



AFGHAN PILOTS IN THE US: INITIAL LANDSCAPE ASSESSMENT & PROPOSED PROGRAM PLAN

July 2022

OBJECTIVE

Geared towards service providers, Sponsor Circles, and others working to welcome newcomers, this document offers initial framing and guidance on what Upwardly Global (UpGlo) has learned about potential pathways, barriers, and requirements for the cohort of Afghan pilots in the US. A complete mapping of the aviation labor market in the US is outside the scope of this effort; however, we hope the document offers helpful tools and ideas for getting started, as well as initial alignment around expectations. Findings are organized around a landscape assessment (with near-, medium-, and longer-term options) and our anticipated program plan, which will be developed around a specialized skilling cohort.

OVERVIEW

For over twenty years, UpGlo has been advancing the inclusion of refugee and immigrant professionals into the US workforce. We are the first and longest-serving national organization that helps these individuals restart their careers and bring their skills and perspectives into the American economy. We know that newcomers often have to start over in a complex workforce that does not recognize their credentials and may face additional barriers related to race, language, and other factors. To that end, it takes on average six to eighteen months for our job seekers to find work at their skill level, depending on several factors such as the industry, need for re-skilling and relicensing, English proficiency, and “soft skills” like networking and interviewing.

When it comes to “brain waste”, the Migration Policy Institute [estimates](#) that over two million immigrant professionals with college degrees are unemployed or underemployed. Our job seekers tell us time and again that they want to use their international skills and experience, yet their financial reality – and the cost of licensing and other barriers – often requires them to accept lower-skill opportunities in order to pay the bills, particularly as resettlement assistance comes to an end.

Since the fall of Kabul in 2021, we’ve met thousands of Afghans with professional backgrounds, and are aware that there are *at least* 250+ pilots resettled throughout the US. Without a formal database and with individuals resettled across the country, the exact number is difficult to track and may in fact be significantly higher. We know that many/most flew for the Afghan Air Force (which required a certificate and not a license), some had commercial licenses obtained in other countries (primarily Eastern Europe) and were flying for commercial airlines in Afghanistan, and others trained on US soil with the military. These individuals possess quite a wide range of flight hours and experience with different types of aircrafts.

Given a complex array of Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) certification and licensing requirements, a diffuse network of local/regional training and employment partners, and immigration status, there is not a single and sure path for this cohort to become licensed pilots in the US. Anecdotally, many of the pilots we’ve connected with want to fly again, while others may want to re-skill and pursue related career paths. This document aims to provide a high-level overview of the landscape, a suite of options for pilots to pursue, and the early outline for the targeted program plan that UpGlo hopes to facilitate.

For those who would like to read more, recent media relevant to this population as well as the existing pilot shortage in the US has appeared in [Air Force Times](#), [New York Times](#), [CNBC](#), [ABC News](#), and [CBS](#).

LANDSCAPE ASSESSMENT

Near-Term Employment: Aviation-Adjacent Pathways

Key Findings

We understand that, for individuals with advanced professional experience and qualifications – and particularly those who dream of flying again – working in low-skill positions can be discouraging. Further, it is a missed opportunity for our communities and economies to benefit from the much-needed skills and experience of this talent pool. Given the need for immediate employment and cash flow, particularly once resettlement assistance ends, we recommend that the cohort of Afghan pilots (excluding those who trained in the US and/or already have FAA certification) pursue “aviation adjacent” options in the near-term. We offer the following guidance based on our research and expertise in this space:

- Focus on aviation-adjacent pathways that do not require certification or licensing and that align with the job seeker’s background; it is equally important to work on both short-term and long-term professional goals in parallel
- Roles we recommend and/or have heard about successful placements for Afghan newcomers include:
 - Engineer, fuel line and other technician, ground equipment and supply chain roles, cargo transport, assembler, electrician, mechanic helper,¹ machine operator, customer service, airline management, and crew support (scheduling, fleet planning, flight attendant, etc.)
 - Given the overlap between mechanical and aerospace engineering, automotive technician roles could also be interesting and can become its own specialized path
- These kinds of “para-aviation” roles help build experience in a related field and offer benefits such as: exposure to a US work environment, opportunity to learn the organizational culture from within, networking and industry connections, conversational and professional English practice, and access to future training and certification opportunities with certain employers
- These kinds of roles also help minimize employment gaps on a job seeker’s resume, which is important when it comes to rebuilding their professional career in the US

