



# REINTEGRATION OF EX-COMBATANTS: LESSONS FROM THE U.S. EXPERIENCE IN AFGHANISTAN

## Executive Summary

The full report can be found on the SIGAR website at [www.sigar.mil](http://www.sigar.mil).





Special Inspector General  
for Afghanistan Reconstruction

*Reintegration of Ex-Combatants: Lessons from the U.S. Experience in Afghanistan* is the seventh lessons learned report to be issued by the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction. This report examines the five main post-2001 reintegration efforts in Afghanistan and assesses their effectiveness. Further, it examines several past local security agreements in Afghanistan and whether they provided an opening for reintegration. The report also includes case studies of reintegration in Colombia and Somalia, and considers whether current conditions in Afghanistan are conducive to a renewed reintegration program.

The report identifies lessons to inform U.S. policies and actions regarding the reintegration of ex-combatants. These lessons are relevant for Afghanistan, where the United States will likely remain engaged in the coming years, and for reintegration efforts in other fragile states engaged in or emerging from conflict. The report also provides recommendations to the Congress and executive branch agencies for improving such efforts.

Our findings highlight the difficulty of reintegrating ex-combatants during an active insurgency in a fragile state. In Afghanistan, we found that the absence of a comprehensive political settlement or peace agreement was a key factor in the failure of prior reintegration programs targeting Taliban fighters. Other important factors were insecurity and threats facing program participants, a weak economy offering few legal economic opportunities, and limited government capacity to implement a program. None of the reintegration programs succeeded in enabling any significant number of ex-combatants to socially and economically rejoin civil society. Programs specifically targeting Taliban insurgents did not weaken the insurgency to any substantial degree or contribute meaningfully to parallel reconciliation efforts.

The United States and the Taliban are reportedly on the cusp of a peace deal that could allow for a phased withdrawal of U.S. troops. Such a deal may set the stage for a viable intra-Afghan peace process, and possibly an Afghan political settlement to end decades of war. If peace efforts succeed, a critical challenge will be the reintegration of tens of thousands of former fighters into Afghan society. U.S. policymakers must consider under what conditions the United States should support reintegration efforts, and if so, determine the best approach. U.S. agencies would also need to take into account several risks to the execution of a reintegration program, including corruption, the difficulty of monitoring and evaluation, vetting challenges, and security issues. As this report lays out, these problems have plagued Afghan reintegration efforts since 2001.

SIGAR began its lessons learned program in late 2014 at the urging of General John Allen, Ambassador Ryan Crocker, and other senior officials who had served in Afghanistan. Lessons learned reports such as this one comply with SIGAR's legislative mandate to

provide recommendations to promote economy, efficiency, and effectiveness of U.S.-funded reconstruction programs and operations; prevent and detect waste, fraud, and abuse; and inform Congress and the Secretaries of State and Defense about reconstruction-related problems and the need for corrective action.

Congress created SIGAR as an independent agency focused solely on the Afghanistan mission and devoted exclusively to reconstruction issues. Unlike most inspectors general, which have jurisdiction only over the programs and operations of their respective departments or agencies, SIGAR has jurisdiction over all programs and operations supported with U.S. reconstruction dollars, regardless of the agency involved. Because SIGAR has the authority to look across the entire reconstruction effort, it is uniquely positioned to identify and address whole-of-government lessons.

Our lessons learned reports synthesize not only the body of work and expertise of SIGAR, but also that of other oversight agencies, government entities, current and former officials with on-the-ground experience, academic institutions, and independent scholars. The reports document what the U.S. government sought to accomplish, assess what it achieved, and evaluate the degree to which these efforts helped the United States reach its reconstruction goals in Afghanistan. They also provide recommendations to address the challenges stakeholders face in ensuring effective and sustainable reconstruction efforts in Afghanistan as well as in future contingency operations.

SIGAR's Lessons Learned Program comprises subject matter experts with considerable experience working and living in Afghanistan, aided by a team of seasoned research analysts. I want to express my deepest appreciation to the team members who produced this report. I thank the report team: Kate Bateman, project lead; Mariam Jalalzada and Matthew Rubin, senior analysts; and Jordan Schurter, student trainee. I also thank Nikolai Condee-Padunov, program manager; Tracy Content, editor; Vong Lim, senior visual information specialist; and Joseph Windrem, Lessons Learned Program Director. In producing its reports, the program also uses the significant skills and experience found in SIGAR's Audits, Investigations, and Research and Analysis directorates, and the Office of Special Projects. I thank all of the individuals who provided their time and effort to contribute to this report.

