



Prepared Remarks of
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“The Way Forward in Afghanistan”

Center for Strategic and International Studies
Washington, DC
September 21, 2017

Thank you, Tony, for that kind and informative introduction. It is always a pleasure to be here at CSIS and especially today to discuss our new report and its recommendations to improve our efforts to develop a viable and sustainable Afghan national-security force—the cornerstone to ultimate success in Afghanistan.

As you all know by now, I am the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, also known by that tobacco-sounding acronym, SIGAR. I have served in this capacity for over five years. To put that in a possibly sobering perspective, my service with SIGAR exceeds the duration of our Nation’s engagement in World War II, but is less than a third the length of our efforts in Afghanistan.

SIGAR’s mandate is to investigate and report to Congress and the Administration on U.S. reconstruction efforts in Afghanistan, including making recommendations for improvements.¹ We are uniquely independent, not housed in any one agency, but required to report on *all* aspects of reconstruction in Afghanistan, regardless of federal departmental boundaries.

Today, the Afghan government struggles to provide security and governance. Afghan forces are sustaining high casualties, and large parts of the country are off limits for foreigners. This week the United States is adding thousands of troops to strengthen the train, advise, assist mission.

I do not state these facts as an argument for disengagement. SIGAR's mandate does not extend to second-guessing policy. And our settled national policy is that Afghanistan must not again become a launching pad for international terrorist attacks. From that standpoint and other considerations, Afghanistan is extremely important to our Nation's security.

But considering the duration and cost of our effort in Afghanistan, and the increasing likelihood of demands on our military and our resources emanating from North Korea, the Middle East, and elsewhere, three things are clear from today's report:

1. We need to help the Afghans stand on their own in order to reduce the need for international military support over time;
2. Building an effective Afghan security forces *is* and has always been the keystone of that effort; and,
3. We need to do a better job of building them.

Those three points bring me to the reason for today's event. I am here to release a major new report from my agency's Lessons Learned Program. The report is entitled *Reconstructing the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces: Lessons from the U.S. Experience in Afghanistan*.

The Afghan National Defense and Security Forces, the ANDSF, are vital to everything we hope to achieve in Afghanistan. Without an effective ANDSF, insurgents and terrorists will increase their control of provinces and populations. The Kabul government will struggle to build popular support and provide basic services. And reconstruction advisors and oversight personnel will be constrained in getting around the country to do their jobs.

Unfortunately, as SIGAR has documented, U.S. security-sector assistance (SSA) in Afghanistan has suffered from serious problems, many of which persist. Despite our having spent over \$70 billion in the past sixteen years to build the ANDSF, they continue to struggle with terrorism and a resilient insurgency.

So with a revised U.S. strategy recently announced by our Administration now under way, SIGAR's report comes at an opportune time to improve chances of success in Afghanistan. Now, more than ever, it is necessary not to dwell upon failures, but to learn the lessons from the last sixteen years and improve our security-sector assistance efforts. We hope today's report contributes to that learning process.

BACKGROUND ON SIGAR'S NEW REPORT

Before going any further, let me direct your attention to the Lessons Learned section of our website, www.sigar.mil, where you can read or download the report. The website also offers an interactive version of the report that gives users quick and easy access to a summary embedded with imagery, graphs, and responsive content. I believe we are at present the only IG office that produces such whole-of-government lessons-learned reports and interactive Web versions. Our website also hosts SIGAR's September 2016 lessons learned report on corruption—another serious and complex threat to the viability of the Afghan state.

Today's report is the latest chapter in SIGAR's ongoing effort to identify critical lessons from the U.S. engagement in Afghanistan. I created the Lessons Learned Program at the urging of Ambassador Ryan Crocker, General John Allen, and several members of Congress. The program's aim is to pursue longer-range, broader-scope, and more whole-of-government analysis of issues than appear in our tightly focused audits, inspections, and investigations.

In writing today's report, our Lessons Learned staff, led by Senior Analyst and Project Lead James Cunningham, consulted hundreds of public and nonpublic documents, within and outside of government agencies. They interviewed and held discussions with more than 100 people including U.S., European, Afghan, and other experts from academia, think tanks, NGOs, and government entities along with current and former U.S. civilian and military officials deployed to Afghanistan—some of whom are here this morning.

This report also relied upon the experience and advice of General Joseph Dunford, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff; CENTCOM Commander General Joseph Votel; Resolute Support mission commander General John Nicholson; former Combined Security Transition Command-Afghanistan commander Major General Richard Kaiser and other subject matter experts—including today’s illustrious host, Dr. Anthony Cordesman. We are grateful for their help.

