Prepared Remarks of
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"Reintegration of Ex-Combatants:
Lessons from the U.S. Experience in Afghanistan"

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Good morning, and thank you for the kind introduction. And special thanks to the US Institute of Peace for hosting today's event. I stand here today at an interesting time in the current chapter of our nation's longest war – one that will mark its 18th anniversary in the coming weeks.

In my seven years as the SIGAR, I have learned never to underestimate the utterly unpredictable nature of matters regarding Afghanistan, and the past few weeks have only underscored that point. But the subject of today's event – the reintegration of ex-combatants in Afghanistan – is and will be relevant to Afghanistan's future and American national security interests no matter what happens in Doha, Kabul, or here in Washington.

For if there is ever to be a true, sustainable peace in Afghanistan, reintegration of the Taliban and other combatants will be a necessary component of that process, whether that process begins days – or years – from now. This is why today's report by SIGAR is so important – it is the first independent, public, official U.S. government report on the trials and tribulations of reintegrating the Taliban and other combatants into Afghan society.

SIGAR's Lessons Learned Program and Reintegration Report

Today's publication is SIGAR's seventh report by our Lessons Learned Program, an effort we began at the urging of former ISAF Commanding General John Allen, former U.S. Ambassador Ryan Crocker, and other senior government officials who noted that our agency was the only U.S. government agency with the mandate to look at the "whole of government" and "whole of governments" approach to Afghanistan's reconstruction.

Like our prior reports, today's is available in both traditional and interactive formats on our website at www.sigar.mil – something unique in the inspector general community.

SIGAR undertook this project, in part, because in the spring of 2018, senior U.S. military and diplomatic leadership in Kabul expressed interest in a SIGAR report on reintegration. We also recognized that the body of literature on what practitioners call "DDR" – disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration – deals much more with the two "D"s, but there was far less information available on best practices for the "R" – reintegration. We also viewed reintegration as an appropriate topic because large-scale disarmament of combatants in Afghanistan is generally not seen as feasible in the near-term.

The goal of today's report is to help U.S., Afghan, and other coalition policymakers and agencies as they prepare for the daunting task of assisting with the reintegration of an estimated 60,000 full-time Taliban fighters, as well as numerous other non-Taliban combatants, in the event that the Afghan government and the Taliban enter negotiations to reach a political settlement.

The report, which we initiated exactly 14 months ago, relies on 51 interviews of current and former U.S., Afghan, and other government officials and academics; a review of thousands of pages of public and private documents and academic material; and a rigorous peer review.

I am grateful to former U.S. Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan James Dobbins, and Dr. Deedee Dirksen, a scholar on Afghanistan and DDR, as well as several others who peer reviewed the report. Many officials at the Departments of Defense, State, Treasury, and USAID also provided valuable insights and feedback. While this is a SIGAR report, it was truly a collaborative effort.

We outline 14 findings, 10 lessons, and make 15 recommendations for policymakers in this report, but in an effort to keep my remarks shorter than the peace negotiations, I will focus on a few of the important high-level takeaways.

Past Reintegration Efforts in Afghanistan

First, as you all know, the stated U.S. goal in Afghanistan is a sustainable political settlement between the Afghan government and the Taliban that brings lasting peace and stability to Afghanistan. There has been hope that a U.S.-Taliban deal would open the door to an intra-Afghan peace process, which could eventually lead to a peace agreement.

While there is no U.S.-Taliban deal at this time, let alone an intra-Afghan political

settlement, ongoing fighting hasn't stopped the U.S. and other donors from supporting reintegration efforts in the past.

Our close examination of those efforts led us to our first recommendation: As long as the Taliban insurgency continues, the U.S. should not support a comprehensive program to reintegrate former fighters, because of the difficulty in vetting, protecting, and tracking former fighters.

This report examines the five main post-2001 reintegration efforts in Afghanistan and assesses their effectiveness. Further, it examines several past local security arrangements and whether they provided an opening for reintegration.

The report also examines opportunities and constraints for reintegration efforts now and in the future, includes case studies of reintegration in Colombia and Somalia, and reviews the broader literature.