In addition, I am grateful to the many U.S. government officials at the Departments of Defense, State, and Treasury, and the U.S. Agency for International Development who provided valuable insights and feedback. This report is truly a collaborative effort meant to not only identify problems, but also to learn from them and propose reasonable solutions to improve future reconstruction efforts.

I believe lessons learned reports such as this will be a key legacy of SIGAR. Through these reports, we hope to reach a diverse audience in the legislative and executive branches, at the strategic and programmatic levels, both in Washington and in the field. Using our unique interagency mandate, we intend to do everything we can to make sure the lessons from the most ambitious reconstruction effort in U.S. history are identified, and applied—not just in Afghanistan, but in future conflicts and reconstruction efforts elsewhere in the world.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'John F. Sopko', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

John F. Sopko  
Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

After nearly a year of negotiations, the United States and the Taliban are reportedly on the cusp of a peace deal that would mark the beginning of the end of the longest war in U.S. history. The deal under discussion could allow for withdrawing U.S. troops in phases, with those phases conditioned on three other elements: a broad dialogue among the Taliban, Afghan government, political factions, and civil society to reach a settlement on the country's political future; Taliban cooperation in preventing terrorist groups from using Afghanistan as a base to launch attacks; and a permanent cease-fire. Ultimately, the U.S. goal is a sustainable political settlement that brings lasting peace and stability to Afghanistan. The Taliban's refusal to talk to the Afghan government without first negotiating with the United States has long been an obstacle to that goal. A U.S. deal with the Taliban, then, would set the stage for an intra-Afghan peace process, and possibly an Afghan political settlement.\*

If peace efforts succeed, an estimated 60,000 full-time Taliban fighters may seek to return to civilian life. The number of ex-combatants could be increased by efforts to demobilize other armed groups that have been engaged in fighting the Taliban, or by potential reform of Afghan security forces. After decades of war, the reintegration of former fighters and their families will be necessary for sustainable peace, and one of the most pressing challenges facing Afghan society, the government, and the economy. If ex-combatants are not accepted by their communities or are unable to find a new livelihood, they may be vulnerable to recruitment by criminal groups or terrorist organizations like the Islamic State Khorasan, the local branch of the Islamic State active in eastern Afghanistan.

As the United States moves toward a deal with the Taliban, and as it continues to encourage Afghan stakeholders toward a sustainable political settlement, U.S. officials—civilian and military alike—face immediate questions. Should the United States support any reintegration activities while the insurgency is still ongoing? In the event of an intra-Afghan peace agreement, what would the reintegration of ex-combatants look like, and how could U.S. agencies most effectively help? How would U.S. agencies need to revise policies to ensure they do not interfere with reintegration efforts?

In cooperation with the Afghan government and other international partners, U.S. agencies must begin now to anticipate the risks and challenges of a reintegration effort. The aim of this report, the seventh Lessons Learned Program report to be issued by SIGAR, is to help U.S. policymakers and agencies as they confront this daunting task. The report relies on 51 interviews, a review of thousands of pages of documents and academic material on this subject, and a rigorous peer review of our conclusions and recommendations.

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\* In the Afghan context, it is necessary to distinguish between the deal currently being negotiated between the United States and the Taliban, and an eventual intra-Afghan peace agreement that would presumably involve the Afghan government and the Taliban, as well as other political elites and Afghan civil society representatives. This report generally uses the term "deal" to refer to the objective of U.S.-Taliban negotiations, and the term "political settlement" or "intra-Afghan peace agreement" to refer to the objective of an intra-Afghan peace process.

Reintegration is hardly a new topic in Afghanistan. There have been four main reintegration programs in the country since 2001, targeting both the Taliban and state-aligned militias. Any renewed reintegration effort should not reinvent the wheel, nor repeat the mistakes of the past; it must build on the lessons from past programs and others around the world.

This report is the first and only U.S. government study to comprehensively examine all post-2001 Afghan reintegration programs and assess their effectiveness. In addition, the report draws on the broader literature on other countries' reintegration efforts, and includes case studies of Colombia and Somalia. Through this analysis, the report identifies lessons to apply to any future Afghan reintegration effort. The report also makes recommendations to the U.S. Congress and executive branch agencies for how the United States can best advance reintegration goals, both now and in the event of an intra-Afghan peace agreement.

Reintegration of fighters is as old as war itself. It is a complex, long-term process with social, economic, psychological, political, security, and humanitarian dimensions. To facilitate this process in conflict-affected countries, many different actors have a role to play, including the host nation government, political parties and factions, civil society, and international partners—as well as leaders of the warring parties, ex-combatants and their families, and the communities accepting them.

