



**SIGAR**

Office of the Special Inspector General  
for Afghanistan Reconstruction

June 15, 2023

The Honorable Charles E. Grassley  
United States Senator  
Washington, DC

Dear Senator Grassley,

We are writing in response to your letter dated May 8, 2023. First, we want to thank you for your questions as well as for your leadership in ensuring that the lessons from Afghanistan are not quickly forgotten and are instead vigorously applied to current and future U.S. efforts. The questions you submitted are exactly the ones that policymakers should be exploring now. As you said, the “government must learn from its mistakes so that they are not repeated.” While SIGAR’s oversight efforts focus on Afghanistan, our expansive body of research is relevant to numerous other contexts because it focuses on the way the United States conducts such operations in conflict-affected countries.

SIGAR began its lessons learned program in 2014 at the urging of General John Allen, Ambassador Ryan Crocker, and others who had served in Afghanistan. We sought to capture lessons from the U.S. experience in Afghanistan to help Congress and executive branch agencies improve efforts in current and future operations. To date, this program has produced 12 comprehensive reports conceived with input from ambassadors, generals, and development experts. They cover a range of topics, including security sector assistance, anticorruption, private sector development, stabilization, reintegration, monitoring and evaluation of contracting, police training, and gender equality. In addition, SIGAR’s Lessons Learned Program experts led the research efforts on our congressionally mandated reports assessing why the Afghan government and its security forces collapsed so quickly in 2021.

The Lessons Learned Program is designed to complement SIGAR’s extensive audit, inspections, and investigations work by providing a macro-level analysis of multiple lines of efforts by many U.S., international, and foreign government agencies covering whole sectors over extended periods of time. In short, lessons learned reports are designed to scrutinize U.S. strategies, how they are coordinated and translate into specific programs, and the result of those efforts. This scrutiny often revealed critical problems in the assumptions driving U.S. efforts and the ways in which U.S. government institutions were poorly suited to rebuild a war-torn country like Afghanistan.

SIGAR’s unique whole-of-government approach to oversight—based on its broad authority to oversee multiple lines of effort by many U.S. agencies—is especially critical in any contingency environment when vast sums of money are being spent very quickly in places that are difficult to oversee and are particularly vulnerable to waste, fraud, and abuse.

The United States is currently involved in many unstable, conflict-affected countries and regions around the globe. It is therefore vital that any lessons gleaned in one context are captured and analyzed for use in other contexts. To that end, attached are the answers to your five questions on the applicability of lessons from Afghanistan to current and future U.S. efforts in similar environments.

Sincerely,

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Special Inspector General for  
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Enclosure: Responses to Questions from Senator Grassley

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## **Responses to Questions from Senator Grassley**

### Question 1: What are the key challenges and obstacles to successful reconstruction in a war zone? How have you addressed these issues in Afghanistan?

Each lesson below reflects a critical shortcoming in the U.S. mission to rebuild Afghanistan's civilian and military institutions, contributing to the collapse of the government. Each lesson is also directly applicable to multiple ongoing U.S. interventions in other conflict environments, from Ukraine to coastal west Africa. Specifically, from our work in Afghanistan, we have identified the following challenges and obstacles for the U.S. government to address:

#### **Lesson 1: Corruption is a key obstacle to success and in Afghanistan undermined the U.S. mission by enabling predatory behavior, exacerbating local conflict, and channeling support directly to the insurgency.**

Corruption, the misuse of entrusted authority for personal gain, significantly undermined the U.S. mission in Afghanistan. Ranging from petty bribery to large-scale embezzlement and fraud, corruption severely compromised the legitimacy of the Afghan government and bolstered support for the insurgency. The United States was unable to effectively address the problem because doing so required the cooperation of Afghan power brokers and oligarchs who were among the worst offenders. In some cases, U.S. decisions made the problem worse—especially the emphasis on immediate military and reconstruction successes over the gradual and careful process of state building. The U.S. failure to understand complex Afghan political networks and their dynamics also contributed to corruption, as did hasty spending and insufficient oversight.

Yet the United States did not recognize corruption as a critical threat to its core goals until late in its mission in Afghanistan. By then, the Afghan government was deeply enmeshed in corrupt and criminal networks; dismantling them would have meant dismantling major pillars of support for the government itself. Lessons from Afghanistan suggest that anticorruption efforts should be an essential part of security, political, and development goals from the start. Fighting corruption must be “mission critical.” Failure to proactively and robustly address corruption from the outset will likely undermine—and could lead to the ultimate failure of—any future U.S. reconstruction, assistance, or development efforts. As Ambassador Ryan Crocker told SIGAR, “The ultimate point of failure for our efforts . . . wasn't an insurgency. It was the weight of endemic corruption.”<sup>1</sup>

#### **The U.S. alliance with malign power brokers reinforced patronage networks, intensified conflict, and contributed to pervasive corruption.**

In pursuit of short-term military goals, the U.S. partnered with anti-Taliban local militias and strongmen, often referred to as warlords or oligarchs—many of whom had committed war crimes and grave human rights abuses against fellow Afghans. These powerful individuals, many of whom attained high-level government positions, destabilized the state with large-scale acts of embezzlement, fraud, nepotism, and extortion that enriched their own patronage networks. As these groups benefited from the war, the general population became alienated and was driven toward the insurgency.

#### **Afghanistan's inability to absorb financial assistance exacerbated corruption.**

The rapid influx of U.S. and foreign money and aid into Afghanistan from 2002 to 2015 overwhelmed the country's institutions and administrative capacities. U.S. reconstruction assistance at one point reached an equivalent of more than 100 percent of Afghanistan's GDP, more than double the estimated absorptive

capacity of the country. This influx of money, combined with the limited spending capacity of the Afghan government and poor oversight and contracting practices by donors, increased opportunities for corruption.

U.S. officials made the problem worse by designing reconstruction programs without regard for the Afghan government's ability to sustain them. Billions of reconstruction dollars were wasted as projects went unused or fell into disrepair when the Afghan government was unable or unwilling to take responsibility. When U.S. reconstruction funding declined, so did Afghanistan's economic growth—demonstrating that this “growth” was merely the result of an overheated wartime economy.

### **Weak oversight and aggressive timelines for rebuilding Afghanistan and its institutions further fueled corruption.**

As security in Afghanistan deteriorated and demands on donors increased, the pressure to demonstrate progress also increased. U.S. officials responded by creating unrealistic timelines for rebuilding infrastructure and developing effective Afghan government systems and institutions capable of sustaining themselves without significant foreign intervention or support. These timelines often ignored conditions on the ground and created perverse incentives to spend quickly and focus on short-term goals. This tactic taxed the oversight capacity of the U.S. military and civilian agencies, who were hampered by insecurity and lack of mobility, staffing shortages, and contract management expertise. The emphasis on positive narratives and quick wins overshadowed the need for rigorous oversight and honest assessment of how well U.S. programs were actually contributing to overall strategic goals.

U.S. agencies attempted to deal with the prevalence of corruption and lack of capacity within the Afghan government by hiring external contractors to implement programming. That simply transferred the problem: The lack of direct oversight allowed contractors ample opportunity to engage in fraud.

### **Lesson 2: Lack of effective coordination—both within the U.S. government and across the international coalition—was a major obstacle to success and resulted in a disjointed patchwork of ineffective efforts, rather than a united and coherent approach.**

Perhaps no other coordination effort suffered as much as the international coalition's attempt to build Afghanistan's security sector. Our research showed that no single person, agency, military service, or country had ultimate responsibility for all U.S. and international activities to develop the Afghan security services or the ministries of defense and interior. Instead, responsibilities for developing the Afghan security forces' capabilities were divided among multiple agencies and services, each of which assigned these tasks to advisors who were usually deployed for a year or less.

Coordination within the international coalition was also constrained by national caveats, restrictions that countries placed on the use of their military forces and civilian personnel. Caveats that were particularly inhibiting included those that banned night operations, restricted the mobility of national forces, and required that tactical decisions get approval from national capitals. These caveats hindered that operational effectiveness and produced resentment and tension within the alliance. Caveats created the perception that some countries were withholding their full support, thus placing a disproportionate burden on others. In some instances, caveats affected how the Afghans perceived their coalition counterparts. One study found that Afghan leaders preferred to partner with U.S. training teams rather than with international liaisons because U.S. trainers were able to join Afghans in combat.

