



Prepared Remarks of
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- Thank you for the kind introduction and I would like to thank the Afghan Institute for Strategic Studies for inviting me to speak today, as well as King’s College London for hosting this important event.
- I believe this conference’s focus on examining options for how to address Afghanistan’s challenges is a truly important topic and I commend you for convening today to discuss it.
- As many of you know, I have been the head of SIGAR for 11 years and my organization documented many of the failures of the international coalition’s reconstruction effort in our over 700 reports.
- Obviously, we wouldn’t be here today if the \$147 billion U.S. effort to rebuild Afghanistan’s security forces, government, civil services, economy, and civil society had succeeded. We clearly failed in that effort.
- If you’ll indulge me, let me read from an important study on Afghanistan.
 - “U.S. expectations of the time required to achieve effective results in Afghanistan were generally unrealistic and over-ambitious.”
 - “The U.S. had too much confidence in the applicability of technical solutions to complex social and economic development problems...and too much confidence in the transferability of U.S. values and experience.”
 - “This overconfidence meant that too little attention was paid to local circumstances and values in the preparation and execution of aid activities.”

- And, finally, “the use of aid for short-term political objectives tended to distort sound economic rationale for development, which weakened the longer-term political interests of the United States.”
- You may be thinking that I’m reading from one of SIGAR’s twelve lessons learned reports – but those conclusions are from a study commissioned by USAID in 1988 looking at U.S. assistance to Afghanistan from 1950 to 1979.
- But as we all know, those lessons from the period prior to the Soviet invasion were just as applicable to the coalition reconstruction effort that began in 2001 and may be just as applicable to today’s efforts in Afghanistan.
- Unfortunately, once we found this report, we could not find anyone in the US Embassy or government who had ever read it.
- My point is this – we tend not to learn the lessons of our failures of the past, and, as a result, too often reinvent the wheel, only to end up repeating the same mistakes.
- I think it is important to be cognizant of that as you and policymakers consider how best to deal with Afghanistan moving forward.
- And, one of the key lessons, I believe, is that the U.S. government didn’t understand Afghanistan well enough – we too often treated it as one homogenous state, assuming what was good for Kabul was good for Kandahar.
- And now, there may be a tendency, particularly in the West, to view the Taliban as equally monolithic and homogeneous, when the truth may well be more complex.
- So, clearly, today you will all be discussing an extremely difficult topic. But as Afghans you may be best positioned to understand the nuances of the country.
- For example, we all know that the humanitarian and economic situation in Afghanistan is dire. As SIGAR has consistently reported since the Taliban’s return to power, a number of factors have contributed to this, including the Taliban’s reluctance to abide by any semblance of human rights norms, particularly when it comes to the treatment of – and opportunities for – Afghan women and girls.

- For our part, SIGAR's focus now is on monitoring the billions in humanitarian assistance that the U.S. is providing for the Afghan people and working to ensure that assistance reaches those who it is intended for and doesn't benefit their Taliban oppressors.
- As an independent inspector general, I am not a policymaker. Nor do I have the decades of experience living in Afghanistan that many of you do – and I am certain many of you still have friends and family in Afghanistan, making this discussion all the more personal.
- Today, I can only share my observations as someone who not only has spent a decade examining the international response to Afghanistan's challenges, but as one who's also spent over four decades working in Washington, including for senior Senators and Congressmen renowned for their work on matters of international importance.
- The conundrum the U.S. government, the British government, and all the governments of the former coalition in Afghanistan face is immensely challenging.
- On the one hand, after all the loss of blood and treasure – including thousands of American lives – and the lives of many more Afghans who wished for a prosperous and free future for their country, can the Western Donor community justify sending assistance to Afghanistan when it is run by one of the most repressive – if not the most repressive – regimes in the world?
- Yet, at the same time, as I mentioned before, we know that many Afghans are facing horrendous challenges in the face of humanitarian and economic crises.
- So, can governments stand by and do nothing in the hopes of altering Taliban behavior – or out of fears that assistance will benefit the Taliban?
- And I think we all recognize that continued humanitarian assistance – however essential – is, at best, a temporary solution to the challenges that Afghanistan faces and is likely not sustainable over the long term.
- Likewise, history shows, and the Taliban would be wise to realize, that no country can ever fully prosper and meet its potential if it ignores and suppresses fifty percent of its population.

- I will be honest. I do not have the answer to these questions, nor should I – in our government, it is up to the policymakers in the White House and Congress to grapple with those issues. My job is simply to tell them whether the decisions they make are being implemented correctly or not and whether they are being successful or not.
- But history tells us that – in many cases – when the people suffering under an odious regime need assistance, the United States and other international donors often “hold their nose” and ultimately provide that assistance.
- We have seen this in Syria and Burma where people suffering grave human rights abuses received assistance from the American taxpayer. And we have seen it before in places such as North Korea, where food and other assistance was provided despite those regimes’ horrific treatment of their own people.
- Thus, the billions the U.S. has provided for the Afghan people since the Taliban’s return is not an aberration.
- But again, as someone who has worked on this issue for over a decade, I can tell you that the politics surrounding aid to Afghanistan are extremely complex.
- Over the course of the two-decade reconstruction effort, many policymakers, whether in the executive branch or Congress, became heavily invested in the success of that effort.
- This is perhaps most evident in the strong support in Congress to address the plight of Afghan women and girls, whom the Taliban seem intent on continuing to strip what few rights and dignity they may have left.
- As a result – the issues you all are discussing here today – about whether and how to deal with Afghanistan and the Taliban regime are ones that are being discussed in the halls of Congress as I speak here today.
- While no one in Washington wants the Afghan people to suffer because of the Taliban regime, harder questions are starting to be asked about where U.S. assistance is going and whether any of it could be benefiting the Taliban.

- In March, the Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the U.S. House of Representatives tasked SIGAR with examining a number of matters related to ongoing U.S. assistance to Afghanistan.
- One of those requests – which SIGAR is now working on – is examining the safeguards against waste, fraud, or abuse of assistance, as well as identifying any diversion by the Taliban or – importantly – “other direct or indirect support” to the Taliban.
- Entities such as the World Bank and UN, as well as NGOs working on behalf of the United States government have long had to pay salary taxes and other fees to authorities as part of doing business in those countries.
- Ultimately, those taxes and fees end up in the hands of the authorities – regardless of whether the donor government supports that particular regime or not.
- The same is true in Afghanistan – but after two decades of losing American lives fighting the Taliban insurgency and given the Taliban’s seemingly ever-increasing disregard for any international condemnations over their treatment of Afghan women, girls, and minorities, patience may be wearing thin.
- Recently proposed Congressional legislation may have the effect of prohibiting indirect assistance to the Taliban in addition to the existing ban on direct assistance to the Taliban. How that would affect ongoing humanitarian assistance is unclear, but it shows Congress’ continued concern with doing anything that might legitimize or otherwise assist Taliban rule.
- I caution that this legislation is at a preliminary stage and it likely won’t be known for several months if there are any resulting changes to U.S. assistance to Afghanistan.
- But I felt it important that you recognize that the questions you are grappling with here today are very much on the minds of those in Washington as well.
- In the meantime, as the policymakers determine their course forward, and as experts, including yourselves, work to advocate for what you feel is the best way forward, SIGAR’s mission will not change.

- I promise you that we will continue to provide public, independent and honest assessments of how the United States' assistance is or is not helping the Afghan people.
- That is why I am here today and why I spent the last week talking to many members of the Afghan community in London, current and former senior government officials, and thoughtful parliamentarians.
- In that spirit, I thank you again, and I look forward to answering any questions you may have.