Our review of those efforts found, however, that any major reintegration effort is very likely to fail in the absence of an agreement between the Afghan government and the Taliban on terms for the reintegration of former fighters. Why? Our review found that for a reintegration effort to have a greater chance of success, formerly hostile parties must demonstrate high-level commitment and mutual trust that they will allow their fighters to participate in a program.

Without this, if fighters join a reintegration program, they and their families face enormous risks of retribution. And amid a war, it's very difficult to provide protection for them. That risk of retribution – and insecurity more generally – was a key reason that past reintegration programs in Afghanistan failed.

Other factors were a very weak economy offering few legal livelihood opportunities to former fighters, and limited Afghan government capacity to implement a program. Additionally, early efforts to demobilize and reintegrate state-allied militias failed in part because U.S. forces were at the same time partnered with the militias for security and other services. U.S. forces' dependence on the militias empowered commanders and groups that were supposed to be disbanding.

Based on Afghan government documents, program evaluations, interviews, and independent studies, we found that past programs did not lead to any significant number of former fighters reintegrating into society, did not weaken the insurgency, and did not reduce violence.

If they had, we would be reading a lot less about Afghanistan these days.

Our report also highlights that, especially from 2009 onward, the U.S. viewed

reintegration primarily as a tool to fracture and weaken the Taliban. That approach had an unintended – but damaging – consequence. It undermined the potential for reintegration efforts to promote actual reconciliation. And, as we report, there's no evidence that reintegration programs served to splinter or weaken the Taliban movement.

Nothing about the current environment suggests that a renewed program would have any greater chance of success than past efforts. Moreover, given the legacy of prior programs, a renewed program could in fact erode the trust needed to establish a peace process.

The Challenges of Peace and Reintegration

Because the past is often prologue, one goal of evaluating previous reintegration efforts was to derive lessons and recommendations for future efforts, should a more conducive environment present itself.

As we have seen in recent weeks, developments in Afghanistan move rapidly and unexpectedly.

The level of diplomatic engagement by the United States with the Taliban and Afghan government in recent months suggests that it would be prudent for policymakers to consider now what reintegration might look like following a peace agreement between the Afghan government and the Taliban — rather than wait until the "day after" an agreement is signed.

In our report, we recommend that the U.S. only consider supporting a reintegration effort if first, the Afghan government and the Taliban sign a peace agreement that provides a framework for reintegration of ex-combatants; secondly, if a significant reduction in overall violence occurs; and thirdly, if a strong monitoring and evaluation system is established for reintegration efforts.

Our report is clear that any reintegration program – even under the auspices of a political settlement – would still face significant challenges.

One of the biggest problems we highlight is the poor state of the Afghan economy. Joblessness, for example, would present a major hurdle to successful reintegration. Unemployment stands at over 23 percent, and at 31 percent for the more than one-fifth of Afghanistan's population between the ages of 15 and 24. An estimated 400,000 youth enter the job market each year.

For fighters to come in from the cold and rejoin society, they will need access to a stable job, or they may return to fighting or enter one of Afghanistan's many illicit

economic sectors, such as the narcotics trade.

Additionally, should a peace agreement be reached, some portion of the more than 2.7 million Afghan refugees – the vast majority of whom reside in Pakistan or Iran – are expected to return home. In 2018 alone, the World Bank reported that more than 800,000 Afghans returned from Pakistan and Iran, and more than 700,000 Afghans were internally displaced by drought or conflict.

These vulnerable groups will increase pressure on the anemic labor market, and on the capacity of the Afghan government and donors to provide social services, create jobs, and deliver humanitarian aid. Adding tens of thousands of former Taliban fighters and supporters to the mix would only exacerbate the challenge.

It will also be critical that reintegration efforts be directed at not only Taliban combatants, but also members of state-aligned militias and other armed groups that have been fighting the Taliban. Failing to do so would give the Taliban a rationale for not participating, as they would likely seek to protect themselves against former rivals.