We are also encouraged by the positive responses to drafts of the report from many DOD officials, senior military officers and national-security policy officials. Their reactions do matter. No matter how ironclad and compelling a report may be to its authors, it is useless if decision makers don’t accept the accuracy of its findings and the logic of its recommendations. Their initial reactions to the draft report bode well for the value of the final product we release today.

KEY POINTS OF OUR \$70 BILLION EFFORT

The \$70 billion U.S. effort to create an effective ANDSF has been under way since 2002. It’s also been a coalition effort from the beginning, with key contributions from British, German, Italian, Canadian, Australian, Turkish, and Japanese personnel, among others. They have all helped.

Not surprisingly, such a long and costly undertaking has attracted a great deal of attention to the lessons that might be extracted from it. Such lessons are generally not very cheerful reading, for as a British military historian observed, “History is ... a record of how things usually go wrong.”² The work of SIGAR, other federal inspectors general, the GAO, CSIS, and others richly confirms that statement. But not everything goes wrong, and our report also highlights some encouraging successes in security assistance that may augur well for the future.

Our report contains a detailed array of findings, lessons, and recommendations. It comprises:

- Twelve researched and documented *findings*,

- Eleven *lessons* drawn from those findings, and
- Thirty-five *recommendations* for addressing those lessons: two for Congress to consider, seven that apply to executive agencies in general, seven that are DOD-specific, and nineteen that are Afghanistan-specific and applicable to either executive agencies at large or to DOD.

WHAT DID SIGAR FIND?

Time constraints do not permit me to discuss all of these matters, or to give them the detail they deserve. But I will try to discuss a few of the most significant ones at this time:

1. The U.S. government was ill-prepared to conduct security sector assistance programs of the size and scope required in Afghanistan, whose population is about 70 percent illiterate and largely unskilled in technology. In particular, the U.S. government lacks a deployable police-development capability for high-threat environments, so we have trained over 100,000 Afghan police using U.S. Army aviators, infantry officers, and civilian contractors. The only ministerial advisory training program is designed solely for civilians, but in Afghanistan mostly untrained military officers are conducting that mission. One U.S. officer watched TV shows like *Cops* and *NCIS* to learn what he should teach. In eastern Afghanistan, we met a U.S. Army helicopter pilot assigned to teach policing. We found one U.S. police-training unit set up as a military unit, and another set up like a police unit. Afghan police training has suffered because of this misalignment of U.S. advisors.
2. U.S. military plans for ANDSF readiness were created under politically constrained timelines, rather than based upon realistic assessments of Afghan readiness. These plans consistently underestimated the resilience of the Afghan insurgency and overestimated ANDSF capabilities. Consequently, the ANDSF was ill-prepared to deal with deteriorating security after the drawdown of U.S. combat forces.

3. The United States failed to optimize coalition nations' capabilities to support security-assistance missions in the context of international political realities. Partner nations' restrictions on the use of their troops, disparate rationales for joining the coalition, their own resource constraints, differing military capabilities, and NATO's force-generation processes led to an increasingly complex implementation of security sector assistance programs. For example, the NATO training mission for the ANDSF was chronically understaffed by more than 50 percent. Gaps existed even in positions identified as mission-critical.
4. The lag in Afghan ministerial and security-sector *governing* capacity hindered planning, oversight, and the long-term sustainability of the ANDSF. Insufficient attention to Afghan institutional capacity meant that the personnel, logistical, planning, administrative, and other functions vital to sustaining the fighting forces remained underdeveloped—as they do to this day. Creating inventory systems for equipment, fuel, and personnel began in earnest only in the past few years.
5. As security deteriorated, efforts to sustain and professionalize the ANDSF became secondary to meeting immediate combat needs.

TOUGH LESSONS BASED ON SOLID FINDINGS

These and other findings provide the bones and connective tissue of the report. But the heart of any lessons-learned report consists of—naturally—*lessons*.

SIGAR's Lessons Learned Program extracted 11 lessons from its months of research. They include some sobering observations. In capsule form, the top five lessons are:

1. The U.S. government is not well organized to conduct large scale security-sector assistance missions in post-conflict nations or in the developing world. Furthermore, our doctrine, policies, personnel, and programs are insufficient to meet security-sector assistance mission requirements and expectations.
2. Security-sector assistance cannot employ a one-size-fits-all approach. It must be tailored to a host nation's context and needs. Security-force structures and

capabilities will not survive the end of U.S. assistance if the host nation does not fully buy into and take ownership of security sector assistance programs.