Success Stories

- S. was an instructor and combat pilot with the Afghan Air Force who completed his training at a US military base. He and his family arrived in the US in August 2021. S. connected with an UpGlo job coach in February 2022 and began a full-time role as a Line Technician with a regional airline in the Southwest in April 2022; he makes \$40,000 per year. S. is open to certification in a mid-skill pathway to better leverage his skill set and hopes to eventually relicense as a pilot in the US.
- S. worked as an interpreter with a range of national and international institutions in Afghanistan. He connected with UpGlo at Fort McCoy in Wisconsin in February 2022 and worked with his job coach to develop a career plan. In April 2022, he began a full-time role as a Customer Service Agent with a major national airline making \$60,000 per year. While S. was not a pilot, he has found a permanent placement with the aviation industry that offers room for growth in his field (logistics/operations).

Next Steps

Implementation will rest with the job seeker and/or service providers. We encourage you to:

- **Help prepare job seekers** as they seek employment:
 - Review the framing above and throughout this document; discuss expectations about what is feasible in the short- and longer-term

¹ Note the mechanic role itself requires FAA certification and would fall under our category of medium-term pathways

- UpGlo's [Afghan response portal](#) – a free, self-paced virtual learning platform – has information about US workplace norms, a resume-building tool, and interviewing tips (such as fielding inevitable questions about being overqualified)
- Encourage job seekers to focus on practicing English if they are not already fluent; proficiency is required for pursuing any of the higher-skill opportunities outlined below
- Encourage job seekers to remain open to internships and/or apprenticeship opportunities, which can be a terrific entry point towards permanent employment
- **Contact local and regional employers** in your community to foster introductions; see if they are open to hiring internationally-trained talent and/or conducting informational interviews
- **Reach out to local community colleges** regarding short-term and low-cost training pathways, such as cable harness wiring, composite training, and other opportunities; some of these programs may offer apprenticeships and employer connections
- **Our [Jobversity](#) portal** is a suite of specialized learning and training resources that empower organizations serving diverse job seekers; contact jobversity@upwardlyglobal.org if you are a service provider and would like to learn more about options for technical assistance

Medium-Term Training & Employment: FAA-certified Roles

Key Findings

Building on the aviation-adjacent options outlined above, FAA certifications offer additional opportunities for career growth, higher pay, and job security. There are [many types of FAA certifications](#) and this document does not aim or intend to map out the full range of options. In the second half of this document, we include information about UpGlo's proposed program plan, which will be developed around one of the FAA certifications.

Next Steps

With the exception of the skilling cohort that UpGlo will focus on (see below), implementation will rest with the job seeker and/or service providers. In general, we encourage you and your job seeker to explore certification(s) that appeal to them – opportunities for mechanics, airmen, and otherwise. There is *significant* variability regarding eligibility criteria, training time, costs, and pathways for growth.

Longer-Term Training & Employment: Licensed Pilot

Key Findings

Relicensing as pilots in the US will be a long-term and potentially tricky path for the cohort of Afghan newcomers. From our research and conversations, however, we believe it **is** possible. Our intent is to encourage a sense of optimism while conveying - with transparency - that this pathway will be costly and time-consuming. We also believe that momentum may change once Afghan newcomers have a better sense of their immigration pathway in the US, and/or possibly as flight cancellations and pilot shortages continue to impact travel.

The combination of credential verification, training requirements, and immigration status means becoming a licensed pilot in the US will take several years and, much like the lengthy and arduous process for international medical graduates who want to practice as physicians in the US, individuals may need to start from scratch. The author has been made aware of an Afghan pilot and SIV recipient who arrived in the US in 2016, successfully relicensed, and is now flying as a pilot for a regional airline; we are seeking to learn more with our partner about his path and recommendations.

Whether or not flight hours in Afghanistan can be documented and transferred in full – which will dictate the length of training and ultimately cost – is a moving target. Based on our research to date, even if FAA-approved

training programs recognize international flight hours, employers may not (and may have further requirements around citizenship and/or passports with open entry and exit to all of their international destinations).

