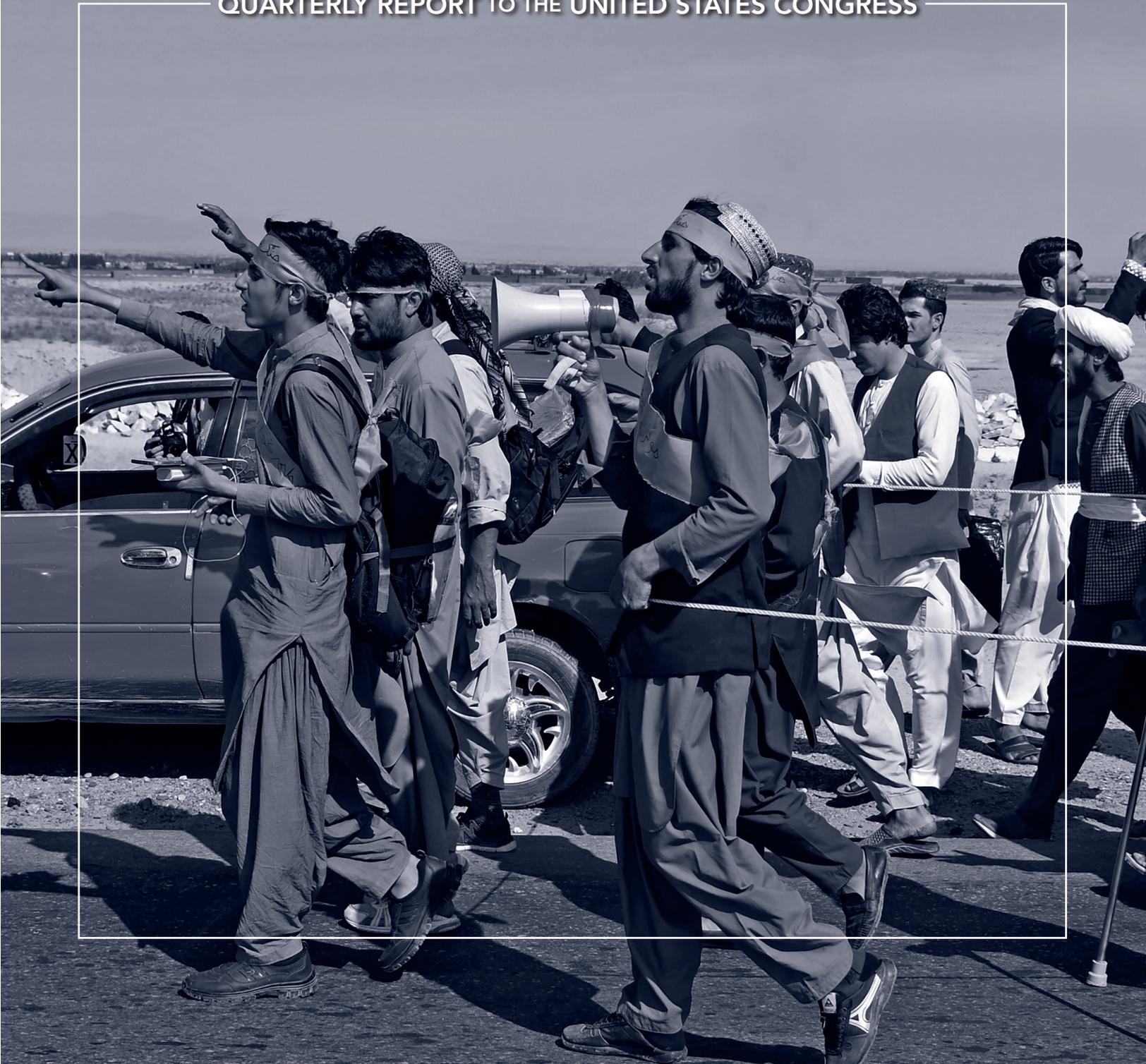


SIGAR

Special Inspector General for
Afghanistan Reconstruction

JUL 30
2018

QUARTERLY REPORT TO THE UNITED STATES CONGRESS





SPECIAL INSPECTOR GENERAL FOR
AFGHANISTAN RECONSTRUCTION

I am pleased to submit to Congress and the Secretaries of State and Defense, SIGAR's 40th quarterly report on the status of reconstruction in Afghanistan.

In the Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2017, Congress directed SIGAR to assess the Afghan government's implementation of its national anticorruption strategy and the action plans of five ministries. This quarter, SIGAR released its assessment. As described in Section Two of this report, SIGAR found that the Afghan government has begun to implement an anticorruption strategy, but that significant questions remain regarding its ability to fully implement the strategy and demonstrate a lasting commitment to combatting corruption. As directed by the Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2018, SIGAR will submit an updated assessment to Congress next year that includes an examination of whether the Afghan government is making progress toward achieving its anticorruption objectives.