3. Security-force assessment methodologies often cannot evaluate the impact of important yet intangible factors such as leadership, corruption, malign influence, and dependency. These limitations can lead to under-appreciation of how such factors can affect readiness and battlefield performance.
4. Developing foreign military and police capabilities is a whole-of-government mission. However, there is a large “hole” in U.S. government reconstruction activity. That is the matter of *civilian* advising for the security sector.
5. Despite their importance to the mission, security-sector assistance training and advising positions are not currently career-enhancing for uniformed military personnel. Therefore, experienced and capable military professionals with such experience often choose other assignments later in their careers, resulting in the continual deployment of new and inexperienced forces for security sector assistance missions.

Our report goes into detail on these and other lessons. The lessons, you will note, are not confined to a particular time or place. They spring from our findings about security-sector assistance in Afghanistan to date, but are also prudent points to bear in mind for future efforts in Afghanistan and elsewhere.

Let me expand briefly on two of our lessons. One is that security-sector assistance cannot employ a one-size-fits-all approach.

From 2002 to 2015, senior U.S. and NATO officials took on ANDSF development with little to no input from senior Afghan officials. The work of securing Afghan buy-in mostly took the form of briefing Afghan leaders on what military plans and training programs the Westerners had selected for the ANDSF. Perhaps I am naïve, but that does not strike me as an ingratiating approach to fostering a successful outcome.

For another bizarre example, at one point, training sessions for Afghan police were using PowerPoint-based curricula from the U.S.-NATO *Balkan* operations. The

presentations were not only of questionable relevance to the Afghan setting, but also overlooked the high levels of illiteracy among the police. Such cut-and-paste activities, lifted from one country and slapped onto another like a decal, are not likely to boost the prospects for overall success.

Meanwhile, the lack of Afghan ownership of force development, operational planning, and security-sector governance prevented the Afghans from effectively overseeing and managing the ANDSF after the security transition at the end of 2014. Without Afghan ownership and buy-in, the security-force structures and capabilities we have so painfully built will not outlast U.S. assistance.

NEEDED: A WHOLE-OF-GOVERNMENT APPROACH

Another critical lesson of our report has particular resonance for me based upon my agency's special mission. That lesson is that a whole-of-government approach is necessary to successfully develop foreign military and police capabilities.

I believe Afghanistan is the definitive case study for that judgment. As our report notes, "While the U.S. government has a number of individual department and agency initiatives to improve security sector assistance programs, it currently lacks a comprehensive, whole-of-government approach and coordinating body to manage implementation and provide oversight of these programs."³

This continuing failure is not only a serious impediment to success in Afghanistan, but could be the Achilles' heel of future contingency operations.

Even if the United States has a well-conceived whole-of-government approach, poor execution can undermine it. For example, embassy understaffing and tight restrictions on travel can add to the burden on our military, undermine the ability of civilian implementing agencies to perform their reconstruction tasks in Afghanistan, and hinder the work of SIGAR and other oversight entities.

For example, I was able to visit the coalition's southern training headquarters in Kandahar this spring. The senior leadership there told me they had not met or seen anyone from our Embassy in Kabul since deployment, so our military had to deal with the local governor and other Afghan civilian officials on development and reconstruction matters that should have been an Embassy concern. That comment was not a good omen for anyone seeking a whole-of-government approach.

Similar troubling observations come from Major General Richard Kaiser, who until recently led the Combined Security Transition Command-Afghanistan (CSTC-A). He recently noted that, "A lack of embassy manning is a huge challenge for us. They are understaffed, because of a lack of funding and the lack of an ability to hire people." Consequently, some tasks for which State is supposed to have the lead, such as counternarcotics and ministry coordination, are performed by the U.S. military. General Kaiser also noted, "I often meet with the [Afghan] minister of finance, then I collaborate with the embassy and tell them what has occurred." He adds, "This then is a real gap that can/will cause fractures along the lines of communications."⁴

As we noted in SIGAR's July 2017 quarterly report to Congress, Embassy Kabul's severe restrictions on travel have increased the difficulty of carrying out the U.S. government's oversight mandate in Afghanistan. Other federal civilian agencies are similarly burdened.