However, shortcomings in coordination and coalition fractures were not limited to security sector assistance but were apparent throughout the reconstruction effort. For instance, opinions on the importance of counternarcotics often varied among U.S. government agencies, coalition partners, and Afghan authorities, and concern waxed and waned as priorities shifted and opium poppy cultivation levels rose. During the early stages of the reconstruction effort, the United Kingdom served as the lead nation for counternarcotics, while the United States played a minimal role in the counterdrug effort. However, U.S. leaders soon became disillusioned

with the UK approach, and by 2003 began to take a more dominant role in counternarcotics—far outspending the UK, which was still the de facto lead nation. As President George W. Bush later recalled, “The multilateral approach to rebuilding, hailed by so many in the international community, was failing.”

Fractures and division were apparent not just among international partners, but among U.S. government agencies as well. There was often significant tension between the U.S. Agency for International Development and the Department of Defense over USAID’s reluctance or inability to work in the most contested and insecure districts—areas the military believed to be critical in reversing the Taliban’s momentum. One USAID official said that “the military expected us to be bags of cash,” and that DOD pressed the agency to begin costly and highly visible infrastructure projects in poor security conditions. Few at State or USAID felt they could push back. The dynamic was profoundly unequal; even when a disagreement involved a military officer and a civilian who were theoretically of the same rank, the officer often had the upper hand because of the overwhelming difference in size between the military and civilian contingents.

As a result of these coordination challenges, all types of stabilization programming were often implemented during all stages of the “clear-hold-build” counterinsurgency strategy. This occurred even when USAID knew that the timing was inappropriate and that programs would be ineffective. Under pressure from the military, USAID built schools in places where they could not be monitored, the Afghan government could not maintain and staff them, and students attended only sporadically—if at all—due to insecurity. As one official noted, when USAID tried to stop implementing projects in areas where they could not be monitored or evaluated, the military simply used funds from its Commander’s Emergency Response Program to implement those projects anyway—often in less secure areas where projects were unlikely to succeed.

Even within agencies, coordination between field and headquarters was a significant challenge. Civilian personnel in Kabul significantly outnumbered those in the field. Decision-making authority was disproportionately centered in Kabul and Washington. According to one report, experienced staff at State and USAID reported limited opportunities to provide feedback or felt that their feedback fell on deaf ears.<sup>2</sup> This reliance on headquarters-based decision making, with limited influence from knowledgeable field staff, undermined coalition policy objectives. The ostensibly bottom-up stabilization strategy had few voices at the bottom.

### **Lesson 3: Pervasive insecurity continuously undermined every effort to rebuild government and security institutions, and efforts to improve security often resulted in new or worse problems.**

In Afghanistan, the U.S. government and its allies struggled to account for the challenges posed by insecurity. Insecurity undermined political processes, the extension of government services, and innumerable economic and development programs, as well as counternarcotics programs—all of which were, in theory, meant to reduce insecurity by creating a sustainable government. Insecurity hollowed out even the most direct and practical efforts to counter its effects, such as the development of competent Afghan security forces and programs meant to draw reconcilable insurgents back into the fold of Afghan society.

#### **Elections**

The U.S. government spent many years trying to help Afghanistan hold credible elections in the belief that doing so would produce legitimate government officials. Instead, poor security, among other factors, critically undermined the electoral process and the legitimacy of its elected officials. SIGAR found that insecurity hamstrung both voter registration and the establishment and operation of polling centers throughout Afghanistan. Polling centers that were operational on election day were sometimes inaccessible to election observers, the watchdogs of the democratic process. Even in locations that were accessible to observers, the threat of violence sometimes stymied their efforts to observe and document fraud. In addition to observers, the insecure environment also affected voting behavior: Increased fears for personal safety were clearly linked to lower turnout.

## **Private Sector Development**

One potential avenue to victory in Afghanistan was supporting and growing the country's stunted private sector. The theory that economic development would bolster security rested on three assumptions: economic growth would legitimize the state, tax revenue would enable the state to deliver services, and reducing the ranks of the unemployed would shrink the pool of potential insurgents. As it turned out, the Afghan economy did experience growth over the course of American involvement there—but that growth did not translate into substantial reductions in unemployment or poverty, as the original theory of change predicted. The projects that aimed to spur economic growth and foster a more secure environment were undermined by the very symptoms of insecurity that they were meant to treat. The constant threat of violence inevitably affected the motivations and confidence of Afghans starting and running businesses, to say nothing of foreign companies considering investment.

## **Service Delivery**

Insecurity also undermined efforts to legitimize the government through service delivery programs. Some districts were so volatile that the coalition was perpetually trying to secure them and could never properly deliver the services that stabilization and counterinsurgency demanded. Local officials recruited and trained to provide services were easy targets for the insurgency, which at the height of the U.S. troop surge reportedly managed to assassinate an average of one Afghan official every day. The high levels of violence against local officials made it difficult to recruit qualified candidates and had a chilling effect on finding qualified people willing to leave the security of provincial capitals. Moreover, projects often attracted violent attacks by insurgents. The government's inability to prevent this from happening resulted in more disillusionment with the government than if there had been no intervention in the first place.

## **Counternarcotics**

Over the last two decades, the problems of insecurity and the narcotics industry exacerbated one another in ways that stymied U.S. efforts to reduce both. The U.S. government spent nearly \$9 billion on counternarcotics efforts since 2002, in part due to concerns that narcotics trafficking funded Taliban activities, but the cultivation and trafficking of opium poppy was as much a contributor to insecurity as it is a response to it. Despite the investment, the cultivation of opium poppy in Afghanistan trended upward for two decades, and insecurity made it difficult to reverse the growth. Poppy cultivation was often concentrated in areas under the control of insurgents, so physically accessing areas to eradicate the crop or interdict it as it was being moved or processed into heroin proved challenging.

## **Security Force Assistance**

The initial U.S. military operations were conducted in partnership with independent militia forces, many of whom had previously committed abuses against their fellow Afghans. Some of these same militia commanders and their ranks were later brought into the government and security forces, where they continued their predatory behavior and ultimately undermined the development of the Afghan National Army and Afghan National Police. In fact, Afghan militias allied with the United States were sometimes direct sources of insecurity, even after the United States attempted to formalize them by inducting their members into various policing programs. In some cases, insecurity also affected retention among Afghan military personnel, with high instances of Afghan military trainees going absent without leave. Meanwhile, high levels of violence and insecurity compelled policymakers to shorten training timelines to meet demand for security forces—but poorly trained forces found it that much more difficult to impose a monopoly on violence in the country. In some instances, poorly trained security forces actually contributed to insecurity.

## **Reintegration**

A potential fundamental flaw in U.S. efforts to reintegrate former fighters back into Afghan society was the vulnerability of former combatants to retaliatory violence for having abandoned the insurgency. Insecurity was so problematic for reintegration programs that even senior program staff working under tight security faced



credible threats of assassination. In a 2011 reconciliation and reintegration effort, over 200 reintegrated fighters and dozens of reintegration staff were killed, including Burhanuddin Rabbani, a former president of Afghanistan and the leader of the effort. Insecurity complicated the delivery of benefits and services promised to those ex-combatants who did join reintegration programs, while fears of retribution from former enemies led other would-be participants to return to the battlefield.

#### **Lesson 4: Poor U.S. personnel policies—both civilian and military—meant that U.S. efforts were rarely overseen by trained and qualified staff.**

SIGAR determined that the U.S. government's inability to get the right people into the right jobs at the right times was one of the most significant failures of the mission in Afghanistan. It is also one of the hardest to repair. With any large-scale reconstruction effort, large numbers of people are needed to implement, monitor, and guide the various projects that make up the overall mission. The United States approached reconstruction in Afghanistan by first creating and funding reconstruction projects—and only then attempting to locate the individuals needed to carry them out. This method works only if the government can continuously draw upon existing talent pools. Once those pools were depleted for Afghanistan, projects were haphazardly staffed with underqualified workers, were allowed to go unmonitored, and, in some cases, were outright abandoned.