Accordingly, successful reintegration will require continued economic support for Afghanistan from the U.S. and the rest of the donor community. We note approvingly that a number of donors, including the United States, are working with the World Bank on plans for enhanced financial and technical support to Afghanistan with the goal of improving Afghanistan's economy and capacity to deliver services. In a post-settlement scenario, this would support both reintegration and the burgeoning youth population.

Nevertheless, pervasive corruption in Afghan government institutions, paired with limited capacity, could undermine attempts to deliver tangible benefits and resources to former fighters. As SIGAR's prior work has shown, without adequate oversight and conditionality by the donor community, resources intended for foot soldiers face the real risk of being stolen by corrupt government officials and senior commanders. And if benefits are provided to former fighters but do not also reach the communities they live in, the resentment that follows may undermine reintegration efforts.

In addition, the future of the Afghan security forces could present another complication. Taliban officials have shown interest in the integration of Taliban fighters into the Afghan security forces. This would likely be one of the most contentious issues in any negotiation between the Afghan government and the Taliban. Failure to adequately resolve this issue could threaten the implementation of any peace agreement between the two sides.

Again, since U.S. funds may well continue to support Afghan security forces, robust oversight would be paramount to ensuring the successful integration of these

adversaries.

Some reintegration – particularly for Taliban fighters who fight seasonally and are already part of the social fabric of their communities – may occur naturally as it did in 2001, when many Taliban returned to their villages. But some research also indicates that many Taliban struggle to imagine a life beyond the insurgency and want to retain the movement's military power. The potentially tens of thousands of Taliban who do wish to reintegrate will face the obstacles of a weak economy, ongoing insecurity, and local conflicts driven by tribal disputes and unresolved grievances. Islamic State – Khorasan could also attempt to recruit disgruntled Taliban fighters who find fault with the terms of a peace deal.

In a post-settlement scenario, U.S. policymakers must consider the conditions under which they would support and fund reintegration efforts, including whether there should be a targeted program for ex-combatants or whether wider development programming is more appropriate to address their needs.

In addition, U.S. and UN sanctions that prohibit assistance from going to members of the Taliban and the areas they control may need to be revised so that those individuals and areas are not excluded from receiving U.S. assistance.

If a peace settlement opens the door for development assistance to reach previously inaccessible populations, the donor community will also face hard questions about how and where to direct assistance most efficiently. The logic justifying reintegration programs presumes that ex-combatants pose greater security risks than other vulnerable populations, such as jobless youth. But it is reasonable to assume that millions of unemployed young Afghans will remain at risk for recruitment by criminal groups and terrorist organizations like IS-K. Investments in a reintegration program, therefore, should be appropriately balanced against other development priorities.

Finally, as SIGAR pointed out in the High-Risk List we issued earlier this year, an Afghan political settlement would not end the plagues of insecurity, corruption, or weak government capacity, something that U.S. agencies should take into account well in advance of the successful conclusion of any peace agreement.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it has often been said that it is far easier to start a war than end one, a sentiment that successive U.S. and Afghan leaders would undoubtedly agree with.

But even if an intra-Afghan political settlement is reached, Afghanistan's problems will not magically disappear the moment the ink dries on an agreement. A

failure to reintegrate combatants of all stripes into Afghan society will only lead to the continuation of a forty-year cycle of war that has led to generations of Afghans growing up knowing only death and destruction. And, for Afghanistan's supporters, continued sacrifice of blood and treasure in a distant land.

Should a sustainable political settlement be reached – something we all hope for – the success of that agreement will depend in large part on the successful reintegration of the Taliban and other combatants. As our report's review of reintegration efforts in Colombia and Somalia identifies – it is not an easy process – but should the United States support such an endeavor, we must learn from past mistakes, set reasonable expectations, and identify and implement best practices, an effort I hope this report will make significant contributions to.

Lastly, I would be remiss if I did not publicly highlight the outstanding team who produced this report – including project lead Kate Bateman and her team of Mariam Jalalzada, Matthew Rubin, and Jordan Schurter, along with Nikolai Condee-Padunov, Tracy Content, Vong Lim, and lessons learned program director Joe Windrem. I thank them for their tireless dedication to this project, and hope you will all agree with me that such a team is another reason why SIGAR is so special.

Thank you.