To be blunt, the U.S. whole-of-government approach in Afghanistan suffers from a gap, a *hole in our government* approach, and that is particularly obvious when discussing civilian advisors who fall under Chief of Mission protection protocols. The high-threat environment in Afghanistan and the embassy's risk-avoidance posture impedes U.S. advisors from engaging regularly with their Afghan counterparts. Their tasks include important work like training Afghan judicial and police staff, giving technical support to Afghan ministries and monitoring the progress of USAID projects. Their limited access hinders building working relationships, trust, and follow-through on critical missions with direct negative impact on our military and reconstruction efforts.

With the civilian advisory mission mostly stuck behind embassy walls in Kabul, even with an expanded “Green Zone,” there are limits on what can be achieved—unless Congress and the Administration quickly address the highly risk-averse posture that the State Department appears to have adopted in Afghanistan.

Accepting risk is a critical element in our work in such a challenging environment as Afghanistan and my sense from 17 visits over the past five years is that our front line civilian personnel understand these risks and want to be untethered so that they can do more.

FROM LESSONS TO RECOMMENDATIONS

Offering lessons, no matter how carefully researched or compellingly presented, does little good if you can’t answer the proverbial guy in the back of the room who says, “Yeah, yeah, but what are you going to *do* about it?”

That takes us to our report’s recommendations. Our report provides thirty-five recommendations, comprising thirty-three general and Afghanistan-specific recommendations for executive agencies and DOD, plus two for Congress to consider. We think they are timely, sensible, and actionable, especially as the Administration rolls out its new strategy.

If adopted, our recommendations for executive agencies would lead to outcomes including:

- Better matching of U.S. advisors to the needs of the ANDSF and the Afghan Ministries of Defense and the Interior
- A stateside entity providing persistent and comprehensive support to the U.S. military and to the train, advise, and assist commands in Afghanistan
- Stringent conditions attached to U.S. funding to eliminate the ANDSF’s “culture of impunity”

Our DOD-specific recommendations would bring about:

- Improved training and equipping for the Afghan Air Force
- Extending the reach of the U.S. military’s train, advise, and assist mission below the Afghan corps level to allow for better observation and mentoring of maneuver units
- Taking into account the need for more military “guardian angels” for trainers and advisors who need to travel in insecure areas

SIGAR also offers two recommendations for the U.S. Congress that could:

- Provide a systematic review of authorities, roles, and resource mechanisms of major U.S. government stakeholder in security sector assistance
- Identify a lead agency for foreign police training in high-threat and post-conflict environments, resolving the current misalignments among Justice, State, and DOD.

CONCLUSION

To sum up, SIGAR’s new lessons-learned report includes well-documented findings, compelling lessons, and practical, actionable recommendations to improve strategic outcomes in Afghanistan and in operations yet to come.

Improving those outcomes requires taking a fresh, bolder look at the Afghan security forces and their problems with morale, literacy, drug use, corruption, leadership, and technical skill. But it also requires *us* to recognize that the U.S. approach to security-sector assistance in Afghanistan over the past fifteen years may have actually *contributed* to the ANDSF’s inability to secure the country from threats and prevent the re-establishment of safe havens for terrorists.

To put it plainly, as our report does, the United States failed to understand the complexities and scale of the mission required to stand up and mentor security forces in a country suffering from thirty years of war, misrule, corruption, and deep poverty. We

still need to address the problems of defining mission requirements, and of executing these missions adequately.

The ANDSF is fighting hard, and improving in many ways. But we have to do a better job of assisting their growth. Smarter and more appropriate security assistance is vital, now in Afghanistan, and later in whatever new contingencies arise.

Based on our discussions with key leaders in our military, in DOD offices, and at the National Security Council, I am cautiously optimistic. A properly resourced, persistent, and comprehensive train, advise, and assist operation can pay big dividends. Two good examples of such success are building the core competency of the Afghan Special Forces and providing the Afghan Air Force with A-29 close-support aircraft and training for their pilots.

There is still time to make a real difference in the capabilities and performance of the rest of the ANDSF.

I believe resolving to do better, and absorbing even some of the lessons in SIGAR's new report will offer a better way forward for the Afghan people—and ultimately, a more successful way to hasten the end of America's longest war.

¹ Pub. L. 110-181, §1229.

² Sir Basil H. Liddell Hart, *Why Don't We Learn From History?* (New York, 1971 [1943]), foreword, p. 12.

³ SIGAR, *Reconstructing the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces: Lessons from the U.S. Experience in Afghanistan*, a Lessons Learned Program report, 9/2017, p. 4.

⁴ Center for Army Lessons Learned, "An Interview Summary with MG Richard Kaiser," *News from the Front*, 8/1/2017, p. 10.