In Afghanistan, the U.S. government repeatedly undertook new projects without first guaranteeing enough personnel resources were available to see them through. At times, shortages in qualified personnel became so pronounced in both civilian and military agencies that hiring standards were lowered to keep programs functioning. At one point, a USAID employee noted that the organization was so desperate for additional staff that they were hiring anyone with “a pulse and a master's degree.”

For two decades in Afghanistan, the U.S. government continuously struggled to identify the right personnel, train them properly, keep them in the country long enough to become effective, and enable them to spend enough time with their replacement to hand over their work before departing. In particular, State and USAID struggled to staff their programs with qualified personnel and were forced to pull staff from other assignments. Because civilian agencies lack the strategic reserves of qualified employees that the military enjoys, they had to hire many staff quickly to meet demand. But civilian agencies simply could not compete with DOD's resources and planning, especially in remote parts of the country. DOD ended up making critical decisions that should have been made by U.S. civilian officials with expertise in navigating complex political dynamics.

The severe lack of personnel also created budgetary problems: Without enough oversight staff, it was impossible to properly validate data from the field. When neither civilian nor military personnel were available to report on the progress of various reconstruction efforts, the amount of money being spent on various projects became a highly imperfect proxy for measuring progress. The inability of U.S. government agencies to properly oversee their own projects produced poor results in critical project areas, as various staffers were assigned jobs for which they had little to no training or qualifications. For example, some DOD police advisors were helicopter pilots and received little formal training in policing. The training many military advisors did receive was not even Afghanistan-specific. In desperation, some police advisors turned to television shows like “Cops” and “NCIS” to become more familiar with policing.

Compounding these general staffing issues, short tours of duty for both military and civilian personnel undermined institutional memory and programmatic continuity. These tours, typically lasting less than a year for both civilian and military positions, limited the ability of staff to build a nuanced understanding of their role, their environment, and the Afghans they worked with. By the time they found their bearings and built important relationships, they began preparing to depart. With personnel taking critical information with them as they rotated out, the reconstruction effort essentially experienced an annual lobotomy, as newly arriving staff made the same mistakes as their predecessors. The lack of candidates was often addressed by reassigning unqualified staff members to positions as they were vacated, further contributing to the lack of institutional memory in both civilian and military organizations.

To address the constant turnover, the United States employed contractors to work both alongside and independently from U.S., Afghan, and coalition forces. But DOD, State, and USAID lacked enough staff to

oversee those contractors. Because contract work was often performed with little to no oversight, waste and fraud often went unchecked.

Coordination between civilian agencies and the military was critical to the U.S. government's efforts at rebuilding Afghan institutions. But there were frequent clashes over personnel issues. DOD's exponentially larger budget and human resource reserves allowed it to dictate the speed and priorities of the reconstruction process and had the effect of elevating military objectives over civilian ones. Civilian officials had little recourse. They were dependent on the military for food, housing, and transportation, and there might only be one civilian official embedded with an entire battalion or brigade. Arbitrary timelines, either implicit or explicit, often compounded the problem, as the military was less likely to consider civilian objectives if troops were under intense pressure to make fast progress. Rather than working with their civilian counterparts to identify which areas were suitable for interventions, military officials simply prioritized their own goals.

Given the dearth of robust personnel structures that were necessary to successfully scale up a reconstruction effort, it is difficult to imagine how U.S. officials could have performed any better. The problem was not that they were poor at improvising, but that the U.S. government believed it could achieve its goals through improvisation at all. It takes decades to build effective institutions in host countries, and those of the U.S. government are no different. Laying the groundwork for personnel to be trained and bureaucratically positioned for a scaled reconstruction campaign is a particularly difficult institutional challenge, and one that may be best implemented long before a reconstruction campaign begins.

## **Lesson 5: The U.S. needs to understand the host country's social, economic, and political systems to successfully tailor its reconstruction efforts.**

Effectively rebuilding Afghanistan required a nuanced understanding of the country's complex social, economic, and political dynamics. However, U.S. officials were consistently operating in the dark, often because of the difficulty of collecting necessary information. The U.S. government ultimately forced complex local conflicts into a simplistic overarching narrative, tried to impose a formal rule of law on a country that addressed most of its disputes through informal means, and often worsened local conflicts by relying on one-sided information from local allies. Ignorance of the Afghanistan context was a significant contributing factor to failures at the strategic, operational, and tactical levels. It also made it difficult to understand the complexities of corruption and its corrosive impact on Afghan institutions. What follows are three specific examples of such failures.

### **The United States adhered to a simplistic conflict narrative that failed to appreciate the complexity of Afghanistan's political economy.**

U.S. counterinsurgency doctrine conceptualized the conflict as contest between insurgents and counterinsurgents for the support of the people—a framework that labeled Afghanistan's many local political economies as either "good" allies supporting the nascent state or "bad" enemies opposing it. The United States empowered warlords who opposed the Taliban, even if they had no respect for basic human rights. Afghans who resisted abuses committed by the U.S.-backed government were often assumed to be supporters of the Taliban, rather than citizens attempting to raise legitimate grievances.

As the Afghan state solidified, formalized, and expanded into more territory, it became unpredictable and predatory. American advisors, practitioners, and coalition partners inadvertently contributed to the predatory behaviors their local allies committed because, lacking insight into individual local dynamics, they relied on these same allies for information. Rural Afghans, caught in the middle, reacted to the expanding U.S.-supported government with a combination of apathy and resistance.

## **The United States attempted to impose formal rule of law institutions on a country that resolved most civil disputes through informal means.**

Between 2003 and 2015, the U.S. government spent more than \$1 billion on rule of law programming in Afghanistan, with approximately 90 percent of that funding going toward the development of a formal legal system. That system was foreign to most Afghans, who favored the traditional, community-level dispute resolution mechanisms which historically handled up to 90 percent of civil disputes. The informal systems operated more efficiently and by rules already familiar to most Afghans. One researcher described a mindset where outsiders and Afghan elites believed rural Afghans needed “to be brought out from the Stone Ages,” without realizing that functioning informal systems already existed.

## **The United States implemented stabilization projects that exacerbated conflict.**

Programs meant to stabilize communities were hastily implemented in insecure areas, a practice which prevented U.S. and coalition officials from collecting enough information about local political dynamics to operate effectively. As a result, the coalition often unknowingly implemented projects that supported one local powerbroker, faction, tribe, or ethnic group over another, aggravating local conflict and giving disaffected communities a reason to start or continue supporting the Taliban. This was especially true where coalition officials relied on local powerbrokers for information, which the powerbrokers could easily manipulate to serve their own interests. Under such circumstances, even a “successful” project could exacerbate local conflicts and create opportunities for insurgents to form an alliance with the disaffected party.

## **Lesson 6: U.S. government agencies rarely conducted sufficient monitoring and evaluation to understand the impact of their efforts.**

Monitoring and evaluation (M&E) is the process of determining what works, what does not, and what needs to change as a result. M&E efforts in Afghanistan were largely ineffective. SIGAR’s body of work, which has touched every major reconstruction sector—health, education, rule of law, women’s rights, infrastructure, security assistance, and others—paints a picture of U.S. agencies struggling to effectively measure outcomes and impacts while sometimes relying on shaky data to make claims of success.

Conducting adequate M&E in Afghanistan was more challenging than in many countries. Nevertheless, U.S. agencies face similar obstacles to implementing effective M&E in other contexts, including such volatile places as Pakistan, Syria, and Yemen. Many of the lessons learned in Afghanistan apply to the U.S. government’s work elsewhere.

## **Measuring outcomes and impacts is critical.**

Too often in Afghanistan, DOD, State, and USAID failed to measure programs and projects against the ultimate outcomes and impacts they sought to achieve. Compounding the problem, the speed with which funds were spent in Afghanistan, particularly during the surge period, became a perverse metric of success. This resulted in projects pouring money into a fragile environment with no concept of whether those projects achieved any actual goals, or even necessarily where all the money was going. With M&E relegated to input and output measurement, it was often difficult to understand what was and was not working. Making reasonable attempts to determine outcomes and impacts is crucial.

