top Ten Visa Wait Times at U.S. Consular Posts, April 2011\***

One possible response to the lengthy visa appointment times at our four visa-issuing posts in Brazil? <http://careers.state.gov/CALNA>

#	Country	Consular Post	Visa Wait Time	Increase/decrease from Last Month	Top 10 Position Last

					<b>Month</b>
1	Cuba	Havana (US Interests Section)	999 days	Unchanged	1
2	Venezuela	Caracas	177 days	-13 days	2
3	Argentina	Buenos Aires	125 days	+ 13 days	5
4	Brazil	Rio de Janeiro	106 days	- 7 days	3
5	Nigeria	Lagos	105 days	+ 24 days	6
6	Brazil	Sao Paulo	99 days	Unchanged	4
7	Ghana	Accra	90 days	+ 40 days	New Listing
8	Brazil	Brasilia	59 days	Unchanged.	9
9	Cameroon	Yaounde	57 days	+ 19 days	New Listing
10	Ireland	Dublin	56 days	+ 39 days	New listing

\*\* Updated to May 3, 2011, and based on published Department of State data. The “visa wait time” is the estimated time in which individuals need to wait to obtain a nonimmigrant visa interview appointment at a given consular post.

### **Top Wait Times by Region:**

<b>The Americas (excluding Cuba)</b>	Venezuela/Caracas	(177 days)
<b>Africa</b>	Nigeria/Lagos	(105 days)
<b>Europe and Eurasia</b>	Ireland/Dublin	(56 days)
<b>East Asia and Pacific</b>	China/Beijing	(49 days)
<b>Middle East and North Africa</b>	Saudi Arabia/Jeddah	(35 days)
<b>Central and South Asia</b>	Pakistan/Karachi	(21 days)

### **Answers to “Are You Smarter Than A Consular Officer?”**

1) “To determine whether an applicant for an F-1 or M-1 visa is qualified to pursue the desired course of study.” [9 FAM 41.61 N7.1](#)

2) “At any time,” per [9 FAM 41.62 N8.4](#). (Neither F nor J visa holders can enter the United States more than 30 days before the program start date.)

3) c. [9 FAM 41.61 N13.4-2](#)

4) Immigrant visas for residents of Iran are processed at: U.S. Embassy Vienna, Austria; U.S. Embassy Ankara, Turkey; U.S. Embassy Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates; U.S. Consulate General Frankfurt, Germany (family-based applicants only); and U.S. Consulate General Naples, Italy.

5) According to [9 FAM 41.61 N17.2](#), Sasha can travel on the original visa (as long as it hasn’t expired), if she has a properly executed Form I-20 from University Y.

6) Students, medical and humanitarian emergency travelers, and business travelers in cases of particular concern to American business.

[http://travel.state.gov/visa/visa\\_2796.html](http://travel.state.gov/visa/visa_2796.html)

7) Five months. [9 FAM 41.61 N17.4](#)

8) In general, a nonimmigrant visa may be issued to an applicant with a possible claim to U.S. citizenship who is unable or unwilling to obtain documents to establish that status – and the applicant is found eligible for the visa. 9 FAM 40.2 N1 <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/86922.pdf>

9) The F-3 “Border Commuter visa” allows Mexicans and Canadians to attend educational programs in the United States while continuing to reside in their home countries. [9 FAM 41.61 N14](#)

10) e. [9 FAM 41.31 N7\(b\)](#).

### **Quote of the Corner**

“Today was my first time working with the Consular Section in an evacuation and it was really an exciting time to be here to be helping the people, especially what was most gratifying was being a welcoming face, an open face for the people as they came through the border and just helping them with their bags and really to showing them where the bathrooms were, showing them where the sandwiches were, just really hanging out with them and being relaxed and showing them a welcoming face from both the United States and on as they prepare for their onward journey.”

Ruben Harutunian, Vice-Consul, American Embassy Tel Aviv, quoted in the Embassy’s January 2009 Press Release on the Evacuation of U.S. citizens and other foreign nationals from Gaza. <http://usembassy-israel.org.il/xarchives/gaza2.aspx>

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