

From the Office of the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction

Transcript for: Operation Oversight – Episode 6: Afghanistan Security Update

Description: Hear and update from SIGAR's security subject matter expert, Heather Robinson, on the current security situation in Afghanistan.

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[ Background Music ]

[ Jennifer George-Nichol ] Hi, this is Jen George-Nichol from SIGAR's office of public affairs, and today I'm joined by Heather Robinson, our subject matter expert for security. Welcome to the podcast, Heather!

[ Heather Robinson ] Thanks Jen.

[ Jennifer George-Nichol ] Now, you're the author of our security section in the quarterly reports we issue to Congress each quarter, is that correct?

[ Heather Robinson ] That's right

[ Jennifer George-Nichol ] It's now been 17 years since the U.S. and its allies entered Afghanistan, way back in 2001. A question we often get at SIGAR is: how's the war going? That's obviously hard to answer using any single metric, but since our mission there has been to rid the country of terrorists and stabilize the country enough to keep them out, security is a pretty good metric to start with. Tell us what the security situation looks like right now.

[ Heather Robinson ] I think the whole point of this administration's South Asia strategy, which was implemented back in August 2017, is to pressure the Taliban to come to the negotiating table and to, obviously, stabilize the security situation in the country. You'll recall that back in June there was a three day overlapping ceasefire between the Taliban and U.S. and Afghan forces. At the time that was touted as a huge success – a positive move forward toward possible reconciliation with the Taliban. But, following that, the Taliban stepped up their offensive operations against the Afghan forces, or ANDSF, showing that everyone got a little

too excited a little too early. The Taliban then undertook a major siege on Ghazni City in mid-August and were only repelled after five days by both U.S. and Afghan forces and lots of U.S. airpower.

[ Jennifer George-Nichol ] Yeah I remember that. That was big news.

[ Heather Robinson ] Right. So that means that this year there have been two major Taliban offenses of Afghan provincial capitals. There was the one in May in Farah City in Farah Province in the west, and then again this one in August in Ghazni City in the east. So while the military points out that this isn't bad when we compare that to 2016 – there were eight attempts to seize provincial capitals in 2016 – it still seems bad when the current strategy is supposed to be geared toward putting the ANDSF on the offensive against the Taliban. Even today we're seeing press reports on continued insurgent activity in Ghazni and Farah and I think that's concerning.

[ Jennifer George-Nichol ] Heather, it's hard for some of us to appreciate how credible the threat is from the Taliban, right? Like it's a constant back and forth between each side, expectedly, saying they're winning, or they're progressing. Are U.S., Afghan, and NATO forces pushing the Taliban back, in actuality? Or is the Taliban showing some staying power?

[ Heather Robinson ] So unfortunately it is pretty credible – the threat that the Taliban presents. We know this because we're seeing some bad news on the few security related metrics of success against the insurgency that we currently get unclassified and releasable to the public. Those are primarily: first, district, population, and territorial control data; and secondly, I would say strength and attrition and casualty data for the ANDSF. Those kind of show us how things are going against the Taliban.

[ Jennifer George-Nichol ] Ok, so, start with district control.

[ Heather Robinson ] So on control, I'd say that's arguably our most important metric to show success against the Taliban. U.S. and NATO forces recently provided us data that shows, unfortunately, that the ANDSF has really failed to move the needle on its control of the country. Instead, control is becoming more and more contested between Afghan forces and the Taliban. So, to give you some statistics here, as of July 31<sup>st</sup> this year, Afghan government control or influence of its districts has hit the lowest level since SIGAR began tracking it in back in 2015, and that's at 55.5% of the country. Population control has essentially stalemated

since May 2017, which is quite a while now. The current figures are that the government controls or influences areas where 65% of the population lives. The Afghan's goal for population control is to control areas where 80% of the population live by the end of 2019, so you can see that the ANDSF is a long way off from achieving that goal. Contrarily, the insurgency controls and influences 12% of districts, and 11% of the population. And the large gap in between those statistics are contested districts and population.

[ Jennifer George-Nichol ] You mentioned casualties and forces strength, or the size of the Afghan force?

[ Heather Robinson ] In terms of casualties and strength figures, the Afghan security forces are still facing casualty and attrition problems and its risking their sustainability as a force. Which then, of course, risks their ability to improve security in the country.

[ Jennifer George-Nichol ] Heather, can you drop some stats?

[ Heather Robinson ] So as of July 31<sup>st</sup>, ANDSF strength was the lowest it had been in the third quarter of the year since 2012. That puts them at 312,328 personnel. This means the ANDSF is at roughly only at 89% of their authorized strength, which is 40,000 personnel below their goal strength. A big part of this that we're seeing is due to this heavy casualties that the force has incurred this year. So as you may know, casualty data has been classified, along with a bunch of other types of data that are important for us to know about the ANDSF for over a year. So when we've asked the military recently to comment on all these press reports that we're seeing, and also Afghan government reports that we're seeing, that ANDSF casualties were rising, they told us that, quote, from the period of May 1<sup>st</sup> to the most current data as of October 1<sup>st</sup>, 2018, the average number of casualties the ANDSF suffered is the greatest it has ever been during like periods, end quote. That doesn't occur from an un-credible insurgent threat.