## **Pressure to demonstrate progress can undermine the utility of M&E.**

External pressure, whether political or interagency, to demonstrate immediate and tangible results can shift the incentive structure surrounding M&E. Such pressure sometimes outweighed the need for planning, resulting in implementation of projects that were unlikely to succeed. Indeed, at least two programmatic categories—stabilization and counternarcotics—appeared to have failed entirely long before the demise of the Afghan government. But even programs that had unachievable or unrealistic goals were often described as successful, or at least making progress. In retrospect, it is clear that the evidence for these rosy assessments



was often lacking. Where real or perceived pressure incentivizes selective or inaccurate reporting, it makes meaningful M&E impossible.

### **High levels of spending outpaced the number of contract oversight personnel.**

An enduring feature of contingency environments is that when spending increases, oversight generally does not keep pace. Numerous reports on reconstruction contracting have pointed out that contract oversight personnel are overworked or overburdened, largely because high spending levels on programs outpaced spending on hiring oversight personnel. At one point, USAID determined that, in order to meet the U.S. government's average ratio of dollars to contracting officers, it would have to send nearly its entire overseas workforce to work only in Afghanistan.

## **Question 2: What best practices have you developed for monitoring and assessing the effectiveness of reconstruction programs? How can these practices be applied elsewhere?**

SIGAR is not aware of any monitoring and evaluation (M&E) practices employed in Afghanistan that consistently provided candid information about whether programs and strategies were achieving real effects. As we stated in our 2021 report on the M&E of contracting, each agency we examined—USAID, State, and DOD—had strong M&E systems in place—"on paper." The problem was putting what existed on paper into practice. We noted there was no clear evidence that, as implemented, M&E reliably, accurately, and objectively answered the question of whether reconstruction funds were having their intended impact. This raises the question of whether, broadly speaking, meaningful M&E is possible at all in reconstruction environments like Afghanistan.

Notwithstanding that important qualification, the partial list of practices outlined below may improve the quality of M&E in other contexts.

### **Before reinventing the wheel, aggressively implement M&E policies already in place.**

A central takeaway of SIGAR's work is that the mere existence of M&E systems does not guarantee that they will be effectively put into practice. For example, USAID's Automated Directives System articulates clear guidance for project evaluations. Yet SIGAR noted instances in which evaluations presented conflicting findings, were phrased in dense bureaucratese, or based findings on bad data—thus failing to provide a clear answer to a very simple question: "Is the project working?" Similarly, DOD has established requirements for end-use monitoring of defense articles transferred to other countries to provide reasonable assurance that recipients are employing those articles as intended. Yet in Afghanistan, DOD consistently failed to meet these requirements. In sum, ensuring sound M&E in any environment or context can involve holding agencies accountable to procedures that already exist.

### **Determine clear, relevant metrics that measure actual outcomes, not just how many dollars were spent.**

Too often in Afghanistan, U.S. agencies failed to measure programs against the ultimate outcomes and impacts those programs sought to achieve. With M&E relegated to input and output measurement, it was often difficult to understand what was and was not working. In too many cases, the amount of money spent became the main metric. As we have reported, excessive input and output measurement, or use of performance indicators irrelevant to program objectives, creates the risk of doing the wrong thing perfectly. Moving forward,

U.S. agencies should establish metrics that are clear, quantitatively or qualitatively measurable, and relevant to project execution and intentions.

### **Third-party monitors are necessary, but the U.S. government must be diligent in evaluating them and their standards.**

Aid providers like the United Nations, the World Bank, and the International Monetary Fund have used third-party monitors to report on programs in aid-recipient countries. Before the Taliban victory in August 2021, SIGAR, too, used local third-party monitors in Afghanistan because they could travel more freely and safely than U.S. citizens there. Similar monitors will likely be employed in Ukraine. However, concerns arise when U.S. oversight officials cannot be reasonably assured of the accuracy and effective use of aid intermediaries' monitoring reports. An imperfect antidote is transparency: If third-party monitors are being used in any context, their periodic monitoring reports should be provided to all stakeholders for review, scrutiny, and actionable use.

### **Embrace impact evaluation.**

The most credible way to assess whether programs are effective is through impact evaluation—developing a credible understanding as to how programs changed the lives of intended beneficiaries. Although M&E in Afghanistan was mostly lacking, some impact assessment did provide useful information. For example, one USAID initiative compared stabilization-related changes in villages where stabilization projects had been undertaken (treatment villages) to control villages selected by the initiative whose key characteristics matched the treatment villages. The study produced a number of critical observations, including the need for flexible programming, and confirmation that stabilization projects may have been destabilizing in some cases. One way to increase the prevalence of impact evaluation in other contexts, including in Ukraine, is for Congress to explicitly require such evaluation and provide funding for it.

### **Question 3: What strategies have you found to be most effective in promoting transparency and accountability in the use of reconstruction funds? How can these strategies be adapted for use elsewhere?**

Based on its years of research and findings from over 700 oversight reports, SIGAR has developed several best practices for donors and implementing agencies that can help the United States accomplish the goals of protecting taxpayer funds. Before these best practices can be adapted for use elsewhere it is important to recognize that very few of them were effectively implemented in Afghanistan. These failures, however, offer an opportunity for the U.S. government to learn from its mistakes and improve current and future programming in other countries. As Special Inspector General John Sopko emphasized in his remarks at the University of Toronto Munk School of Global Affairs & Public Policy, "After spending 20 years and \$146 billion trying and mostly failing to rebuild Afghanistan, it would be tragic to learn these lessons the hard way, again." Some of those best practices, boiled down to their essentials, are:

#### **Establish a clear purpose for the aid.**

All too often, agencies and international organizations are vague or unrealistic about what they intend to achieve with a program. But taking care to ensure that a goal or purpose is clearly stated, and that program objectives and activities are aligned with the overall purpose, is a key condition for effectiveness. Having clear purposes and goals helps managers and oversight agencies assess what evidence to seek and whether the links between program design, execution, and outcomes make sense.

## **Insist that any organization receiving U.S. funding is fully transparent, so we know where our money went and how it was used.**

If the United States decides to channel multi-million- or multi-billion-dollar aid contributions through international organizations, trust funds, NGOs, and other intermediaries, it must insist on complete transparency regarding how they use those funds. Without resorting to unduly burdensome reporting requirements, the United States must make it clear that the provision and amount of assistance would depend on access by outside, independent U.S. oversight agencies.

## **Set a tolerable level of risk and be ready to end an activity if that risk becomes too great.**

The work of SIGAR and other oversight agencies has demonstrated that there will be risks in any assistance programs—poor planning, corruption, inadequate work plan, deficient monitoring, natural disasters or pandemics, defective data, unintended consequences, and many more. Assumptions about risk must be determined at the outset and continually stress-tested to determine if risk factors have changed and, if so, how those changes impact the ongoing feasibility of an activity.

## **Keep track of how money is used and regularly reassess to see if activities are actually helping people.**

This may sound like simple common sense, but it requires a great deal of effort and vigilance by development agencies—something that SIGAR’s research has shown has been woefully lacking in the past. Monitoring and evaluating is an essential activity to determine whether data are being collected, procedures followed, schedules met, waste avoided, and objectives attained. But simply having monitoring and evaluation schemes in place is no assurance that necessary and accurate information is being captured or evaluated. Factors such as self-interest, training limitations, and reliance on data from contractors or grantees can affect the accuracy of monitoring reports.

## **Determine clear, relevant metrics that measure actual outcomes, not just how many dollars were spent or how many people participated in some program.**

Measuring outputs like money spent, hospitals built, or vaccines delivered is a straightforward counting exercise. What is more difficult is measuring the actual impact of those outputs. For example, education programming may result in schools built and textbooks purchased (or even delivered), but those activities do not answer the question of whether children are getting an education and how, in turn, that is leading to stability or prosperity in a given region. The United States must determine whether U.S.-funded aid entities are attempting to measure outcomes rather than inputs, and whether those aid entities have selected measures that would be reasonably related to actual results.

## **If an activity is going poorly, make course corrections and be prepared to pull the plug.**

When indications surface that something is going wrong, there can be a temptation to defend one’s ideas and efforts and explain away bad news. Consistent adherence to a course-correct/modify/abandon principle within the U.S. foreign-aid universe would help prevent programs from surviving despite unacceptable risks, excessive costs, failed outcomes—and would perhaps free up resources for more fruitful alternative uses.