SIGAR will also be looking into concerns raised by the Department of Justice (DOJ) and by other officials and donors during my most recent trip to Afghanistan in June. As discussed in Section Three of this report, DOJ views the situation in Afghanistan as "consistent with a largely lawless, weak, and dysfunctional government" with many corruption cases languishing due to the lack of political will—rather than capacity—of the Afghan government. We share the concern of donors that the Afghan government may be going back to "business as usual" and simply "checking the box" when it comes to fighting corruption.

In particular, SIGAR is concerned that the specialized anticorruption court established by President Ashraf Ghani in May 2016, the Anti-Corruption Justice Center (ACJC), has shown little ability to function as intended. At the ACJC, Major Crimes Task Force investigators, Attorney General's Office prosecutors, and judges work to combat serious corruption. DOJ reports that the Ministry of Interior, despite expressing willingness, has not helped the ACJC execute search and arrest warrants. According to DOJ, more than 100 ACJC warrants remain outstanding. DOJ believes the problem of powerful and corrupt actors ignoring warrants is so severe that it has undermined the fundamental legitimacy and authority of the ACJC. In addition, according to DOJ, there is significant corruption within the ACJC, with nearly 40 percent of the prosecutors assigned to it having failed polygraphs. SIGAR's new review will also be looking at the effectiveness of the Counter-Narcotics Justice Center (CNJC) as well as the Afghan government's response to the anticorruption provisions of the Afghanistan Compact.

Additionally, Section Three of this report features several new analyses using district-control data supplied by NATO's Resolute Support mission, including maps comparing district control with United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime-reported opium poppy cultivation, open-source reported security incidents, and UN-reported internal displacement. It also contains a discussion of the lessons to be drawn from the Afghanistan Peace and Reintegration Program that ended in 2016.

This quarter SIGAR issued its fourth and fifth lessons-learned reports, *Stabilization: Lessons from the U.S. Experience in Afghanistan* and *Counternarcotics: Lessons from the U.S. Experience in Afghanistan*. The stabilization report, which is discussed in Section One of this report, draws important lessons from the U.S. experience with stabilization in Afghanistan from 2002 to 2017, with a special focus on the years after 2009, when most of the \$4.7 billion in stabilization funds was spent. The counternarcotics report draws important lessons from U.S. counternarcotics efforts in Afghanistan from 2002 to 2017, during which time the U.S. government allocated roughly \$8.6 billion on counternarcotics activities there. It will be discussed at greater length, and with reference to new developments, in SIGAR's next quarterly report.

The Lessons Learned Program (LLP) recently reached out to U.S. government agencies to discuss its current list of ongoing reports and to solicit feedback and input on future lessons-learned topics. At the suggestion of Embassy Kabul and the Resolute Support mission, LLP is currently developing reports on elections and the reintegration of insurgents.

In addition to the anticorruption assessment, SIGAR published a performance audit this quarter examining USAID's \$301 million Regional Agriculture Development Program. SIGAR also completed five financial audits covering a range of topics from the Department of the Army's freedom-of-maneuver project to the Department of Defense's Ministerial Development Program. To date, SIGAR's financial audits have identified more than \$413.1 million in questioned costs. In addition, SIGAR published two inspection reports. These reports examined the construction, use, and maintenance of Wardak prison and the Afghan National Army's ground forces complex.

SIGAR's Office of Special Projects issued five reports on such issues as the response to a Congressional request to calculate the total amount of waste, fraud, and abuse identified by SIGAR since 2008; construction of the Qeysar-to-Laman section of the Ring Road; and the status of U.S. support to the extractives sector in Afghanistan. Special Projects also issued one alert letter, one fact sheet, and one inquiry letter.

SIGAR investigations this quarter resulted in one indictment, two criminal informations, three guilty pleas, one sentencing, and \$81,000 in cost savings to the U.S. government. SIGAR initiated six new cases and closed 25, bringing the total number of ongoing investigations to 180. To date, SIGAR investigations have resulted in a cumulative total of 127 criminal convictions. Criminal fines, restitutions, forfeitures, civil settlements, and U.S. government cost savings and recoveries total over \$1.2 billion.

This quarter, SIGAR's suspension and debarment program referred three individuals and two entities for suspension or debarment based on evidence developed as part of investigations conducted by SIGAR in Afghanistan and the United States. These referrals bring the total number of individuals and companies referred by SIGAR since 2008 to 900, encompassing 501 individuals and 399 companies to date.

In a positive development with regard to an issue SIGAR has raised repeatedly, the Joint Explanatory Statement from the Conference Report (H. Rept. 115-863) to accompany H.R. 5515, the John S. McCain National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2019, noted that the conferees are disappointed by the Department of Defense's lack of transparency on basic information such as kinetic-strike data, Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF) development, retention and casualty rates, and progress on achieving the central tenets of the bilateral Afghanistan Compact. The report said the restriction of information in this manner undermines public confidence, hinders necessary congressional oversight, and raises legitimate questions about the efficacy of current U.S. efforts in Afghanistan.

