

From the Office of the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction

Transcript for: Operation Oversight – Episode 5: SIGAR’s Presence in Afghanistan

Description: Hear about SIGAR’s presence in Afghanistan and how our staff conducts audits, inspections, investigations, and reviews in a war zone.

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[Background Music]

[Jennifer George-Nichol] Welcome to Operation Oversight, the official podcast of the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction. I’m Jen George-Nichol and I’m here today with Scott Harmon, our Deputy Assistant Inspector General for Audits and Inspections, based out of SIGAR’s office in Kabul, Afghanistan. Welcome to the podcast, Scott.

[Scott Harmon] Thanks for having me, Jen.

[Jennifer George-Nichol] So, today we have a special episode for you. Since we have Scott in town today, we thought we thought we would give you guys a taste of what it’s like to be an auditor, inspector, investigator for SIGAR on the ground in Afghanistan. So Scott, why don’t you start off by telling us about the SIGAR office over there? How many staff do we have there and what’s a day in the life look like?

[Scott Harmon] SIGAR has about 30 American personnel in our office in Kabul, as well as about five locally employed staff. The American staff are made up of about 14 auditors, 12 investigators, and three or four forward operations personnel. The locals, there are five: two program analysts, an engineer, and two translators.

A day in the life, really what you’d expect a day in the life in Washington, D.C. We have an office we share space with a couple of the others inspectors general – USAID and Department of State. We all live on the US Embassy compound. Most of us live in apartments – efficiency type. Most days would be like just like here, except I can’t get in my car and drive home, or really drive anywhere. We’re not allowed to. We call it a prison cruise ship because it is nice; however, you can’t just open the door and walk out the front.

We have about 2,000 employees on the US Embassy. We also have the NATO headquarters base that’s right next to us. NATO has about 2,000 personnel on their base. We also have about 5,000 personnel that provide security for the Embassy. But that would give you an idea of how much maximum security we got there. We’re pretty well fortified.

[Jennifer George-Nichol] It sounds like it. I imagine with that number of contracted security personnel and what you were saying about not being able to step out anywhere that that is a

result of the security situation in Afghanistan which we report regularly on and it isn't looking good and it's deteriorating. Is that fair to say?

[Scott Harmon] I think that's fair to say. I first started traveling to Afghanistan in 2012 and the differences between now and what I could do six years ago are just tremendous. In 2012, I remember that there was just a carpool that picked us up at the airport, drove us to the Embassy, just like you would, maybe like an Uber. And you contrast that with now, where that Uber ride I took from the airport to the Embassy, now it's a helicopter ride that lasts, I think about a minute and a half. It's about two miles as the crow flies.

The situation in Kabul, the security situation has deteriorated to the point where we have to go by air, not by ground. So, it's definitely restrictive.

[Jennifer George-Nichol] That seems like that would have a significant impact on your ability to conduct oversight, both throughout Kabul, but also the rest of the country. Can you speak to that a little bit?

[Scott Harmon] We've folded up most of our military presence into either Bagram Airfield, which is about 30 miles to the north of us, or the NATO headquarters, which is right next to us. So, obviously, we can't go out to all the bases we used to because they're not there anymore.

The ministries, some of them are out of bounds. So what we've done to compensate for that is we try to get the ministries to come to us. They can come onto the US Embassy compound. A lot of the ministries have offices at the Presidential Palace. We can go meet them there.

We also have our locals. We also have a civil society organization we work with by the name of Integrity Watch Afghanistan, or IWA. We've had to rely a great deal on them. You know, they call SIGAR the eyes and ears of the American taxpayer in Afghanistan; however, IWA is our eyes and ears. Over the last three years, they've been able to travel to 28 of the 34 provinces. They've done about 500 inspection-type reviews for us. So, we've relied on them a great deal. What makes us special, in terms of both the inspectors general and just the regular USAID and Department of State how they can conduct their duties around Afghanistan is that they really don't have an IWA-type that can be their eyes and ears. So, generally, we get out more than any other agency in Afghanistan for oversight.

[Jennifer George-Nichol] With security being such a challenge, do these situation every make you guys feel unsafe?

[Scott Harmon] I think it depends on who it is and how long they've been there. I think everybody has different tolerances. On the day-to-day basis, I feel fine. We work in what we call hardened structures and what that means is they have a certain capacity to withstand earthquakes, bomb blasts, that type of thing. And we also live in hardened structures.

Most of the time, I feel safe. I think some of our new staff who come out, initially, they're a little worried because of what the perception is in Afghanistan. The US Embassy is extremely well-fortified. So, we're not at any kind of risk of being overrun. A concern we have is indirect fire,

where somebody shoots a rocket in from an undisclosed location several miles away. Luckily, so far they haven't had very good aim.

So no, that being said, we've definitely had incidences there. I don't really think we feel that concerned, but it can happen if you're in the wrong place at the wrong time. The one I remember most vividly was the May 31st, 2017 bombing where essentially, like a dump-truck-sized truck got into the – what we call the green zone – pulled up next to the German Embassy, which is only about a half a mile away from our compound. And to penetrate that deeply you had to go through about six levels of, layers of, security, which is suspicious. He detonated a bomb that left a 30-foot hole in asphalt, about thirty yards wide. Destroyed half of the German Embassy, killed and injured a lot of people.

I was actually in my apartment at the time and felt the shockwave on my feet and then about three seconds later, heard the blast. That was scary because if you were anywhere close to that, you know, you would've been in bad shape. I know that the German Embassy had to close for a year to do their repairs and actually, the US Embassy became the German Embassy for a year. That's probably the most vivid memory I have of being like "oh my God, something could really happen here." So, I think it depends on your temperament. You know, I've been doing this for a long time, maybe I'm a little numb to it.

[Jennifer George-Nichol] I do recall a news story over the past couple of years referring to you and your colleagues' jobs out there as the most dangerous auditing job was it? The auditing job with the greatest risk. So, while you're well-fortified, you're still in a war zone. I know everybody back here appreciates what you guys do and we were so glad that you were able to join us today on the podcast and give our listeners a little taste of what it's like to work for SIGAR out in Afghanistan and we hope you'll come back sometime soon.

[Scott Harmon] Absolutely. Thank you very much for the opportunity.

[Jennifer George- Nichol] Thanks again, Scott. If any of our listeners would like to learn more, you can find all SIGAR products on our website www.sigar.mil and you can follow us on Twitter [@SIGARHQ](https://twitter.com/SIGARHQ) or on [Facebook](https://www.facebook.com/SIGARHQ). Thanks for listening and we'll catch you next time on Operation Oversight.

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