## **Seek smart opportunities to condition aid.**

Though it will prove challenging, the United States and international partners should find effective opportunities to impose conditions on assistance and learn from past efforts. SIGAR has concluded that U.S.

attempts at imposing conditionality in Afghanistan generally failed because they lacked credibility. Nothing was as important to U.S. officials as the survival and stability of the Afghan government, so reforms such as reducing corruption were often secondary. When U.S. officials imposed conditions on aid to incentivize reform, Afghan officials essentially called their bluff, knowing the U.S. government ultimately would not withhold critical assistance that Kabul desperately needed to ensure its survival.

## **Look for activities that the host country can eventually sustain without outside support.**

Humanitarian aid such as food, water, and medicine are temporary emergency measures. Reconstruction and development programs, however, are intended to build institutions of government, civil society, and commerce that will continue to function long after the foreign assistance has ended. In Afghanistan, U.S. government often failed to ensure its projects were sustainable over the long term. Projects and programs that cannot be sustained should not be implemented.

## **Question 4: What lessons have you learned about the importance of working with local communities and stakeholders in reconstruction efforts? How can these lessons be applied elsewhere?**

When the U.S. government empowers local actors, draws upon local capacities and priorities, and is accountable to local communities, the results are more likely to be effective and sustainable. Yet in Afghanistan, agencies frequently bypassed the Afghan government, disregarded the concerns of local communities, and built institutions that mirrored our own.<sup>3</sup> As a result, we frequently exacerbated conflict, hindered the development of good governance, and wasted a great deal of taxpayer funds, as detailed in Lesson 5 above.<sup>4</sup>

### **Localization is a priority only on paper.**

Partially in response to such dynamics, USAID in 2021 recommitted to “localization,” in which the agency promises to work through diverse local actors—from government officials to local NGOs to religious leaders—to empower them to set their own development agendas and implement their own solutions.<sup>5</sup>

While USAID’s intent was commendable, the U.S. government has been trying, and failing, to “localize” its aid for decades.<sup>6</sup> In fact, an assessment of U.S. assistance to Afghanistan between 1950 and 1979 bemoaned the U.S. failure to achieve “locally based development” and called for “careful involvement” of the people whose lives would be impacted by a project in future programming. Presciently, it also warned that this would require rethinking past aid practices.<sup>7</sup>

Today, USAID only gives six percent of its global assistance to local partners.<sup>8</sup> In Afghanistan between 2001 and 2021, U.S. agencies directed only 12 percent of reconstruction assistance “on-budget,” or via the Afghan government.<sup>9</sup> Other donors did better, so it is possible. A review of the Danish role in Afghanistan praised the degree to which that country aligned its aid with Afghan policies and priorities.<sup>10</sup>

This inability to give our host nation partners a lead role in shaping our reconstruction strategy in Afghanistan had strategically fatal effects. The enormous pressure to demonstrate progress led the United States to take shortcuts and bypass the Afghan government and its systems and simply do things ourselves.<sup>11</sup> The United States is at risk of repeating the same mistakes in Ukraine and in other conflict-affected environments because many of the impediments to locally led reconstruction remain unaddressed.<sup>12</sup> Fixing the problem will require structural reforms of the U.S. government’s contingency contracting, staffing, and risk management systems.

## **Going through local government is inherently difficult.**

One of the major challenges to locally led reconstruction in Afghanistan was the country's highly centralized government. The country's powerful presidency had its origins in its history of monarchy. In designing the new Afghan constitution, U.S. officials pushed to keep a centralized model, fearing that otherwise the new government would splinter into islands of influence by various warlords.<sup>13</sup> Yet research commissioned by USAID found that fiscal decentralization—delegating authority to local officials on how government funds are spent—is associated with lower levels of conflict.<sup>14</sup> It is easier for the U.S. government to interact with a partner government that has control of the whole country than it is to deal with diffuse local power structures.<sup>15</sup> However, in Afghanistan, centralization did little to prevent the creation of many islands of influence: Corrupt and predatory local warlords, economic tycoons, and powerbrokers found that wealth and power could be derived from pulling the strings of the central government.<sup>16</sup>

Over the course of the 20-year war, the United States and its international partners did push to give more budgetary power to provincial and local governments but were unable to solve through the technical means at their disposal what was, first and foremost, a political problem.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, as one USAID official told us, the Afghan government had no motivation to reform their budgetary processes as long as the aid spigot flowed freely.<sup>18</sup>

On those occasions when the U.S. tried to deal directly with the Afghan government to enact reforms, it quickly abandoned these efforts in favor of creating unsustainable parallel systems.<sup>19</sup> For example, a program to fund the Afghan government to conduct local administrative and financial reforms was closed because progress was deemed too slow, and the Afghan government's financial reporting did not meet U.S. standards. Instead, the U.S. replaced it with a similar program that used contractors.<sup>20</sup> Empowering local Afghan officials was a slow process, and U.S. officials rarely had the necessary patience.<sup>21</sup>

Yet much of the “progress” achieved through bypassing the Afghan government and local organizations later proved ephemeral.<sup>22</sup> Instead of building Afghan capacity, the United States built an Afghan government and military wholly reliant on U.S. trainers, advisors, and enablers, including close air support, medical evacuation, and leadership.<sup>23</sup> Donors also hired technical advisors at salaries much higher than government officials made, creating an expensive “shadow” civil service.<sup>24</sup>

A heavy reliance on U.S.-based partners is a worldwide problem for USAID. In fact, as a former senior official has pointed out, between 2018 and 2022 most of the agency's large U.S. partners saw steady or increased funding—despite USAID's 2021 recommitment to “localization.”<sup>25</sup>

## **Using opaque multilateral institutions like the UN and World Bank does not advance localization.**

While some programs are ideally run through the budgets of a foreign government, other programs must be implemented by local partners. Yet the U.S. government struggles with this as well, making it tempting to direct those funds through a go-between, namely multilateral organizations like the UN and World Bank. These organizations are frequent recipients of donor funds in conflict-affected environments because they can contract with local organizations with greater speed and fewer burdensome regulations than USAID can.<sup>26</sup> It can take a year for USAID to vet a new partner, whereas it is relatively easy to sole source an award to a UN agency, which can start delivering aid quickly.<sup>27</sup> In addition, managing a large number of small grants to local organizations is more cumbersome than a single large grant to an established partner.<sup>28</sup>

For these reasons, U.S. agencies are structurally motivated to direct funds to multilateral organizations even though they cost more, and struggle to build the kind of local institutions necessary to outlast U.S. funding. In addition, this work-around often merely shifts the problem, since these organizations can be quite opaque. SIGAR and USAID's Office of Inspector General have documented concerns about the limited access donors have to information in multilateral organizations.<sup>29</sup>

Failing to give local partners lead roles resulted in inappropriate approaches. It also frequently resulted in building Afghan institutions, such as the courts, in the United States' image.<sup>30</sup> Yet projects that are not thoughtfully conceived with Afghan needs and constraints in mind were either irrelevant to Afghans' needs or unsustainable. For example, in 2021, SIGAR audited a sample of 60 U.S. infrastructure projects in Afghanistan. SIGAR concluded that \$723.8 million—91 percent of the total—had been spent on projects that were unused or abandoned, were not used as intended, had deteriorated, were destroyed, or some combination of the above.<sup>31</sup> In some cases, the annual operating and maintenance costs of the new projects constructed by the United States were many times those of the facilities they were intended to replace, and were constructed before the relevant Afghan ministry was even informed, much less consulted. It is not surprising that the Afghan government was uninterested in continuing programs or sustaining infrastructure it had not asked for in the first place.<sup>32</sup>

## **Structural roots of the problem**

A willingness to fund and slowly strengthen partner governments and systems requires a shift in the kinds of risks that U.S. management, oversight, and compliance institutions are focused on.<sup>33</sup> Reconstruction is an inherently risky endeavor, and local partners are relatively bad at complying with arcane U.S. government administrative and financial regulations.<sup>34</sup> But by working with and through them, we may be able to better mitigate the bigger risks of strategic failure. According to a former senior USAID official, Patrick Fine, changing this will require “chang[ing] power dynamics” with partners. A Brookings report assesses that it will take “mov[ing] from policy and symbolic actions such as giving small grants to local organizations to authentic country ownership where priorities, program directions, and financial decisions are determined by local actors.”<sup>35</sup> According to Fine, “It is not local organizations that lack the capacity to work with USAID,” but USAID that lacks the ability to work with them.<sup>36</sup>