My staff and I remain committed to conducting the oversight necessary to identify waste, fraud, and abuse; develop cases against individuals and companies engaged in criminal activity; and offer recommendations to improve the effectiveness of reconstruction.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'John F. Sopko', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

John F. Sopko
Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report summarizes SIGAR’s oversight work and updates developments in the four major sectors of reconstruction efforts in Afghanistan from April 1 to June 30, 2018.* It also includes an essay on the lessons learned from stabilization programs in Afghanistan. During this reporting period, SIGAR published 16 audits, inspections, and other products assessing U.S. efforts to build the Afghan security forces, improve governance, facilitate economic and social development, and combat the production and sale of narcotics. During the reporting period, SIGAR criminal investigations resulted in one indictment, two criminal informations, three guilty pleas, one sentencing, and \$81,000 in cost savings to the U.S. government. SIGAR initiated six new cases and closed 25, bringing the total number of ongoing investigations to 180. Additionally, SIGAR’s suspension and debarment program referred three individuals and two entities for suspension or debarment based on evidence developed as part of investigations conducted by SIGAR in Afghanistan and in the United States.

SIGAR OVERVIEW

AUDITS AND INSPECTIONS

This quarter, SIGAR published two performance audits, five financial audits, and two inspection reports.

The **performance audit reports** examined:

- Afghanistan’s anticorruption strategy and efforts
- The performance and sustainability of USAID’s Regional Agriculture Development Program

The **financial audit reports** identified \$104,292 in questioned costs as a result of internal-control deficiencies and noncompliance issues.

The **inspection reports** found:

- Inadequate government oversight and contractor noncompliance have increased safety and health risks while also resulting in wasted U.S. funds at Wardak Prison.
- U.S. Army Corps of Engineers-contracted construction of the Afghan National Army’s ground forces complex generally met contract requirements, but at least \$406,000 may have been wasted on the project.

* As provided in its authorizing statute, SIGAR may also report on products and events occurring after June 30, 2018, up to the publication date of this report. Unless otherwise noted, all afghani-to-U.S. dollar conversions used in this report are derived by averaging the last three months of exchange-rate data available through Da Afghanistan Bank (www.dab.gov.af). Data as of June 26, 2018.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

SPECIAL PROJECTS

This quarter SIGAR's Office of Special Projects wrote five reports, an alert letter, a fact sheet, and an inquiry letter expressing concern on a range of issues including:

- a Congressional request to calculate the total amount of waste, fraud, and abuse identified by SIGAR since 2008
- USAID-supported health facilities in Kandahar Province
- construction of the Qeysar-to-Laman section of the Ring Road
- the status of U.S. support to the extractives sector in Afghanistan

LESSONS LEARNED

This quarter, SIGAR's Lessons Learned Program issued two reports, *Stabilization: Lessons from the U.S. Experience in Afghanistan*, and *Counternarcotics: Lessons from the U.S. Experience in Afghanistan*. The stabilization report draws important lessons from the U.S. experience with stabilization in Afghanistan, with a special focus on the years after 2009, when most of the stabilization funding was spent. The counternarcotics report draws important lessons from U.S. counternarcotics efforts in Afghanistan from 2002 to 2017, during which time the U.S. spent \$8.62 billion on counternarcotics activities in Afghanistan.

INVESTIGATIONS

During the reporting period, SIGAR investigations resulted in one indictment, two criminal informations, three guilty pleas, one sentencing, and \$81,000 in cost savings to the U.S. government. SIGAR initiated six new cases and closed 25, bringing the total number of ongoing investigations to 180. SIGAR's suspension and debarment program referred three individuals and two entities for suspension or debarment based on evidence developed as part of investigations conducted by SIGAR in Afghanistan and the United States.

Investigations highlights include:

- a U.S. contractor pleaded guilty to conspiracy to provide kickbacks
- a former U.S. contractor employee was sentenced for receiving kickback payments
- a former U.S. military member pleaded guilty to receiving and agreeing to receive bribes
- a former U.S. contractor employee pleaded guilty to transporting stolen money
- a SIGAR investigation resulted in \$81,000 cost avoidance to the U.S. government

TABLE OF CONTENTS



SECTION 1

1 STABILIZING AFGHANISTAN: LESSONS FROM A LONG STRUGGLE

- 5 SIGAR Examines Lessons From 15 Years of Stabilization
- 7 An Amorphous and Shifting Concept
- 8 A Quick Tour of Stabilization Aims and Operations
- 10 Seven Key Findings
- 11 Insecurity and Corruption Weaken Stabilization
- 12 Stabilization May Still Be Worth Attempting
- 13 SIGAR Recommends Actions for Better Stabilization Outcomes



SECTION 2

15 SIGAR OVERSIGHT ACTIVITIES

- 18 Audits
- 19 Quarterly Highlight: SIGAR's Assessment of Afghanistan's Anticorruption Efforts
- 25 Inspections
- 27 Special Projects
- 31 Lessons Learned
- 34 Investigations
- 38 Other SIGAR Oversight Activities
- 41 SIGAR Budget
- 41 SIGAR Staff



