



Prepared Remarks of
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“Filling the Security Gap: International Approaches to Policing in Conflict”
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My remarks today are based on years of research conducted by my agency which culminated in our recent lessons learned report entitled “Policing in Conflict: Lessons from the U.S. Experience in Afghanistan.”

The horrors taking place in Ukraine remind us how quickly stability can disappear in even the most modern-looking countries. And experiences in places such as Afghanistan remind us how difficult it is to reconstruct a viable police force in the aftermath of military operations that have destroyed homes, businesses, and critical infrastructure; where civilians have taken up arms; and conditions are ripe for criminal behavior.

I believe that we must use what we learned from the experience in Afghanistan in future endeavors to build police forces in post-conflict environments – whether it’s in Ukraine, the Horn of Africa, or a conflict that hasn’t yet come to our attention.

For nearly 20 years, the United States and international community provided assistance to Afghanistan’s government with the goal of creating a legitimate, accountable, and effective civilian police force that could protect Afghans from criminals and uphold the rule of law. Without such a civilian law enforcement authority, the odds were greater that the country would remain unstable or revert to active conflict. Yet – except for some specialized police forces – community policing and law enforcement capabilities in Afghanistan were weak or nonexistent, despite receiving more than \$21 billion in U.S. and international financial support.

Overall, the Afghan National Police, or ANP, proved incapable of enforcing the law, protecting Afghan citizens from criminals and attacks by the Taliban and the Islamic

State, or ensuring that Afghanistan did not become another safe haven for terrorism. And as we all saw, the ANP quickly collapsed following the U.S. and NATO military withdrawal, paving the way for the Taliban takeover.

One of our critical findings is that the U.S. and its international partners failed to fully understand the history of policing in Afghanistan, which has never had an effective nationwide police force dedicated to protecting its citizens. Primarily, its police have existed to protect government power, often through corrupt or abusive means.

In particular, the U.S. and international community missed an opportunity in the early days following the invasion by ignoring the need to rapidly deploy police and rule of law advisors to stabilize what was, at least at that moment, a post-conflict country. This was opposite to the approach taken in Kosovo just a few years prior. Instead, the United States implemented a “light footprint” strategy of maintaining a small troop presence, and the international community followed suit. With the U.S. focused on pursuing al-Qaeda and its Taliban sponsors, senior Afghan government officials and power brokers seized the opportunity to reestablish a police force beholden only to them.

As a result, for decades, the newly constituted Afghan police force operated with near-total impunity. The Afghan government and international community did not hold Afghan police officers – particularly those with political connections – accountable for numerous acts of corruption and human rights abuses. This rapidly eroded any hope the population may have had that the new Afghan government would serve their interests, and the Taliban exploited that lack of trust to reestablish itself.

By mid-2002, the international community belatedly recognized the depleted state of the Afghan police and by 2003, the Department of State created its own police reform program in Afghanistan.

Even though establishing law and order in a post-conflict environment is critical, the U.S. and international community unfortunately lack a deployable police assistance unit that has the required resources AND required specialized expertise.

Although the State Department is the lead U.S. agency for police assistance, it does not have a dedicated team of deployable police development experts. Instead, it was forced to contract out its entire police development mission with little to no oversight. From the start, the program struggled, in no small part because the training

program assumed that Afghanistan remained a post-conflict state and that they had years to implement a professional police training program.

The State Department also failed to embed experienced police advisors with newly trained officers to provide follow-up training in the field. Our report concluded that despite having the legal authority and the budget, the State Department was ill-prepared to operate in a high-threat environment like Afghanistan.

Given the State Department's difficulties, the Defense Department advocated to take over the police assistance mission. And by 2005 all police assistance and training programs were transferred from the State Department to the Defense Department because they seemed better resourced for the mission.

But, as I found many times in Afghanistan, more resources did not lead to better results. Despite a 2006 study by the Institute of Peace that concluded that the U.S. military was ill-equipped to train foreign police forces, the U.S. military rapidly deployed advisors to partner with police forces in Afghanistan and moved embedded training teams originally deployed to partner with the Afghan National Army to ANP units. The U.S. police assistance mission became, in effect, an extension of the military training mission.

But just because the Defense Department had more personnel and more money did not mean that it had the *right* personnel. Police mentoring teams continued to be staffed mostly by soldiers who lacked a basic understanding of law enforcement, community policing, or criminal investigations. Rather, they had experience in infantry, combat aviation, or other military specializations.

Things were so bad that SIGAR found that helicopter pilots were assigned to train the ANP, and soldiers used videos of American TV crime dramas as training materials.

Compounding matters, U.S. police assistance prioritized rapidly increasing the quantity of police officers in the ANP over the quality and sustainability of police training, resulting in poorly trained police being sent into communities.

Meanwhile, the Taliban insurgency grew stronger. In response, under the Defense Department's leadership, the mission and focus of the Afghan police came to reflect the U.S. military's counterinsurgency strategy. Instead of focusing on policing,

most police units focused on security and support to military operations. The Afghan police failed to develop the basic law enforcement capabilities required to prevent and respond to criminal activities that plagued Afghan citizens.

This, in turn, undermined what legitimacy the central government may have had and turned some Afghans towards Taliban or tribal justice mechanisms. The widespread use of illegal detention and torture of suspected insurgents, for example, led some communities to welcome back the Taliban as liberators.

Afghanistan illustrated a key dilemma for U.S. advisors – was U.S. cooperation with brutal but militarily capable security forces worthwhile if it restored security – or did such cooperation create more conflict in the long run by undermining good governance and the rule of law?

The collapse of the Afghan government and security forces highlights the importance of establishing an effective police service in post-conflict and fragile states.

Let me conclude with two key lessons from our report:

First, the U.S. and donor community lack an expeditionary police assistance capability with police assistance experts required for most stabilization and reconstruction missions. Foreign police assistance is often a civilian-led task, but civilian agencies lack the force protection and mobility to operate in areas of significant violence, and also lack experts who can rapidly deploy. This results in the military stepping in; yet militaries usually lack the technical expertise to develop a civilian police force and associated ministries. And since advisors are likely to train the police on what they know best, this increases the risk of overly militarizing the police.

Our report notes that the United States should consider using its relationships with allies who have unique police assistance capabilities such as Italy and its internationally respected Carabinieri. In addition to Italy, a number of other European countries have police forces with military status – gendarmeries.

The second key lesson is that pre-deployment training and education for police advisors should include an understanding of a nation's legal traditions, the historical relationship between police and population, the extent of police corruption, the "command and control" organization of the nation's police forces, frameworks to hold the police accountable to the rule of law, and the nation's policy and planning

documents for police operations.

This knowledge will help advisors avoid interjecting police concepts that may run counter to the host nation's criminal justice system – as, for example, when U.S. advisors tried to import common law concepts to Afghanistan, where the legal system is based on civil law traditions entwined with religious and customary law.

If, in future police advising efforts, we desire a different outcome than that experienced in Afghanistan, policymakers must learn from our 20-year experience there and make the hard choices necessary to invest in police assistance and undertake necessary reforms required to increase the odds for future success.