After the defeat of the Taliban regime in 2001, some form of internationally supported reintegration program was in place from 2003 to 2016. Following the 2001 Bonn Agreement, various forms of disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) programs sought to disband state-allied militias and illegal armed groups. These programs did not include defeated Taliban forces. After the Taliban regrouped and launched an insurgency against the newly established Afghan government and foreign military forces, the government responded in 2005 with a new reintegration program aimed at persuading the Taliban to stop fighting. Particularly from 2009 to 2012, reintegration was a core component of U.S. military strategy and of the Afghan government's peace efforts with the Taliban. Since 2002, the United States has spent roughly \$65 million on programs with reintegration objectives, while total international DDR expenditures in Afghanistan were an estimated \$359 million. None of these reintegration programs succeeded in enabling any significant number of ex-combatants to socially and economically rejoin civil society. Programs specifically targeting Taliban insurgents did not weaken the insurgency to any substantial degree or contribute meaningfully to parallel reconciliation efforts. The Afghan government reported that during implementation of APRP, the most expensive and ambitious program, "armed violence and insecurity in the country (as well as in APRP reintegration and community project areas) has largely increased and there has been no significant diminishment of the military capacity of armed opposition through the APRP reintegration process." At the time of this report's publication, there is no established formal reintegration program in Afghanistan.

Yet these prior reintegration activities are not necessarily analogous to reintegration efforts that may take place following a future Afghan political settlement. Past programs were usually implemented in a context of ongoing conflict, without a peace agreement. Their implied objective was to help *end* the conflict. In a hypothetical post-settlement situation,

efforts to facilitate the reintegration of ex-combatants would aim to help *sustain* an intra-Afghan peace agreement and *prevent* the reemergence of conflict. The latter fits the traditional concept of reintegration, which UN standards define as a post-conflict activity.

An equitable and sustainable peace agreement could end much of the violence that presents the greatest threat to the reconstruction effort—and by extension, to a reintegration program. And yet, as highlighted by SIGAR’s *2019 High-Risk List*, a peace agreement would not in itself end insecurity, corruption, or weak government capacity, nor would it magically produce the economic growth needed to create jobs for ex-combatants and thousands—if not millions—of Afghan refugees who are expected to return to the country. In other words, many of the challenges that plagued earlier reintegration efforts would persist.

This report is laid out in seven chapters:

- **Chapter 1** discusses what reintegration means and its place within DDR efforts. It also looks at how reintegration has been understood in Afghanistan, the relationship between reintegration and reconciliation, how reintegration relates to security sector reform, existing international guidelines for reintegration programs, and common challenges that these programs encounter around the world.
- **Chapter 2** examines in detail the five main reintegration efforts undertaken since 2001: the Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration program (DDR, 2003–2005); the Disbandment of Illegal Armed Groups program (DIAG, 2005–2011); Program Tahkim-e Sulh (PTS or Strengthening Peace Program, 2005–2010); the Afghanistan Peace and Reintegration Program (APRP, 2010–2016); and reintegration commitments within the 2016 Hezb-i Islami Gulbuddin deal with the Afghan government (HIG, 2016–present). The chapter discusses the political and security context in which each program occurred, its structure and resourcing, challenges, and key findings.
- **Chapter 3** examines cases of local security agreements in Afghanistan, and whether these have provided an opening for reintegration.
- **Chapter 4** explores two reintegration case studies, in Colombia and Somalia, and includes insights that may apply to Afghanistan.
- **Chapter 5** looks at recent developments related to reconciliation and reintegration in Afghanistan, including Taliban perspectives, and assesses whether current conditions are conducive to a successful reintegration program.
- **Chapter 6** presents the report’s main findings, and key lessons derived from the Afghanistan experience since 2001 and the broader body of literature on reintegration. This chapter also provides the U.S. Congress, the Department of State, the Department of Defense (DOD), Department of the Treasury, and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) with recommendations for how to best approach and advance reintegration goals in Afghanistan. These are divided into two groups: recommendations for the current environment of an ongoing insurgency without an intra-Afghan peace agreement in place, and recommendations in the event of an intra-Afghan peace agreement. Finally, this chapter provides a number of matters for consideration for the Afghan government, should it pursue a reintegration program.