SECTION 3

43 RECONSTRUCTION UPDATE

- 46 Status of Funds
- 62 Security
- 78 Quarterly Highlight: The 1st Security Force Assistance Brigade
- 110 Governance
- 114 Quarterly Highlight: Previous Nationwide Ceasefires and Localized Truces in Post-2001 Afghanistan
- 117 Quarterly Highlight: Lessons from the Afghanistan Peace and Reintegration Program
- 146 Economic and Social Development
- 178 Counternarcotics

TABLE OF CONTENTS



SECTION 4

203 OTHER AGENCY OVERSIGHT

206 Completed Oversight Activities

207 Ongoing Oversight Activities



APPENDICES AND ENDNOTES

216 Appendix A: Cross-Reference of Report to Statutory Requirements

222 Appendix B: U.S. Funds for Afghanistan Reconstruction

224 Appendix C: SIGAR Written Products

229 Appendix D: SIGAR Investigations and Hotline

235 Appendix E: SIGAR Data Call Questions That Received Classified or Otherwise Restricted Responses

239 Appendix F: Resolute Support-Defined Stability Data for Afghanistan's 407 Districts as of May 15, 2018

250 Appendix G: Abbreviations and Acronyms

257 Endnotes

“The poor results of Afghanistan stabilization may make it tempting to conclude that stabilization should never be undertaken again. However, given the security challenges we face in today’s world, that simply may not be a realistic choice.”

—*Inspector General John Sopko*

1 STABILIZING AFGHANISTAN: LESSONS FROM A LONG STRUGGLE



STABILIZATION LESSONS CONTENTS

SIGAR Examines Lessons From 15 Years of Stabilization	5
An Amorphous and Shifting Concept	7
A Quick Tour of Stabilization Aims and Operations	8
Seven Key Findings	10
Insecurity and Corruption Weaken Stabilization	11
Stabilization May Still Be Worth Attempting	12
SIGAR Recommends Actions for Better Stabilization Outcomes	13

Photo on previous page

Guards provide security for the Khost–Gardez road construction project. (USAID photo)

STABILIZING AFGHANISTAN: LESSONS FROM A LONG STRUGGLE

Opening the June 20, 2018, House Committee on Foreign Affairs hearing on U.S. policy toward Afghanistan, Chairman Ed Royce of California said the goal of the U.S. investment in lives and money in Afghanistan is “to achieve a stable Afghanistan that does not harbor international terrorists.”¹ At the witness table, Ambassador Alice G. Wells, the State Department’s senior bureau official for South and Central Asian Affairs, struck a similar note, speaking of “our strategic objective of a more stable and secure Afghanistan that is never again a platform for terrorists to plan and execute attacks against the United States.”²

Promoting stability in another country can encompass a variety of actions, including military, political, and developmental. In fragile or conflict-ridden countries, the approach can also include stabilization programs, which U.S. agencies have defined as “a political endeavor involving an integrated civilian-military process to create conditions where locally legitimate authorities and systems can peaceably manage conflict and prevent a



Marines talk with an elder to offer assistance after heavy rains, Helmand Province, 2011. (USMC photo by Gunnery Sergeant Bryce Piper)

STABILIZING AFGHANISTAN LESSONS

resurgence of violence.” That definition, adopted by the Secretaries of State and Defense, and by the administrator of the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), further explains that stabilization is “transitional in nature,” and “may include efforts to establish civil security, provide access to dispute resolution, deliver targeted basic services, and establish a foundation for the return of displaced people and longer term development.”³

The three agencies note that between fiscal years 2009 and 2016, the United States provided foreign assistance to 16 conflict-affected “case-study” countries, including Afghanistan. A significant portion of that assistance—13 percent of the total—was designated for “conflict mitigation and stabilization.”⁴ The June 20 House hearing on Afghanistan, however, featured no direct discussion of stabilization strategy and programs.⁵ The reason is simply that, after years of conducting stabilization programs with disappointing results, the United States no longer operates stabilization programs in Afghanistan. The Department of Defense (DOD) has a sharply reduced footprint in Afghanistan since the 2011 peak of more than 100,000 personnel, and is focused on a train, advise, assist mission with Afghan security forces, with additional tasks in combat support and counterterrorism operations.⁶ Meanwhile, USAID confirms that “USAID/Afghanistan, as a policy, is out of the stabilization business, and has no new or continuing stabilization projects, post-12/28/2015.”⁷

Until that point, however, the United States was spending significant amounts on stabilization. USAID, the principal conduit for nonmilitary assistance in Afghanistan, has recorded total disbursements of \$2.4 billion under the heading of stabilization. Only infrastructure (\$4.3 billion) and governance programs (\$2.7 billion) accounted for more USAID spending, while other categories trailed behind.⁸



Members of a Provincial Reconstruction Team meet with Afghan officials in Zabul Province to discuss distribution of winter supplies, 2011. (USAF photo by Staff Sgt. Brian Ferguson)

STABILIZING AFGHANISTAN LESSONS

In total, USAID, DOD, and State implemented more than \$4.7 billion in stabilization efforts and programs between 2002 and 2017. About 75 percent of these stabilization efforts took place after 2009, and nearly 60 percent took place between 2009 and 2011.⁹

Unfortunately, these efforts did not generally succeed—perhaps unsurprisingly, given the country’s long history of violence, poverty, illiteracy, active insurgent and terrorist groups, pervasive corruption, weak institutions, and other problems documented in SIGAR reports.