[ Jennifer George-Nichol ] Yeah, that doesn't sound good. Heather, you've been authoring the security section of our quarterly reports for several quarters now. Tell us what's changed in that time. Are there relative trends you've been seeing?

[ Heather Robinson ] So unfortunately, as I mentioned, on the key metrics of the war not much has changed on the positive side since I began writing about the security situation in Afghanistan in January 2017. District and population control have deteriorated slightly since that time, and the ANDSF has seen pretty

significant attrition since that time as well. It's also very disheartening to see the human cost of the war – civilian casualties, they're on the increase as well since 2017. Civilian deaths for the first nine months of 2018 are the highest the UN has recorded since 2014.

[ Jennifer George-Nichol ] Yikes.

[ Heather Robinson ] Another thing to mention is that, while our military officials are constantly talking about how Islamic State's affiliate in Afghanistan, IS-K, is degraded in the country, we're still seeing the group operating in and planning attacks from more provinces than they had before. Conducting attacks more frequently, especially in heavily populated cities like Kabul and Jalalabad. The UN noted in September that suicide attacks from May through August this year had risen by 38% compared to the same period last year. For this reason, the UN is obviously concerned by what they're calling a disturbing increase in what they're calling a disturbing increase in civilian casualties occurring as a result of the attacks. On a more positive side, there've been fewer security incidents in the country thus far in 2018 than there were during the same period in 2017. The UN has reported that fighting is more concentrated on fewer select provinces like Nangahar, Helmand, and Kunar than was the case previously.

[ Jennifer George-Nichol ] Heather, on the data. I'm glad you mentioned that because it brings me to something else that I wanted to touch on. There've been some issues recently with SIGAR's ability to report all the metrics it receives from the Department of Defense. Why was that? What kind of things were you unable to report and how did that impact your analysis? How does it impact our ability to oversee Afghanistan overall?

[ Heather Robinson ] Yes, and this is an issue SIGAR has been grappling with since October 2017 when United States Forces-Afghanistan and Resolute Support, the NATO mission out there, classified or restriction from public release a large swath of the data that they previously gave us in an unclassified, publicly releasable format. This, I think, has been one of the biggest changes, and one of the biggest challenges, that has occurred since I began working on Afghan security here in January 2017. There were many other data points that I used to be able to report on to give insight into the security situation in Afghanistan. I'd say the data that's been classified that's most negatively impacted my analysis of the situation is probably the ANDSF casualty data, which we were told was classified actually at the request of the Afghan government. Almost all types of the data concerning the actual performance of the ANDSF. So this ranges from general performance

narrative assessments about operational planning, fighting capabilities, etc. Or it could be important information about the operational readiness of the ANDSF's equipment, for example. So, there's this constant tension, I think, between transparency and what United States Forces-Afghanistan/ Resolute Support feels are appropriate to provide us in an unclassified format, due to the fact that a lot of this data is Afghan owned and they're a sovereign nation.

[ Jennifer George-Nichol ] Well, as an agency founded on oversight and transparency that does sound like it would be a troubling development. And potentially limiting to our work, as you mention. So to wrap things up, what does all this mean for the American taxpayer? Why, at the end of the day, should they care?

[ Heather Robinson ] I think that with the issue of classified data, it's become increasingly difficult, from the position of an oversight organization, to paint a picture for the American public and for Congress about the performance and the capabilities of an Afghan security force that we all pay to train, advise, and equip. Our forces risk their lives. You know, we've invested an enormous sum of public funds. It's been 83 billion dollars, just to support the Afghan security forces since 2002. And this accounts for 63% of all taxpayer money going to the entire reconstruction effort. I think, as we are nearing the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> year of this war with a security situation that is far from resolved, the American taxpayer and Congress should be increasingly vigilant in asking for tangible results of what our taxpayer dollars are getting us in Afghanistan. And a transparent plan for how taxpayer dollars will be spent in the country moving forward as the U.S. continues its investment there through 2020 or afterwards.

[ Jennifer George-Nichol ] Well, Heather, you've certainly given our listeners a lot to digest. Thank you so much for coming on the podcast.

[ Heather Robinson ] Thank you for having me, it was great.

[ Jennifer George-Nichol ] Thank you guys for listening to the latest episode of Operation Oversight. To read SIGAR's quarterly reports or listen to former episodes, log onto our website at [www.sigar.mil](http://www.sigar.mil) or check us out on Facebook or Twitter. This is Jen George-Nichol with SIGAR's office of public affairs, signing off.

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