

From the Office of the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction Transcript for:  
Operation Oversight – Episode 11: Restricted Oversight

Description: Hear about one of the most serious risks to the Afghan reconstruction effort: restricted oversight.

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[ Background Music ]

[ Jennifer George-Nichol ] Welcome to Operation Oversight, the official podcast for the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction. I'm your host, Jen George-Nichol and I'm joined today by Mike Bindell from our Research and Analysis directorate. Welcome to the podcast, Bindie.

[ Michael Bindell ] Good to be here, thanks for having me.

[ Jennifer George-Nichol ] If you enjoyed our last episode on SIGAR's 2019 High-Risk List, we've got a treat for you. Today, we're going to take a deeper dive into one of the areas posing a significant risk to the reconstruction effort: oversight, or lack thereof.

Mike, why don't you kick it off by just giving our listeners an idea of why restricted oversight falls into that high-risk category, why it represents a risk to the reconstruction effort writ large.

[ Michael Bindell ] Well, violence and insecurity is already a problem in Afghanistan and has had a huge impact on oversight. Most U.S. civilian personnel are restricted to Kabul. As security deteriorates, it further restricts U.S. civilian personnel, including SIGAR, from getting out and being the eyes and ears on the ground and being able to physically confirm and makes it difficult to determine whether reconstruction projects are effective, whether equipment is operable, clinics are stocked with medicines, schools are open, and buildings are safe and functional.

[ Jennifer George-Nichol ] Why don't you tell us exactly what we're talking about when we talk about oversight?

[ Michael Bindell ] Oversight takes a couple of different forms. One is to have physical eyes and ears on the ground to oversee U.S. reconstruction projects in Afghanistan.

[ Jennifer George-Nichol ] Can you rewind and tell us, up to this point, how has oversight become more restricted in Afghanistan?

[ Michael Bindell ] Well, the current security environment is causing U.S. civilian personnel, who are restricted generally to Kabul, when they can move it requires planning and a lot of resources for the U.S. Embassy to approve and help facilitate travel. What you don't have now are a lot of eyes and ears on the ground from U.S. personnel to provide direct oversight over U.S. taxpayer dollars.

[ Jennifer George-Nichol ]                      How has SIGAR overcome some of the restrictions and obstacles in terms of conducting oversight in Afghanistan?

[ Michael Bindell ]                                      SIGAR has partnered with an Afghan civil society organization - Integrity Watch Afghanistan. Because they are Afghan civilians, Afghan locals, they are subject to more freedom of movement to move around the country than we do. And so, we partner with them and they are, in many cases, our eyes and ears on the ground and they provide inspections and oversight of specific infrastructure projects that we ask them to. SIGAR has also used other technology. We've used satellite imagery to look for and see infrastructure projects on the ground and we've also worked with the U.S. military to try to travel and coordinate some movements with some of our personnel with using U.S. military assets and that has worked well in some cases, where otherwise our personnel on the ground would not have been able to get out of the Embassy.

[ Jennifer George-Nichol ]                      How would the drawdown of U.S. military and/or civilian forces impact our ability to oversee U.S. tax dollars in Afghanistan?

[ Michael Bindell ]                                      If there is a drawdown of U.S. military or civilian personnel in Afghanistan, that's going to further restrict movement and that will have a direct impact on providing oversight of U.S. taxpayer dollars. We've already seen that after 2014 and there's no reason to expect that that would change now, after a potential peace agreement might be signed.

[ Jennifer George-Nichol ]                      So, finally Bindie, we like to ask our guests why this should matter to Americans. Why should this matter to our listeners? We're talking today, as we always do, about a country halfway around the world that most Americans have never been to and may well never go to. Why should they care if their dollars are being overseen? Why should they care if the programs and projects we fund are receiving sufficient oversight?

[ Michael Bindell ]                                      U.S. taxpayers should care because their hard-earned contributions and tax dollars are at risk. The United States Congress has, so far, appropriated more than \$132 billion to reconstruct Afghanistan. Without effective and unrestricted oversight, we won't be able to tell if those taxpayer dollars are well-spent.

If I was going to hire a contractor to renovate my house, I would want to ensure that the money that I'm spending is being used appropriately and that what I'm paying for is actually getting done, according to the specifications and according to standards.

If the contractor doesn't do the job appropriately, I'm not just going to pay them and I'm not just going to accept that that money is wasted. I want the job done right. I want to make sure I'm getting my money's worth for it. I will demand that the job is done right and the U.S. taxpayer should demand no less.

Without effective and unrestricted oversight, American and international aid dollars may fund corruption, the illicit narcotics trade, and possibly even insurgent groups.

[ Jennifer George-Nichol ]                      This issue obviously is one very close to SIGAR's heart, so it's great to be able to share some of these realities and challenges and priorities with our listeners. Thanks so much for coming on the podcast, Bindie.

[ Michael Bindell ]                                      Thank you. It was a pleasure to be here.

[ Jennifer George-Nichol ]                      This has been the latest edition of Operation Oversight, the official podcast for the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction. To hear former episodes or access SIGAR reports like the one we discussed today, visit our website at [www.sigar.mil](http://www.sigar.mil), that's S-I-G-A-R dot M-I-L. You can also check us out on [Twitter](#) or [Facebook](#) @SIGARHQ. Thanks for listening and we'll catch you on next time on Operation Oversight.

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