Today, the United States is trying other means of achieving the goal of a stable Afghanistan. Meanwhile, whether with or without stabilization programs, Afghanistan is clearly not yet stable. And as New Jersey Representative Albio Sires said to Ambassador Wells at the House Foreign Affairs Committee hearing on June 20, “We have a growing concern that Afghan politics and society is becoming increasingly fragmented, along ethnic and ideological lines.”¹⁰ He and other members expressed concern and frustration over the pace of progress toward peace and stability.

Afghanistan has been at war almost continuously since 1979, when the Soviet Union invaded to install a client regime, then through civil war, then during the U.S.-led Coalition overthrow of the Taliban regime that harbored al-Qaeda terrorists, and since then through the Coalition and the Afghan government’s struggle against stubborn and resilient insurgents and terror organizations.

Still, after all that time and all that money, why is Afghanistan not stabilized? That question, raised again at the House hearing, is the focus of SIGAR’s latest lessons-learned report, released this quarter.

SIGAR EXAMINES LESSONS FROM 15 YEARS OF STABILIZATION

On May 24, 2018, John F. Sopko, Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, appeared at the Brookings Institution in Washington, DC, to announce the issuance of the new report from SIGAR’s Lessons Learned Program, *Stabilization: Lessons from the U.S. Experience in Afghanistan*.¹¹ The event was hosted by Brookings Institution President John R. Allen, whose previous career as a Marine Corps general included commanding both NATO’s International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan and U.S. Forces-Afghanistan.

After remarks by IG Sopko, Brookings Senior Fellow Tamara Coffman Wittes moderated a panel comprising Frances Z. Brown, a fellow with the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace; Vanda Felbab-Brown, another Brookings senior fellow; U.S. Army Colonel Joel Vowell, executive officer to the Secretary of the Army; and David H. Young, SIGAR’s Lessons Learned Program lead analyst for the stabilization report.



Villagers working under a USAID grant terrace and clear an irrigation canal in Logar Province, 2013. (USAID photo by Ahmad Salarzai)

STABILIZING AFGHANISTAN LESSONS



Afghans work on a CERP-funded aqueduct system in Khost Province, 2006. (DOD photo by Staff Sgt. Robert R. Ramon)

SIGAR lessons-learned reports draw upon the agency’s own body of work and staff expertise, but also upon that of other oversight agencies, government entities, current and former officials with on the ground experience, academic institutions, and independent scholars. SIGAR’s Lessons Learned Program comprises subject-matter experts with experience of working and living in Afghanistan, aided by a team of seasoned research analysts.

Their work is intended to have broad and lasting pertinence. Even if peace were to break out in Afghanistan tomorrow, an examination of U.S. stabilization efforts between 2002 and 2017 can provide lessons for ongoing and future U.S. efforts in other countries. As General Allen told IG Sopko at the Brookings event, “We are now embroiled once again in something in Iraq, and in Syria, and it will continue . . . and we need to profit and benefit from the work that you have done, and others, to ensure that we are better prepared as we go.”¹²

With the rise of the Islamic State and its affiliates, making poorly governed spaces inhospitable to transnational terrorist groups remains a vital U.S. national security priority. Civil and military stabilization programs can theoretically be a means to achieve that goal, but as SIGAR’s new report concludes, the experience in Afghanistan illustrates the need for new thinking: “The U.S. government overestimated its ability to build and reform government institutions in Afghanistan as part of the stabilization strategy,” and “under immense pressure to quickly stabilize insecure districts, U.S. government agencies spent far too much money, far too quickly, and in a

country woefully unprepared to absorb it.” For these and other reasons, the stabilization efforts “mostly failed.”¹³

Getting stabilization right starts with absorbing the lessons learned at high cost in the cities, villages, plains, fields, and mountains of Afghanistan.

AN AMORPHOUS AND SHIFTING CONCEPT

Part of the challenge in analyzing the record of stabilization programs in Afghanistan is dealing with the various and mutating conceptions of what the term means.

“Stabilization” is a term often invoked among policy circles in the United States and other nations that provide aid to Afghanistan. Definitions have varied by U.S. agency and even changed over time within agencies. As the recent State/USAID/DOD stabilization review notes, “Despite significant international experience over recent decades, the concept of stabilization remains ill-defined and poorly institutionalized across government and multilateral structures.” And the ambiguity has practical consequences: “This lack of standardization in definition and process leads to repeated mistakes, inefficient spending, and poor accountability for results.”¹⁴

SIGAR’s lessons-learned report acknowledges the problem. “Properly defining stabilization is particularly difficult,” it observes, “because it is often used by policymakers in cables, strategic documents, and speeches as a vague euphemism to mean ‘fixing’ a country or area mired in conflict.”¹⁵ Adding to the confusion, stabilization was also the term used to describe the overall U.S. strategy during the surge of resources to Afghanistan from approximately 2009 to 2012. “On the ground in Afghanistan,” SIGAR’s report says, “stabilization refers to a specific process designed to keep insurgents out of an area after they have been initially expelled by security forces.”¹⁶