Achieving locally led development will be very labor intensive. The U.S. needs mechanisms to surge oversight and program management staff now if we are to avoid repeating the mistakes we made in Afghanistan.<sup>37</sup> By investing in surge mechanisms for staff, the U.S. government may be able to avoid a situation where it has no choice but to cut corners.<sup>38</sup>

## **Success in the absence of red tape**

The U.S. government is capable of locally led development. Through the Millennium Challenge Corporation, the U.S. government already transfers ownership for identifying investment priorities to partner governments, with input required from civil society.<sup>39</sup> Similarly, PEPFAR—the State Department-run President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief—gives more than 60 percent of its money to local organizations to combat AIDS. Yet both initiatives are specifically designed to avoid the constraints of the Foreign Assistance Act.<sup>40</sup> In contrast, USAID is simply not capable of avoiding those constraints given the rules, regulations, reporting requirements, and earmarks that it must operate under.<sup>41</sup>

## **Question 5: What lessons have the U.S. government, allied governments, and nongovernment observers identified for the reconstruction of Afghanistan that should be adapted for use elsewhere?**

Just as they did after the Vietnam War, State, USAID, and DOD claim after Afghanistan's collapse that the U.S. is unlikely to engage in another large-scale reconstruction campaign.<sup>42</sup> However, at any given time, the United States is involved in numerous efforts to rebuild fragile and conflict-affected countries—a list that currently includes Burkina Faso, Haiti, Iraq, Mali, Somalia, Syria, and Yemen, among others.<sup>43</sup> Meanwhile, Ukraine is receiving an unprecedented level of financial assistance.<sup>44</sup> Between 2009 and 2018 the United States consistently provided more than a third of its foreign assistance to countries with ongoing violent conflicts.<sup>45</sup>



Assessments of what went wrong in Afghanistan conducted by the United States and many of its European partners contain significant agreements and recommendations for addressing this failure. Reports by the UK and the Danish argue that the U.S.-driven strategy was predicated on an assumption that the Taliban could be defeated militarily and that no political compromise would be necessary to accommodate them.<sup>46</sup> Similarly, the Stabilization Assistance Review, a 2018 U.S. interagency policy document designed to fix problems with the U.S. approach to stabilization, acknowledged that the United States has a tendency to jump to high-cost reconstruction programs before establishing a foundation of inclusive political systems.<sup>47</sup> Administration after administration has declared that State, the lead on political matters, should be the lead agency for stabilization.<sup>48</sup> However, without structural changes to the way the U.S. government approaches reconstruction, it is unlikely that State will be sufficiently equipped to lead such an effort.<sup>49</sup>

SIGAR has previously reported that DOD filled the void in strategic leadership in Afghanistan that State was unable to fill.<sup>50</sup> The result was strategic incoherence, with the international community pursuing "an unstable hybrid of state building and counter-insurgency" and different U.S. agencies working at cross-purposes.<sup>51</sup>

The U.S. Stabilization Assistance Review specifies that security sector training and assistance should support a broader political strategy.<sup>52</sup> Assessments by European countries of their performance in Afghanistan call for prioritizing the goals of security for the population and establishing the rule of law. Instead, in Afghanistan, the United States prioritized counterterrorism—to the point where attempts by European Union nations to focus on the root causes of terrorism, particularly improving the rule of law, created tensions with the United States.<sup>53</sup>

Various after-action reports generally agree on what should be done differently in the future. The EU, UK, and Danish reports echo SIGAR's call for longer time horizons on stabilization campaigns and emphasize that short-term gains are not always sustainable.<sup>54</sup> All three reports also stress the need to moderate spending levels and keep them within host nation absorption levels.<sup>55</sup> One way to alleviate pressure to spend money quickly would be to provide multi-year funding, but this was rare. The UK assessment credits that country with being one of the few donors to do so.<sup>56</sup>

## Global Fragility Act

The U.S. government has attempted to correct these mistakes with the passage of the 2019 Global Fragility Act (GFA) and the rollout of a new approach to stabilization in four priority countries and one priority region. The GFA is "a game-changing law that puts peacebuilding and conflict prevention at the center of U.S. foreign policy, assistance, and security strategy," according to one analysis.<sup>57</sup>

The bill promises a long list of improvements to the U.S. approach to conflict prevention and stabilization. Among other things, it requires the U.S. to develop 10-year interagency strategies, to ensure that they are locally led, improve coordination with other donors and multilateral organizations, and improve monitoring and evaluation.<sup>58</sup> But since the GFA provides relatively few resources, in terms both of funding and staffing, these worthy goals are in essence a series of unfunded mandates.<sup>59</sup>

SIGAR has advised U.S. government teams leading stabilization efforts in GFA and non-GFA countries (including Somalia, Libya, and Mozambique) to learn from the failure of the U.S. strategy in Afghanistan. There, stabilization programming was forced to hopscotch around the map, following the military's shifting frontlines, with poor results.<sup>60</sup> Instead, stabilization programming requires an enduring commitment, not just to a country, but also to specific subnational regions.

Physical security is the bedrock of stability.<sup>61</sup> Stabilization programs must focus on subnational areas where security can be provided to the population, both during the day and at night.<sup>62</sup> In Afghanistan, stabilization was counterproductive when it was implemented in insecure areas.<sup>63</sup> The United States and its allies must also focus on a narrow set of sectoral priorities and should not seek to transform host nation governments, societies, and economies, as it did in Afghanistan.<sup>64</sup> Rebuilding targeted basic services should be the focus, especially the rule of law, including in the informal sector.<sup>65</sup> This should be done with a careful adherence to what is locally sustainable.<sup>66</sup>

## Staffing and flexibility

While the GFA is a major step in the right direction, other reforms are still urgently needed. For example, the GFA restricts the degree to which USAID and State can invest in their staff and capabilities by limiting administrative expenses to 5 percent of overall funding.<sup>67</sup> SIGAR agrees with the Stabilization Assistance Review's recommendation that the United States needs a mechanism to rapidly deploy civilian-led teams into conflict-affected areas.<sup>68</sup>

But deploying civilians is not enough. As per the SAR, civilian agencies also need more flexible security and risk management standards to enable them to co-deploy with the military.<sup>69</sup> SIGAR applauds the passage of the 2023 Diplomatic Support and Security Act. According to Senator Chris Murphy, one of the bill's sponsors, it "begin[s] rolling back . . . [the] bunker mentality' at the State Department that hampers American diplomats' ability to conduct work in foreign conflict zones and politically unstable countries."<sup>70</sup> More work remains to be done on this front.

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<sup>1</sup> SIGAR, *Corruption in Conflict: Lessons from the U.S. Experience in Afghanistan*, SIGAR-16-58-LL, September 2016, p. 11.

<sup>2</sup> SIGAR, *Stabilization: Lessons from the U.S. Experience in Afghanistan*, SIGAR-18-48-LL, May 2018, p. 51.

<sup>3</sup> SIGAR, *What We Need to Learn: Lessons from Twenty Years of Afghanistan Reconstruction*, SIGAR-21-48-LL, August 2021, p. 27; SIGAR, *Stabilization: Lessons from the U.S. Experience in Afghanistan*, SIGAR-18-48-LL, May 2018, p. 158; SIGAR, *Why the Afghan Security Forces Collapsed*, SIGAR-23-16-IP, February 2023, pp. i, 14, 60, 61.

<sup>4</sup> SIGAR, *What We Need to Learn: Lessons from Twenty Years of Afghanistan Reconstruction*, SIGAR-21-48-LL, August 2021, pp. 32, 72.

<sup>5</sup> USAID, "Localization at USAID: The Vision and Approach," August 2022, pp. 1–2. In November 2021, USAID Administrator Power announced the agency's new localization strategy. USAID, "Localization," USAID, accessed May 12, 2022.