While reintegration efforts are usually undertaken in the context of a wider DDR program, this report focuses on reintegration rather than disarmament and demobilization. There are several reasons for this. In the spring of 2018, General John W. Nicholson Jr., then commander of U.S. Forces – Afghanistan (USFOR-A), and U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan John R. Bass expressed interest in a SIGAR report on reintegration. Secondly, the body of literature on DDR efforts around the world deals much more extensively with disarmament and demobilization, while reintegration is comparatively poorly understood and documented. Another reason is that the two Afghan reintegration programs directed at Taliban insurgents, PTS and APRP, emphasized reintegration goals, and did not include large-scale disarmament or demobilization elements. Finally, discussions of post-settlement scenarios in Afghanistan have raised questions related to reintegration, but often assume that a large-scale disarmament effort would not be feasible in the near-term. At the same time, the three components of DDR are inherently interconnected. Therefore, this report focuses on the structures, resources, processes, and outcomes related to reintegration, while also discussing aspects of disarmament and demobilization necessary to the analysis of the programs.

We identify 14 major findings from our analysis of prior Afghan reintegration efforts, case studies of such efforts in Colombia and Somalia, and the broader literature on reintegration:

1. The absence of a comprehensive political settlement or peace agreement was a key factor in the failure of prior Afghan reintegration programs that targeted Taliban fighters.
2. Early Afghan government and international efforts to demobilize and reintegrate state-aligned militias failed in part because U.S. forces were simultaneously partnered with the militias for security and other services, empowering commanders and groups that were supposed to be disbanding.
3. Other important factors in the failure of Afghan reintegration programs were insecurity and threats facing program participants, a weak economy offering few legal economic opportunities, and limited government capacity for program implementation.
4. The U.S. government saw prior reintegration efforts targeting the Taliban primarily as a tool to fracture and weaken the insurgency, which undermined the potential for those efforts to promote peace and reconciliation.
5. Prior reintegration programs did not succeed in fracturing or weakening the Taliban to any substantial degree, and no firm evidence exists that the programs pressured Taliban leadership to pursue peace negotiations.
6. In the past, coalition and Afghan forces were unable to provide adequate security for former combatants and their families once the combatant had participated in a reintegration program. Ex-combatants and their families faced risks of retaliatory attacks from the Taliban, Afghan security forces, and individuals or groups in the communities into which they were reintegrating.
7. Prior monitoring and evaluation systems were inadequate for measuring the outcomes or effectiveness of reintegration programs in Afghanistan.
8. None of the four main reintegration programs entailed a long-term effort to assist former combatants to transition to a sustainable alternative livelihood. Benefits were mainly confined to short-term transition assistance packages and vocational training programs that did not match the former combatants' needs or local economic realities.

9. While local Afghan security agreements temporarily reduced violence, they did not create conditions conducive to reintegration.
10. The current environment of ongoing conflict is not conducive to a successful reintegration program.
11. Even today, the U.S. government has no lead agency or office for issues concerning the reintegration of ex-combatants. In Afghanistan, this has contributed to a lack of clarity about reintegration goals and their relation to reconciliation.
12. Globally, the factors that contribute to an individual ex-combatant's reintegration into society are poorly understood. There have been few attempts to gather and analyze the data needed to identify which interventions contribute to successful reintegration.
13. Even in Colombia, a country with greater economic resources and experience with reintegration programming than Afghanistan, reintegration has proved an elusive goal. Despite Colombia's years of experience and well-established administrative structures for reintegration, the Colombian government has struggled to reintegrate thousands of demobilized fighters from the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC).
14. Reintegration efforts in Somalia demonstrate the severe limitations—related to vetting, protection of former combatants, and monitoring and evaluation—of trying to implement a program in the midst of an insurgency.

## **LESSONS**

The report identifies 10 lessons to inform any future reintegration efforts in Afghanistan:

1. A reintegration program runs a high risk of failure in the absence of a political settlement or peace agreement.
2. Reintegration programs may not succeed in weakening or fracturing an insurgency, and can be counterproductive to the goal of reaching a political settlement.
3. Partnering with militias to achieve short-term security objectives can seriously undermine wider peace-building goals, including demobilization and reintegration efforts.
4. Without adequate physical security guarantees, former combatants are unlikely to join reintegration programs.
5. Extensive monitoring and evaluation systems are necessary to assess the effectiveness and sustainability of reintegration activities, which should inform changes in a program's design and delivery of benefits.
6. Community participation is important to a successful reintegration effort.
7. A thorough needs assessment is important to ensure that assistance matches ex-combatants' needs and local economic realities.
8. In an environment of mistrust, the credibility of reintegration programs and implementers relies in large part on creating realistic expectations and delivering benefits to former combatants on time.
9. Grievance resolution is poorly understood and likely to be difficult to implement, which can lead to an overemphasis on economic incentives for ex-combatants.
10. Local security agreements are unlikely to serve as mechanisms for effective reintegration in the midst of an insurgency.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