Many areas of Afghanistan required repeated operations to suppress insurgent activity, however, and security remained a prime concern. “Many communities were so dangerous,” the SIGAR report says, “that elders and government officials would not even participate in stability working groups or agree to accept projects for fear of retribution and, on at least one occasion, elders felt obliged to request permission from the Taliban’s Peshawar shura [council] before allowing stabilization projects to be implemented, clearly defeating the purpose.”¹⁷ Danger also affected the Afghan government’s ability to recruit and deploy officials and civil servants to perform governance duties.¹⁸

The report also notes that throughout much of the period it covers, the concept of stabilization was often paired with “reconstruction,” and the line between the two was sometimes blurred. Reconstruction of damaged or destroyed political, socioeconomic, and physical infrastructure can have stabilization implications, but can also be part of creating the basis for long-term development. In practice, using both terms together provided agencies

STABILIZING AFGHANISTAN LESSONS

the flexibility to implement projects that ranged from building culverts and hospitals, to training carpet weavers and government officials.

Given the penumbras and emanations of the term—and setting aside the ambiguities and complexities of loyalty and control on the ground—it is not surprising that the U.S. stabilization effort in Afghanistan took various forms and lines of effort.

A QUICK TOUR OF STABILIZATION AIMS AND OPERATIONS

SIGAR’s lessons-learned report describes how the concept of stabilization and its execution in Afghanistan took shape gradually and only coalesced into an explicit U.S. strategy in 2009—seven years after the start of U.S. reconstruction efforts.¹⁹

From 2003 to 2005, the U.S. military executed a counterinsurgency (COIN) campaign in the east and south of Afghanistan. “Having ousted the Taliban regime,” a 2003 DOD policy paper said, “the [U.S.-led] Coalition is now working to help the Afghans create a stable government and society that will prevent Afghanistan from serving as a base for terrorists.” Part of the overall strategy was stabilizing the south and east of Afghanistan—the north was largely controlled by the forces of the anti-Taliban Northern Alliance—through a political-military strategy “to prevent a Taliban resurgence and to build support for the Coalition and the central government.”²⁰

In pursuit of that strategy, U.S. military forces, State, and USAID used a growing number of provincial reconstruction teams with military and civilian members to implement projects together and strengthen provincial and district governments.

From 2005 to 2007, policy for military and civilian entities called for synchronized, interagency stabilization programming. In practice, however, agencies rarely operated in concert with one another: military units continued with the “clear, hold, and build” phases of COIN operations, while State and USAID were “normalizing” their operations in expectation that Afghanistan would be rejoining the ranks of non-conflict-affected countries.

In 2008–2009, the numbers of suicide attacks and improvised explosive devices skyrocketed. Many policymakers, seeing COIN and stabilization programs as yielding big gains in security for Iraq, determined to use the same methods to help the Afghan government secure territory and out-govern the Taliban in rural communities.

An explicit stabilization strategy unfolded in 2009–2010 as the United States surged more than 50,000 troops to clear insurgents from the most dangerous and contested districts in Afghanistan’s south and east, and deployed hundreds of civilians to use stabilization programming to hold and build those areas so the Taliban would be unwelcome and unable to return.



An Iowa National Guard member talks with Afghan children and their grandfather during a veterinary outreach program in Kunar Province, 2010. (USAF photo by Capt. Peter Shinn)

STABILIZING AFGHANISTAN LESSONS

To implement the strategy, State, USAID, and DOD increased resources to refocus existing programs and create new ones.

SIGAR's report concludes, however, that prioritizing the most dangerous parts of the country while planning to withdraw surge forces in 18 months regardless of conditions on the ground had a profound, negative impact on stabilization planning, staffing, and programming. The report documents friction between military and civilian priorities. Policy called for civilian-military coordination, but military planners made or heavily influenced most of the key decisions on which districts to focus on, deciding when communities were ready for civilian stabilization programming, and deciding what kind of projects should be implemented to win popular support.

DOD efforts included the Commander's Emergency Response Program (CERP) "designed to enable local commanders in Iraq and Afghanistan to respond to urgent humanitarian relief and reconstruction requirements within their areas of responsibility by carrying out programs that will immediately assist the indigenous population." Programs could include water and sanitation, food production and distribution, electricity, health care, and education.²¹ SIGAR's report, however, explains that CERP generally suffered from poor data collection and struggled to develop measures of effectiveness to understand the impact of its projects.

Another DOD program, Village Stability Operations (VSO), showed early potential during the surge, but deteriorated during transition as the program scaled too quickly. U.S. Special Operations Forces (SOF) implemented VSO from 2010 to 2014 to stabilize strategically located villages. The hope was to connect these villages to the formal structures of district and provincial government by offering various services. The services included security, in the form of an Afghan Local Police (ALP) force that drew its members from the communities being protected.