<sup>6</sup> Patrick Fine, "Rethinking the Constraints to Localization of Foreign Aid," Brookings, December 1, 2022. So far, the trend line is worrying. Between 2020 and 2022, funding for large international organizations increased nearly fourfold, while most of USAID's largest partners saw stable or increased funding from 2018 to 2022. Former Senior Deputy USAID Administrator Patrick Fine remarked, "This is not what you would expect to see if localization was taking hold."

<sup>7</sup> Maurice Williams, John Kean, Charles Jenkins, Joann Feldman, and Patricia Fisher-Harris, "Retrospective Review of U.S. Assistance to Afghanistan," DEVRES Inc., October 31, 1988, pp. 7, 8 46–47.

<sup>8</sup> Michael Igoe and Adva Salinger, "Congress Grills USAID Chief on Localization, Ukraine, Food Crisis," Devex, May 12, 2022.

<sup>9</sup> SIGAR, *What We Need to Learn: Lessons from Twenty Years of Afghanistan Reconstruction*, SIGAR-21-48-LL, August 2021, p. 27.

<sup>10</sup> Nordic Consulting Group, "Review of Danish Evaluation Findings and Lessons Learned in Afghanistan," produced on behalf of Global Affairs Canada, September 2019, p. 18.

<sup>11</sup> SIGAR, *What We Need to Learn: Lessons from Twenty Years of Afghanistan Reconstruction*, SIGAR-21-48-LL, August 2021, p. 27; SIGAR, *Stabilization: Lessons from the U.S. Experience in Afghanistan*, SIGAR-18-48-LL, May 2018, p. 158; SIGAR, *Why the Afghan Security Forces Collapsed*, SIGAR-23-16-IP, February 2023, pp. i, 14, 60–61.

<sup>12</sup> For example, under Administrator Rajiv Shah, USAID set a goal of directing 30 percent of spending to local partners, which proved unrealistic. George Ingram, "Locally Driven Development: Overcoming the Obstacles," Brookings, May 2022, p. 5.

<sup>13</sup> Jennifer Murtazasvhili, "Pathologies of Centralized State-Building – Analysis," *Eurasia Review*, December 15, 2019.

<sup>14</sup> Joseph Siegle and Patrick Mahony, "Assessing the Merits of Decentralization as a Conflict Mitigation Strategy," prepared on behalf of USAID, January 1, 2006. In contrast, in Afghanistan, the central government held all responsibility for financial planning and prioritization. SIGAR, *Stabilization: Lessons from the U.S. Experience in Afghanistan*, SIGAR-18-48-LL, May 2018, p. 72.

<sup>15</sup> Jennifer Murtazasvhili, "Pathologies of Centralized State-Building – Analysis," *Eurasia Review*, December 15, 2019.

- <sup>16</sup> Sayed Madadi, “Dysfunctional Centralization and Growing Fragility Under Taliban Rule,” Middle East Institute, September 6, 2022.
- <sup>17</sup> Frances Brown, “Aiding Afghan Local Governance: What Went Wrong?,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, November 2021, pp. 3–4.
- <sup>18</sup> SIGAR, *Stabilization: Lessons from the U.S. Experience in Afghanistan*, SIGAR-18-48-LL, May 2018, p. 165.
- <sup>19</sup> For example, the United States cancelled two on-budget programs, the Afghanistan Stabilization Program (ASP) and District Delivery Program, after they were unable to demonstrate short-term success. However, the cancellation of the programs left the Afghan government without the strengthened and reformed personnel structure and processes to facilitate legitimate local governance, the lack of which was a central driver of government corruption. ASP was ultimately replaced by an unsustainable off-budget program. SIGAR, *Stabilization: Lessons from the U.S. Experience in Afghanistan*, SIGAR-18-48-LL, May 2018, pp. 86, 158, 219; SIGAR, *What We Need to Learn: Lessons from Twenty Years of Afghanistan Reconstruction*, SIGAR-21-48-LL, August 2021, pp. 32, 44–45.
- <sup>20</sup> SIGAR, *Stabilization: Lessons from the U.S. Experience in Afghanistan*, SIGAR-18-48-LL, May 2018, p. 72.
- <sup>21</sup> SIGAR, *What We Need to Learn: Lessons from Twenty Years of Afghanistan Reconstruction*, SIGAR-21-48-LL, August 2021, p. 27.
- <sup>22</sup> SIGAR, *What We Need to Learn: Lessons from Twenty Years of Afghanistan Reconstruction*, SIGAR-21-48-LL, August 2021, pp. 32, 41.
- <sup>23</sup> SIGAR, *What We Need to Learn: Lessons from Twenty Years of Afghanistan Reconstruction*, SIGAR-21-48-LL, August 2021, p. 32.
- <sup>24</sup> Nordic Consulting Group, “Review of Danish Evaluation Findings and Lessons Learned in Afghanistan,” produced on behalf of Global Affairs Canada, September 2019, p. 25; Integrity Watch Afghanistan, “The Game of Numbers: Analysis of the National Budget 2018,” December 2017, p. 3; Senate Committee on Foreign Relations Majority Staff, “Evaluating U.S. Foreign Assistance to Afghanistan,” 2011, electronic p. 21.
- <sup>25</sup> Patrick Fine, “Rethinking the Constraints to Localization of Foreign Aid,” Brookings, December 1, 2022.
- <sup>26</sup> USAID OIG, “Insufficient Oversight of Public international Organizations Puts U.S. Foreign Assistance at Risk,” Audit Report No. 8-000-18-003-P, September 25, 2018, p. 2.
- <sup>27</sup> Michael Igoe and Adva Salinger, “Congress Grills USAID Chief on Localization, Ukraine, Food Crisis,” Devex, May 12, 2022; Patrick Fine, “Rethinking the Constraints to Localization of Foreign Aid,” Brookings, December 1, 2022.
- <sup>28</sup> George Ingram, “Locally Driven Development: Overcoming the Obstacles,” Brookings, May 2022, p. 7.
- <sup>29</sup> SIGAR, *Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund: The World Bank Needs to Improve How it Monitors Implementation, Shares Information, and Determines the Impact of Donor Contributions*, SIGAR-18-48-AR, April 2018, electronic p. 3; USAID OIG, “Insufficient Oversight of Public international Organizations Puts U.S. Foreign Assistance at Risk,” Audit Report No. 8-000-18-003-P, September 25, 2018, p. 2.
- <sup>30</sup> A 2017 strategic evaluation of USAID’s Afghanistan programming described senior officials expressing the belief that Afghan-led, sustainable programming remained “largely aspirational.” SIGAR, *What We Need to Learn: Lessons from Twenty Years of Afghanistan Reconstruction*, SIGAR-21-48-LL, August 2021, pp. 40, 72, 74.
- <sup>31</sup> SIGAR, *What We Need to Learn: Lessons from Twenty Years of Afghanistan Reconstruction*, SIGAR-21-48-LL, August 2021, p. 32.
- <sup>32</sup> SIGAR, *What We Need to Learn: Lessons from Twenty Years of Afghanistan Reconstruction*, SIGAR-21-48-LL, August 2021, p. 41.
- <sup>33</sup> Former senior USAID official Patrick Fine also argues that USAID needs to stop delegating risk management to contractors and build that capacity internally. Patrick Fine, “Rethinking the Constraints to Localization of Foreign Aid,” Brookings, December 1, 2022.
- <sup>34</sup> Patrick Fine, “Rethinking the Constraints to Localization of Foreign Aid,” Brookings, December 1, 2022.
- <sup>35</sup> Patrick Fine, “Rethinking the Constraints to Localization of Foreign Aid,” Brookings, December 1, 2022; George Ingram, “Locally Driven Development: Overcoming the Obstacles,” Brookings, May 2022, p. 4.
- <sup>36</sup> Patrick Fine, “Rethinking the Constraints to Localization of Foreign Aid,” Brookings, December 1, 2022.
- <sup>37</sup> SIGAR, *Stabilization: Lessons from the U.S. Experience in Afghanistan*, SIGAR-18-48-LL, May 2018, pp. 186–187.
- <sup>38</sup> SIGAR, *What We Need to Learn: Lessons from Twenty Years of Afghanistan Reconstruction*, SIGAR-21-48-LL, August 2021, p. 28.
- <sup>39</sup> George Ingram, “Locally Driven Development: Overcoming the Obstacles,” Brookings, May 2022, p. 5.
- <sup>40</sup> George Ingram, “Locally Driven Development: Overcoming the Obstacles,” Brookings, May 2022, p. 5.

