

From the Office of the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction Transcript for:
Operation Oversight – Episode 13: Afghanistan Security Update

Description: Hear an update on the security situation on the ground in Afghanistan.

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Related Work: [April 30, 2019 Quarterly Report to Congress](#)

[Background Music]

[Philip LaVelle] Welcome to Operation Oversight, the official podcast of the U.S. Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction. I'm Phil LaVelle with SIGAR's Office of Public Affairs. Today, we're joined by Heather Robinson our security subject matter expert. Heather writes the security section of SIGAR's Quarterly Reports to Congress. Welcome to the podcast, Heather.

[Heather Robinson] Thanks for having me, Phil.

[Philip LaVelle] There have been a lot of recent headlines and press on this most recent Quarterly Report especially the news that Resolute Support, which is the NATO military mission in Afghanistan, is no longer producing district-stability assessments. What are these assessments? Give us an explanation of what they are and why they were important to SIGAR and the public.

[Heather Robinson] Resolute Support, or RS', district-stability assessments were their regional command's assessment of what was going on on the ground. So, they would assess whether the Afghan government had control or influence, whether a district was contested, or whether the insurgency had control or influence of all of Afghanistan's 407 districts.

They established the assessment to be somewhat subjective, to be based on the regional command's assessment of what they felt was the situation on the ground. In March, RS informed SIGAR formally that it had discontinued producing its district-stability assessment. Those statistics were some of the most widely-cited data by government officials, members of Congress, the press, and the public.

In the past, RS had raised some concerns about the data's limitations. They said that the assessments were subjective, of course, but SIGAR took note of these and also continued to report on them because it was the only unclassified clear metric that depicted the battlefield situation on the ground between the parties to the conflict.

[Philip LaVelle] But General Nicholson told a Pentagon press briefing in November of 2017 that district assessments were a key metric.

[Heather Robinson] He had said that he and President Ghani set a goal for the Afghan government to reach 80% of control of the Afghan population by the end of 2019. Without this

metric, it's harder to paint a clear picture of the situation on the ground. The commands told us in March that it discontinued the assessment because it no longer sees the assessment as having decision-making value for the current commander, General Miller. They said that trends in control data are no longer supporting the goal they had for Afghanistan which is to end the war on favorable terms to the United States and Afghanistan through negotiated settlement between the parties of the conflict.

[Philip LaVelle] So, you've got General Nicholson saying they want to hit 80%. The last time we reported the statistic was in our January Quarterly Report and they had reported about 63% government control. So, they were pretty far from the bar that Nicholson set but now they're saying "Well, it really wasn't that useful of a metric." So, in any case, we don't have that anymore.

Has anything like this ever happened before with our collecting data?

[Heather Robinson] It has, but I will say that it usually happens in a wider process with the field coming up with a new or a better metric for something that tracks a similar trend or a similar type of data. This is one of the first instances that I'm aware of when a metric, especially one this important has just been completely discontinued from production entirely.

[Philip LaVelle] With the metrics that we do have left, what does the security situation look like on the ground in Afghanistan?

[Heather Robinson] The latest from the field always has a time lapse, so our April Quarterly Report covers the winter months in Afghanistan. Of the few remaining publicly available metrics of the security situation in Afghanistan. These metrics include enemy-initiated attacks, general Afghan force casualty trends, and security incident data. It shows that Afghanistan experienced heightened insecurity over the winter months.

According to Resolute Support, enemy-initiated attacks rose considerably over the reporting period. The average monthly number of attacks from November 2018 through January 2019 increased 19% compared to the average number of attacks between mid-August through October 2018.

Two more points, we have when looking at security incident data collected by the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project or ACLED. From December 2018 through February 2019, security event data shows that there was a 39% increase in security events compared to the same period a year before. And lastly, when we look at Resolute Support's Afghan National Defense and Security Forces, ANDSF, casualties we see that from December 2018 through February 2019, ANDSF casualties were up 31% compared to the same period a year before.

[Philip LaVelle] Heather, what do these statistics and metrics mean in terms of the state of the conflict and how the war is actually going?

[Heather Robinson] They mainly show that violence increased from November through February and that's a little unusual during the winter in Afghanistan when fighting has typically

waned, especially in the last few years. It's important to note that all this is happening during a period when the U.S. has engaged in a few rounds of talks with the Taliban and also with other parties to the conflict, including the Afghan government.

DOD said in December that increased violence has been due to both sides fighting hard to get more leverage at the negotiating table and considering talks are still a huge priority and are being planned amongst the parties, as far as we know, I don't really foresee any decrease in violence in the next few months, especially as both the Afghans and the Taliban has formally announced their annual offensives which began earlier in the spring.

[Phil LaVelle] As typically happens in something like this, the civilians are the ones who take the real brunt of this violence and civilian casualties in Afghanistan are heading in the wrong direction, correct?

[Heather Robinson] The data we reported this quarter on civilian casualties was a bit of a mixed bag with some good news and some bad news. So bad news first, during 2018 the UN reported 10,993 civilian casualties in Afghanistan that includes deaths and injuries. This is a 5% increase from 2017 and the highest number of civilian casualties recorded since the UN began tracking them in 2009. Most of the increase was attributed to the Taliban and Islamic State's indiscriminate use of improvised explosives devices.

The good news, on the other hand, is that so far in 2019 civilian casualties in Afghanistan have sharply decreased. From January through March 2019, the UN recorded 1,773 civilian casualties and that's a 23% decrease compared to the same period last year. It was the lowest number of civilian casualties recorded during like periods since 2013. The UN was unsure whether this decrease was due to a particularly harsh winter they mentioned or if it was actually due to changes in tactics by the parties to the conflict.

However, the UN reported that for the first time, progovernment elements including Coalition and Afghan forces caused more civilian deaths, and that's not overall casualties but civilian deaths, than anti-government elements so far in 2019 and that was due mostly to substantial increases in civilian deaths caused by U.S. and Afghan force air strikes.

[Phil LaVelle] But, when you look at the total number – deaths and injuries – those are attributable to the Taliban and other insurgent groups?

[Heather Robinson] That's correct. That's remains the case. But, civilian casualty data then truly is a mixed bag if we look at the whole period because the decrease in the reported casualties from the early months of 2019 is offset by the high number of civilian casualties that occurred at the end of 2018.

So, if we look at the period from October 2018 through March 2019, the civilian casualties are roughly at the same level as they were in the same period a year before.

[Phil LaVelle] We like to wrap up the podcast by asking our guests “Why should Americans care about all this data that we send out every three months?” and “Why this should matter to the average American taxpayer?”

[Heather Robinson] That’s a great question. Over the past 18 years, the American people have made a tremendous investment in Afghanistan in terms of both blood and treasure. Over 63% of our investment in Afghanistan, it’s actually \$83 billion, has been spent to support the building of, the training, advising, and assisting of the Afghan security forces.

Our country and our taxpayers have a vested interest in protecting this investment we’ve made and this data helps us understand what’s actually going on in this country and how the Afghan security forces are facing these threats. Without key data from the field on the status of the conflict in Afghanistan, data like district and population control for instance, it becomes a lot more difficult to fully evaluate the status of the conflict and the performance of the Afghan security forces that we’ve given so much to.

[Phil LaVelle] Well, thanks for joining us on the podcast today, Heather. If any of our listeners would like to read the [security section](#) of the [Quarterly Report](#) or take a look at any of our other products, you can find them at www.sigar.mil and for the latest updates on SIGAR’s work, you can follow us on [Facebook](#) and check us out on Twitter [@SIGARHQ](#).

Thanks for listening and we’ll catch you next time on [Operation Oversight](#).

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