Once the overall security transition began in 2011, however, the VSO program compromised many of its core principles. DOD thought VSO could compensate for the aggressive pace of transition timelines by using the ALP to fill the security void created by the Coalition's withdrawal. But this compelled the program to focus on ALP development at the expense of the political and other nonmilitary aspects of the larger program. The ALP grew at an unsustainable rate, from 6,500 ALP across 93 sites in 2011, to 24,000 ALP in 2013. Some militias that operated outside of government control were absorbed into the ALP without the vetting that ALP units had initially received.

As conventional forces drew down, SOF teams withdrew with them, so there were not enough experienced U.S. personnel to staff VSO sites and train ALP units. VSO sites often transitioned to Afghan control before they were ready, and some were overrun, while others reverted to the influence of strongmen and the chaos of a predatory or absentee government. With little oversight, some militia commanders coopted the program and simply



Afghans consult in a USAID-sponsored SIKA workshop to improve governance and service delivery in Paktiya Province, 2014. (USAID photo by Ahmad Salarzai)

continued their predatory practices with the appearance of government sanction, ultimately undermining the government's legitimacy.

Even programs that were otherwise well-implemented had trouble compensating for the effects of the timeline and the continued focus on the most insecure districts. Nonetheless, during transition, there were several noticeable improvements in how stabilization programs were implemented on the ground. For example, the Coalition balanced its reliance on small infrastructure activities with an increased use of “soft” programming, like training for government officials and informal leaders. Projects became smaller, more manageable, more consultative, and thus more likely to be implemented in line with community wishes. More projects were implemented directly by partners, rather than being subcontracted out with less oversight and poor quality control.

Nonetheless, SIGAR's report notes, surveying the gamut of stabilization efforts supports the conclusion that “programming often exacerbated conflicts, enabled corruption, and bolstered support for insurgents”—the opposite of the intended results.²²

Getting better results from stabilization requires, as the Brookings Institution's Vanda Felbab-Brown noted at the release event, setting out with a view of “a realistic political end state.” In Afghanistan, “we really had a transformative, almost fantastical, political end state in mind, . . . but it had no bearing on the realistic timeline that change would take; the Karzai government's willingness to reform or decentralize; and . . . local power brokers' willingness to cede responsibility, authority, and accountability at the local level. So it was a real mismatch.”²³

SEVEN KEY FINDINGS

Afghanistan has most likely been one of the most difficult settings imaginable for conducting a large-scale stabilization mission.

Some of the factors contributing to meager results in stabilization operations in Afghanistan are summarized in the SIGAR lessons-learned report's seven key findings:

1. The U.S. government greatly overestimated its ability to build and reform government institutions in Afghanistan as part of its stabilization strategy.
2. The stabilization strategy and the programs used to achieve it were not properly tailored to the Afghan context.
3. The large sums of stabilization dollars the United States devoted to Afghanistan in search of quick gains often exacerbated conflicts, enabled corruption, and bolstered support for insurgents.
4. Because the coalition prioritized the most dangerous districts first, it continuously struggled to clear them of insurgents. As a result, the coalition couldn't make sufficient progress to convince Afghans in



Rug weavers train in a USAID Community Cohesion Initiative program in Kandahar Province, 2013. (USAID photo)

STABILIZING AFGHANISTAN LESSONS

those or other districts that the government could protect them if they openly turned against the insurgents.

5. Efforts by U.S. agencies to monitor and evaluate stabilization programs were generally poor.
6. Successes in stabilizing Afghan districts rarely lasted longer than the physical presence of coalition troops and civilians.
7. Stabilization was most successful in areas that were clearly under the physical control of government security forces, had a modicum of local governance in place prior to programming, were supported by coalition forces and civilians who recognized the value of close cooperation, and were continuously engaged by their government as programming ramped up.²⁴

As several of SIGAR's findings suggest, the extent of host-government control and security has a powerful bearing on whether stabilization programs can be carried out and produce lasting gains.

INSECURITY AND CORRUPTION WEAKEN STABILIZATION

The security element of SIGAR's last finding parallels the observation of the State/USAID/DOD review, "Stabilization is most likely to be successful where there is basic security on the ground . . . [so that] U.S. assistance partners can operate and monitor activities, access appropriate local stakeholders, and where security actors can engage in building trust with local communities."²⁵

But even mounting large and long-lasting counterinsurgency operations is no guarantee that stabilization efforts can work. British and U.S. troops spent years operating in Helmand Province, the southwestern Afghan area whose large opium output helps fund the Taliban. Nonetheless, SIGAR's report observes, "despite the positive effects of force saturation, all of Helmand eventually deteriorated and the province is now among the most clearly Taliban-controlled provinces in the country." The underlying problem was that "no amount of troops could compensate for the lack of popular legitimacy and poor capacity of Afghan civil servants and security forces in the longer term, and the quick drawdown [of foreign forces leading up to 2015] in the country's most dangerous districts created a void that allowed insurgents to take control."²⁶