SIGAR found that the successful reintegration into society of tens of thousands of former Taliban combatants—as well as thousands more fighters from state-aligned militias and illegal armed groups—must happen if Afghanistan is to achieve peace and stability, a goal crucial to U.S., coalition, and Afghan interests. The following recommendations intend to help the U.S. Congress and executive branch agencies develop positions and policies on the reintegration of ex-combatants in Afghanistan—both in the current environment of an ongoing insurgency, and after an intra-Afghan peace agreement is reached.

### Recommendations Regarding Reintegration without an Intra-Afghan Peace Agreement in Place

1. In the current environment of an ongoing Taliban insurgency, the Congress may wish to consider not funding a program for the reintegration of ex-combatants because the Afghan government and the Taliban have not agreed to terms for reintegration.
2. Because of the difficulty in vetting, protecting, and tracking combatants who claim they want to stop fighting Afghan and coalition forces, DOD, State, and USAID should not implement a reintegration program amid the ongoing insurgency.
3. In the event of negotiations between the Afghan government and the Taliban, State should encourage negotiators on both sides to determine how former combatants will be reintegrated—socially, economically, militarily, and politically—into society.
4. State, USAID, and DOD should each designate an existing office to lead and advise on reintegration matters. These offices should develop in-house expertise on international best practices on the socioeconomic, political, and military aspects of DDR processes.

### Recommendations Regarding Reintegration with an Intra-Afghan Peace Agreement in Place

5. Because a wider post-conflict recovery strategy is essential to successful reintegration of ex-combatants, the Congress may wish to consider appropriating funds to support broad post-settlement development programs in Afghanistan.
6. The Congress may wish to consider funding a reintegration program if: (a) the Afghan government and the Taliban sign a peace agreement that provides a framework for reintegration of ex-combatants; (b) a significant reduction in overall violence occurs; and (c) a strong monitoring and evaluation system is established for reintegration efforts.
7. Treasury should ensure that State, USAID, and DOD are in no way prohibited from providing assistance to areas where beneficiaries were or are affiliated with the Taliban. This may entail removing Taliban members from Treasury's Specially Designated Nationals and Blocked Persons list, or providing licenses to enable assistance to those areas.
8. State and USAID should ensure that U.S.-funded development programs in Afghanistan take into account the circumstances and needs of former combatants and their families.
9. The U.S. government should encourage and support an Afghan-led transitional justice process, which will be critical to underpin successful, long-term reintegration.

## Matters for Consideration for the Afghan Government

10. Reintegration efforts should be directed at not only former Taliban fighters, but also members of state-aligned militias and illegal armed groups.
11. A monitoring and evaluation system should assess performance of a reintegration program, as well as the impact and outcomes of the program.
12. Any information gathered as part of a monitoring and evaluation system should be shared with third-party researchers working to better understand the impact that reintegration programs have on individual ex-combatants and the communities they live in.
13. Communities receiving ex-combatants and their families should participate in the design and execution of reintegration efforts, and should also receive benefits from those efforts.
14. Reintegration efforts, whether pursued through targeted programs or wider development assistance, should support a long-term transition to an alternative livelihood, not just provide short-term assistance.
15. During intra-Afghan peace negotiations, international DDR specialists should be consulted regarding any future reintegration effort.



## **The National Defense Authorization Act for FY 2008 (P.L. 110-181) established the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR).**

SIGAR's oversight mission, as defined by the legislation, is to provide for the independent and objective

- conduct and supervision of audits and investigations relating to the programs and operations funded with amounts appropriated or otherwise made available for the reconstruction of Afghanistan.
- leadership and coordination of, and recommendations on, policies designed to promote economy, efficiency, and effectiveness in the administration of the programs and operations, and to prevent and detect waste, fraud, and abuse in such programs and operations.
- means of keeping the Secretary of State and the Secretary of Defense fully and currently informed about problems and deficiencies relating to the administration of such programs and operation and the necessity for and progress on corrective action.

Afghanistan reconstruction includes any major contract, grant, agreement, or other funding mechanism entered into by any department or agency of the U.S. government that involves the use of amounts appropriated or otherwise made available for the reconstruction of Afghanistan.

Source: P.L. 110-181, "National Defense Authorization Act for FY 2008," 1/28/2008.



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