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- <sup>41</sup> George Ingram, “Locally Driven Development: Overcoming the Obstacles,” Brookings, May 2022, pp. 5, 33.
- <sup>42</sup> State, USAID, and DOD, “Stabilization Assistance Review,” 2018, p. 1; SIGAR, *What We Need to Learn: Lessons from Twenty Years of Afghanistan Reconstruction*, August 2021, SIGAR-21-46-LL, pp. 95–96.
- <sup>43</sup> State, USAID, and DOD, “Stabilization Assistance Review,” 2018, p. ii; SIGAR, *What We Need to Learn: Lessons from Twenty Years of Afghanistan Reconstruction*, August 2021, SIGAR-21-46-LL, p. xii.
- <sup>44</sup> DOD OIG, State OIG, and USAID OIG, “Joint Strategic Oversight Plan for Ukraine Response,” January 2023, p. 9.
- <sup>45</sup> State, USAID, and DOD, “Stabilization Assistance Review,” 2018, p. 2.
- <sup>46</sup> Nordic Consulting Group, “Review of Danish Evaluation Findings and Lessons Learned in Afghanistan,” produced on behalf of Global Affairs Canada, September 2019, p. 28; Independent Commission for Aid Impact, “UK Aid to Afghanistan: Country Portfolio Review,” November 2022, pp. ii, 16.
- <sup>47</sup> State USAID, and DOD, “Stabilization Assistance Review,” 2018, p. 5.
- <sup>48</sup> SIGAR, *What We Need to Learn: Lessons from Twenty Years of Afghanistan Reconstruction*, August 2021, SIGAR-21-46-LL, pp. 10, 50; Renanah Miles, “The State Department and USAID and the Flawed Mandate for Stabilization and Reconstruction,” *PRISM*, no. 1, vol. 2, July 2013, pp. 37–38.
- <sup>49</sup> SIGAR, *What We Need to Learn: Lessons from Twenty Years of Afghanistan Reconstruction*, August 2021, SIGAR-21-46-LL, pp. 10–11; SIGAR, *Stabilization: Lessons from the U.S. Experience in Afghanistan*, SIGAR-18-48-LL, May 2018, pp. 47–48.
- <sup>50</sup> SIGAR, *What We Need to Learn: Lessons from Twenty Years of Afghanistan Reconstruction*, August 2021, SIGAR-21-46-LL, pp. 10–11; SIGAR, *Stabilization: Lessons from the U.S. Experience in Afghanistan*, SIGAR-18-48-LL, May 2018, pp. 47–48.
- <sup>51</sup> Independent Commission for Aid Impact, “UK Aid to Afghanistan: Country Portfolio Review,” November 2022, p. 18.
- <sup>52</sup> State, USAID, and DOD, “Stabilization Assistance Review,” 2018, p. 14.
- <sup>53</sup> Oz Hassan, “Afghanistan Lessons Learnt from 20 Years of Supporting Democracy, Development, and Security,” produced for the EU Parliament Directorate-General for External Policies, February 2023, p. 18; Independent Commission for Aid Impact, “UK Aid to Afghanistan: Country Portfolio Review,” November 2022, p. 18; SIGAR, *What We Need to Learn: Lessons from Twenty Years of Afghanistan Reconstruction*, August 2021, SIGAR-21-46-LL, p. 30.
- <sup>54</sup> Independent Commission for Aid Impact, “UK Aid to Afghanistan: Country Portfolio Review,” November 2022, p. 42; Nordic Consulting Group, “Review of Danish Evaluation Findings and Lessons Learned in Afghanistan,” produced for Global Affairs Canada, September 2019, p. 27; SIGAR, *What We Need to Learn: Lessons from Twenty Years of Afghanistan Reconstruction*, August 2021, SIGAR-21-46-LL, p. 22, 36–37; SIGAR, *Stabilization: Lessons from the U.S. Experience in Afghanistan*, SIGAR-18-48-LL, May 2018, p. 196; Dr. Oz Hassan, “Afghanistan Lessons Learnt from 20 Years of Supporting Democracy, Development, and Security,” produced for the EU Parliament Directorate-General for External Policies, February 2023, p. 66.
- <sup>55</sup> Dr. Oz Hassan, “Afghanistan Lessons Learnt from 20 Years of Supporting Democracy, Development, and Security,” produced for the EU Parliament Directorate-General for External Policies, February 2023, p. 38; Nordic Consulting Group, “Review of Danish Evaluation Findings and Lessons Learned in Afghanistan,” produced for Global Affairs Canada, September 2019, p. v; Independent Commission for Aid Impact, “UK Aid to Afghanistan: Country Portfolio Review,” November 2022, p. 19.
- <sup>56</sup> Independent Commission for Aid Impact, “UK Aid to Afghanistan: Country Portfolio Review,” November 2022, p. 35.
- <sup>57</sup> Liz Hume, “Successful Implementation of the Global Fragility Act: An Evidence Based Approach,” *Fragile States Index*, July 12, 2022.
- <sup>58</sup> Global Fragility Act of 2019, as part of the Further Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2020, Pub. L. No. 116-44, § 501 (2019).
- <sup>59</sup> In fact, according to the Center for Strategic and International Studies, there is a perception that the new funding sources created by the Global Fragility Act are “just another low dollar amount funding stream to be used for country team activities and not the shift in interagency culture focused on prevention and stabilization efforts it was intended to be.” The report also describes the process of accessing the funds as “cumbersome” and expresses concern that additional staff are necessary for successful implementation. John Christianson, Courtney Stiles Herdt, and Ginny Nadolny, “The Global Fragility Act: Unlocking the Full Potential of Interagency Cooperation,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, May 16, 2023.
- <sup>60</sup> SIGAR, *Stabilization: Lessons from the U.S. Experience in Afghanistan*, SIGAR-18-48-LL, May 2018, p. 138.
- <sup>61</sup> SIGAR, *Stabilization: Lessons from the U.S. Experience in Afghanistan*, SIGAR-18-48-LL, May 2018, p. 168.
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<sup>62</sup> State USAID, and DOD, “Stabilization Assistance Review,” 2018, pp. 8–9.

<sup>63</sup> SIGAR, *Stabilization: Lessons from the U.S. Experience in Afghanistan*, SIGAR-18-48-LL, May 2018, p. 175.

<sup>64</sup> Stabilisation Unit, “U.K. Government’s Approach to Stabilisation,” March 2019, p. 19; SIGAR, *Stabilization: Lessons from the U.S. Experience in Afghanistan*, SIGAR-18-48-LL, May 2018, pp. 26–27, 163, 196, 273.

<sup>65</sup> SIGAR, *Stabilization: Lessons from the U.S. Experience in Afghanistan*, SIGAR-18-48-LL, May 2018, pp. 157, 189; SIGAR, *What We Need to Learn: Lessons from Twenty Years of Afghanistan Reconstruction*, August 2021, SIGAR-21-46-LL, p. viii; Stabilisation Unit, “U.K. Government’s Approach to Stabilisation,” March 2019, pp. 19, 67; State, USAID, and DOD, “Stabilization Assistance Review,” 2018, pp. 4, 15.

<sup>66</sup> SIGAR, *What We Need to Learn: Lessons from Twenty Years of Afghanistan Reconstruction*, August 2021, SIGAR-21-46-LL, p. 39.

<sup>67</sup> Global Fragility Act of 2019, as part of the Further Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2020, Pub. L. No. 116-44, § 501 (2019).

<sup>68</sup> State, USAID, and DOD, “Stabilization Assistance Review,” 2018, p. 12.

<sup>69</sup> State, USAID, and DOD, “Stabilization Assistance Review,” 2018, p. 12.

<sup>70</sup> Senator James Risch, “Risch on the Final Passage of FY2023 NDAA,” press release, December 15, 2022; Robbie Gramer, “New Bill Takes Aim at State Department’s Bunker Mentality,” *Politico*, March 10, 2021.