A note about credential verification and flight records: We know that many records have been destroyed and many individuals had to flee without time to gather their documents (or were explicitly instructed to destroy them for safety reasons). The FAA-approved training programs in the US are equipped with processes to recognize international flight hours; as noted above, an unfortunate challenge is whether employers will do the same. And while the overall cohort of Afghan pilots arrived in the US through different channels, for the majority we know of who were evacuated via Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, the US Departments of Defense and State have some of the flight records; we are trying to understand at what level of detail and/or if it is enough for FAA-approved programs to recognize.

Here is some of what we have learned about the journey to relicensing in the US:

- Flying for the US military: This may potentially be an option down the road once individuals receive a green card; it is not possible with SIV or parolee status
- Non-military pilot options: There are several for-profit training schools across the country. We **strongly recommend** pursuing any/all pilot training through [FAA-approved training programs](#) only; these schools are more likely to have processes for transferring international flight hours. A snapshot of options most relevant to this group includes:
 - Private Pilot License (PPL) - A prerequisite for any pilot to fly in the US; transferring flight hours may be challenging since there are requirements about how many hours need to be under a US certified flight instructor; cannot be employed as a pilot with this license alone
 - Instrument Training - A required step before individual can proceed with commercial license
 - Commercial Pilot License (CPL) - Initial permit for a pilot to fly for hire in the US; can be employed to provide “specialty air services” (aerial surveying, parachute jumps, agriculture, etc.); note the CPL is required to pursue CFI and/or ATPL training
 - Certified Flight Instructor (CFI) - Ability to teach students, gain experience, and build flight hours towards ATPL, there are also sub-categories within CFI for single-engine, instrument, and multi-engine instruction
 - Airline Transport Pilot License (ATPL) - Highest-level certificate for pilot to fly passengers and/or cargo; estimated all-in cost if international flight hours are not transferred is \$80,000 - \$100,000 and *at least* two years of training time; employment options for Afghans would more likely be with regional than national carriers given current citizenship and/or passport requirements with some large employers

Emerging Stories

- We are following an Afghan newcomer with all his flight records that our colleagues in Idaho are supporting; at the time of this writing, there have been some snags with credential verification.
- We have a job seeker who received his CPL in the US and his ATPL in Jordan; he was employed as a pilot with Kam Airlines in Afghanistan and has all of his records and log books. Once resettled in his new community, he will contact the local FAA-approved training programs to discuss next steps.

Next Steps

Coordinating a national-level effort will be difficult given the range of pathways, local/regional training providers, and the current uncertainty of pathway(s) to citizenship. To that end, implementation will rest with the job seekers that want to pursue this path and/or the service providers who are helping to guide them. Additionally:

- More information can be found at the [FAA “Become a Pilot” landing page](#). It may be helpful to contact your [nearest FAA Flight District Standards Office](#) if you meet the eligibility requirements and are prepared to get started

- For those who flew commercial, have their ATPL from another country, and/or have their flight records, we encourage you to [contact your local FAA-approved training program](#) on next steps
- We look forward to hearing about successes, challenges, and lessons learned so we can help disseminate recommendations and best practices to the broader community

UPWARDLY GLOBAL'S PROGRAM PLAN

Medium-Term Training & Employment: FAA Aircraft Dispatcher Certification

Key Findings

Given the above context, we sought to identify *one* FAA certified role around which we hope to build a deep skilling cohort and training-to-hiring pathway for eligible and interested Afghan pilots.² Based on our research and conversations with industry experts and employers, we are narrowing in on the **aircraft/flight dispatcher certification**, a critical role when it comes to flight safety. We know this will not be a one-size-fits-all pathway, and not all of the Afghan pilots will meet the eligibility criteria. For those that do, we feel this is a promising pathway given the alignment around skill set, relatively short-term training time, and the high labor market demand. According to [Glassdoor](#), the average annual salary for flight dispatchers in the US is approximately \$44,000, with an estimated additional pay of \$22,000+ for overtime and otherwise. Further, the testing requirements are largely similar to the Airline Transport Pilot's License (ATPL) for individuals choosing to pursue that path in the longer-term. Here are some highlights about the dispatcher pathway:

- **Requirements:** The *minimum* training and certification requirements from the FAA for this path include: age 23 or older; high school graduate or international equivalent education³; ability to read, write, and communicate in English; minimum 200 hours of instruction in the US; and a passing score on the FAA Aircraft Dispatcher Practical Test. Work authorization in the US is required; citizenship is not.
- **Training courses:** Some of the national employers we have spoken with so far are in process of creating their own dispatcher training programs; however, priority in the near-term will go to existing employees looking to up-skill (another reason for folks to consider aviation-adjacent opportunities described above!). To that end, Afghan newcomers pursuing this pathway would complete training at one of the [51 FAA-approved Aircraft Dispatcher training programs](#) around the country, and there are study guides and apps available to help with the exam preparation.⁴
- **Process:** We understand the process is as follows – pass the training course (~5-8 weeks depending on the school) → receive certificate to take the FAA examination → pass practical examination → receive FAA certification → available to be hired as a dispatcher.
- **Cost:** Training costs vary by school, but appear to be approximately \$5,000, and there may be supplemental fees for training materials and equipment. Individuals who have the financial resources are welcome to apply to the training courses on their own at any time and/or look into educational and training loans through the [Support for Afghan Financial Empowerment \(SAFE\) IRC](#) loans.⁵ We cannot make any guarantees, but hope to identify funding to provide at least some scholarship support for Afghan pilots interested in pursuing this path; this is a process that will take some time and that will be announced accordingly.
- **Labor market demand and employer partners:** While most of the national airlines are hiring for flight dispatchers, the major employers we have spoken with so far prioritize individuals with at least 1-2 years of prior experience as a dispatcher in the US. To that end, we envision that initial employer

² Unfortunately, given limited data on educational backgrounds, English proficiency, and other requirements, it is quite difficult to estimate how large this cohort might be and which individuals will be interested in pursuing this path

³ We recommend the [World Education Services \(WES\) Gateway Program](#) if newcomers need help with credential verification

⁴ We do *not* recommend proceeding with any of the private training programs and schools (for dispatchers, pilots, or otherwise) that are not approved by the FAA

⁵ These loans are not available in all states; applicants must meet eligibility criteria (including proof of income) and repayment terms

partnerships for this cohort would be with a small handful of regional airlines; pay will be slightly lower, though the experience will open doors for opportunities with national airlines down the road.

- **Opportunities for growth:** This career is appealing given the pathways for professional and financial growth. As one employer told us, individuals can “make it whatever you want.” For instance:
 - Adding further dispatcher sub-qualifications (international, instructions, etc.) can yield significant increases to base salary, as well as opportunities for overtime and holiday pay
 - National employers pull from their flight dispatcher ranks for roles such as Operations Managers (responsible for specific fleets), Air Traffic Control (ATC) Coordinators, Instructors, Line Check Dispatchers, and other roles

Next Steps

It will take several months for UpGlo to firm up this pathway and to secure funding, employer partnerships, industry-specific English language training (if needed), and an implementation plan (potentially in collaboration with an implementing partner) at a national scale. In the interim:

- Please work with your job seekers to **set expectations accordingly** about the timeline
- We highly recommend job seekers **secure near-term employment** (see above) and to **practice professional and conversational English**, as proficiency is required to become a dispatcher
 - Note that there are industry-specific English courses for the aviation industry; we urge caution to job seekers before pursuing, as they can be expensive and vary significantly in quality
- If you have not already done so, **please email UpGlo’s Afghan Response Coordinator**; she is keeping a list of service providers and individuals who would like to receive program updates, announcements about information sessions, and application information
 - Due to the volume of inquiries, we kindly ask that you refrain from checking in once your name has been submitted; rest assured, UpGlo will communicate far and wide as soon as we have something to announce

CONCLUSION

As noted, this document aims to share some of what we have learned, guidance, and initial recommendations for Afghan pilots looking for employment in the US. There are *many* options and pathways to consider, and we hope this information will help job seekers identify the option(s) that fit their goals. Further, we have outlined our initial thinking for where UpGlo can add value to this effort with a targeted skilling cohort.

We also recognize and name the need to continue to build awareness, share stories, and highlight the untapped potential of this talent pool, particularly as a solution in the ecosystem to help address the ongoing pilot shortage in the US. We are committed to seeking out impactful advocacy and storytelling opportunities, excited to assist in guiding and shaping the narrative, and want to hear about your successes and challenges.

This piece has been authored by Rebecca Fishman, Special Projects Coordinator (Afghan Response) at Upwardly Global, and does not represent a full study of the aviation labor market in the US. For more information, please contact rfishman@upwardlyglobal.org.

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