Even if the host government has nominal control over an area, insurgents can compel accommodation. The World Bank has reported on evidence that providers of social services find "local 'unsavory' bargains are sometimes necessary to deliver humanitarian and development assistance."²⁷ Such bargains can involve concessions and compromises that change service in ways that "make it more acceptable to insurgents and reduce the risk of violent backlash," or tolerating corruption and sharing resources



Afghan contractors unload bags of fertilizer bound for farms in Helmand Province, 2009. (USMC photo by Lance Cpl. Jeremy Harris)

STABILIZING AFGHANISTAN LESSONS

“to appease and buy off opposing armed and unarmed elites to sustain service delivery.”²⁸

Other researchers have reported similar observations. In a report published last year by the Norwegian government, Dr. Antonio Giustozzi, who served with the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan and whose sources include Taliban councils, wrote of a diffuse Taliban “shadow government” whose activities include charging for electricity delivered by the national power utility, monitoring the activities of state-run schools, taxing all economic activity, and regulating humanitarian and development organizations’ access to territory.²⁹ And as General Allen observed at the Brookings event marking the release of SIGAR’s report, “some days there’s a distinction without a difference between the insurgent and the criminal patronage networks.”³⁰

STABILIZATION MAY STILL BE WORTH ATTEMPTING

Professor Thijs Zaalberg, the Dutch author of an article entitled “The Snake Oil of Stabilization,” citing the meager results of stabilization efforts in Afghanistan, says similar disillusion appeared among U.S. institutions in the wake of the Vietnam War, but warns that “We run the risk of throwing out the baby with the bathwater if we do not continue to build on past mistakes,” because “The type of conflict we get embroiled in is mostly not of our own choosing.”³¹

SIGAR’s lessons-learned report recognizes the temptation to swear off stabilization as a policy tool, but argues that once areas have been secured—a critical caveat in conflict settings like Afghanistan—“The absence of reliable alternatives to stabilization means that rather than discourage the use of stabilization writ large, the best course of action may be to help the U.S. government (1) balance the importance of any given stabilization mission with a realistic understanding of the level of effort required and what is achievable; and (2) improve its ability to prepare for, design, execute, monitor, and evaluate stabilization missions when it elects to undertake them.”

SIGAR also learned that progress in stabilization is slow and messy. Too often, U.S. timelines assumed that quick security gains would be matched by equally quick stabilization and governance gains. Many times, the withdrawal of security forces was followed by the return of instability.

Another important lesson was that implementing smaller projects helped programs avoid some of the common pitfalls of working in the midst of a counterinsurgency, such as predatory officials, corruption, and insurgent sabotage. Smaller projects are also conducive to community buy-in and ownership of small-scale infrastructure, and can provide opportunities for iterative learning and adaptation as work proceeds.



Workers move gravel up to the roof of a new prison in Uruzgan Province, 2011. (USAF photo by 1st Lt. Matt Schroff)

STABILIZING AFGHANISTAN LESSONS

Because the goals of stabilization remain important, whether in Afghanistan or other current or future venues, SIGAR believes it would be helpful for U.S. policymakers and lawmakers to take steps to improve the policies and practices involved in stabilization programs.

SIGAR RECOMMENDS ACTIONS FOR BETTER STABILIZATION OUTCOMES

SIGAR's report contains recommendations for the Executive Branch of government and the Congress to consider.

Recommendations for Executive Branch entities include that State should take the lead in laying out a robust whole-of-government stabilization strategy, with USAID as lead implementer and DOD in support; that DOD develop effective measures for any future programs like CERP; that DOD and USAID update counterinsurgency and stabilization doctrine and best practices to make reliable and continuous physical security the critical foundation; and that State and USAID designate a standing civilian-response corps to reduce ad hoc and improvised responses to stabilization needs.

SIGAR also recommends that Congress consider providing adequate resources to ensure Executive Branch agencies can implement reforms, as well as requiring State to develop an overall stabilization strategy, and requiring USAID to develop and implement a monitoring-and-evaluation plan and to focus its oversight on stabilization outcomes, as distinct from outputs. Details and discussions of SIGAR's recommendations appear in the full text of the Lessons Learned Program report.

Stabilization efforts in Afghanistan have been difficult and all too often disappointing failures. But the goals remain pertinent and essential: even comprehensive battlefield success cannot guarantee popular cooperation and support for the host-country government, or eliminate the doubts and grievances that can fuel future insurgencies.

SIGAR's Lessons Learned Program report offers evidence-backed findings, lessons, and recommendations that, if adopted, can improve outcomes for local populations as well as for U.S. interests in other countries. As the Carnegie Endowment's Frances Brown said at the Brookings event, "I think a key recommendation of mine is, do read the report."



Women train on using computers in Khost Province, 2015. (USAID photo)

“Fraud, waste, and abuse cannot be tolerated. Corruption cannot be tolerated. Accountability has to be established. Working with SIGAR, working with other auditing agencies ensures that we understand where money is flowing, where it is usefully flowing, and where it is flowing unusefully.”

—*Lieutenant General Austin Miller*