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Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction

UNCLASSIFED VERSION OF A PREVIOUSLY ISSUED CLASSIFIED REPORT

Afghan Air Forces: The U.S. Has Reduced its Advising for Vetting AAF and SMW Recruits and the Afghan Ministry of Defense Does Not Have the Resources Needed to Vet All Recruits or Personnel

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April 8, 2022

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This report discusses the unclassified results of SIGAR's audit of U.S. Department of Defense and Afghan Ministry of Defense (MOD) efforts to address challenges associated with corruption in the Afghan Air Force (AAF) and Special Mission Wing (SMW). The objective of this audit was to assess the extent to which the MOD vets AAF and SMW recruits for corruption.

We are making two recommendations to help ensure the MOD maximizes its anti-corruption vetting capacity. Specifically, we recommend that the Commander of Combined Security Transition Command–Afghanistan (CSTC-A):

1. **Direct U.S. advisors to coordinate with the Afghan National Army (ANA) General Staff for Intelligence (GSG2) to develop additional, anti-corruption-specific questions for the Preliminary Credibility Assessment Screening System (PCASS) program.**

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2. Direct U.S. advisors to advise and assist the MOD in identifying resource requirements that would allow GSG2 to impose PCASS and Cellular Exploitation (CELLEX) screening on all recruits to the Afghan air forces and high-risk individuals.

SIGAR received written comments on the draft of this report from the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Central Asia; CSTC-A; and the Train, Advise, Assist Command–Air (TAAC-Air). These DOD components each either concurred or did not concur with the two recommendations in the report. Specifically, the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Central Asia did not concur with our first recommendation, but concurred with our second. CSTC-A concurred with our first recommendation, partially concurred with our second, and stated it would work with TAAC-Air to implement them. TAAC-Air concurred with both recommendations and identified specific actions it would take to implement them. All comments we received contained classified information and are therefore not being published in in this report. However, we have included an unclassified summary of these comments at the end of this report.

SIGAR conducted this work under the authority of Public Law 110-181, as amended, and the Inspector General Act of 1978, as amended; and in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards.

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ABBREVIATIONS

AAF	Afghan Air Force
ANA	Afghan National Army
ANDSF	Afghan National Defense and Security Forces
CELLEX	Cellular Exploitation
CSTC-A	Combined Security Transition Command–Afghanistan
DOD	Department of Defense
GSG2	Afghan General Staff for Intelligence
MOD	Afghan Ministry of Defense
PCASS	Preliminary Credibility Assessment Screening System
SMW	Special Mission Wing
TAAC-Air	Train, Advise, Assist Command–Air

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Since 2010, the U.S. government has spent approximately $8.5 billion to support and develop the Afghan Air Force (AAF) and the Special Mission Wing (SMW).[1] According to the U.S. Department of Defense (DOD), these forces are "critical capabilities," and enhancing and growing them are a priority for the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF).[2] As a result, U.S. and coalition advisors train, advise, and assist the AAF and SMW from the ministerial level to the tactical level.[3] While DOD has reported that the AAF's pilots and ground crews show steady improvement and the SMW is one of Afghanistan's most capable forces, corruption continues to be a challenge across the ANDSF and continues to impede progress in the ANDSF.[4] The 2017 Afghan Ministry of Defense (MOD) "Policy to Prevent and Combat Corruption" adopted the World Bank's definition for corruption: the "abuse of public office for private gain."[5]

A 2018 DOD report stated that corruption is one of the top strategic threats to the legitimacy and success of the Afghan government.[6] In 2018, the Combined Security Transition Command–Afghanistan's (CSTC-A) Counter Corruption Advisory Group prioritized reducing corruption in Afghanistan's air forces.[7] The same year, the former commander of Train, Advise, Assist Command–Air (TAAC-Air), the U.S.-led command responsible for training and advising the AAF, told us that corruption in the AAF needed to be "closely managed" because corrupt activity affecting aviation assets and missions is more destructive than corruption in ground forces.

Additionally, in 2019, CSTC-A identified corruption as one of the top 10 challenges facing the ANDSF, noting that corruption is widespread throughout the ANDSF.[8] This corruption creates negative perceptions of the Afghan government, undermining its legitimacy.[9] TAAC-Air officials told us that corruption is systemic in the AAF. For example, officials said that a previous AAF Inspector General was removed from his position for appointing family members to key logistics and supply positions.

As of May 2020, the AAF was authorized 8,071 personnel and had 7,505 personnel assigned, while the SMW was authorized 1,216 personnel but had 943 personnel assigned. As the AAF and SMW continue recruiting to reach the desired number of personnel, identifying and reducing the potential for corruption in Afghanistan's air forces remains critical.

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[1] The AAF is part of the Afghan National Army and provides transport and evacuation, search and rescue, and attack support to ground forces across Afghanistan. The SMW is a special operations wing of the Afghan Special Security Forces, and flies counterterrorism and counternarcotics missions.

[2] Department of Defense, *Enhancing Security and Stability in Afghanistan*, June 2019, pp. 5, 32.

[3] NATO Air Command–Afghanistan's Special Operations Advisory Group is responsible for advising the SMW.

[4] SIGAR, *2019 High Risk List*, 2019, p. 25.

[5] For the purposes of this report, we use the MOD's (and thus the World Bank's) definition of "corruption." *See*, Islamic Republic of Afghanistan Ministry of Defense, "Policy to Prevent and Combat Corruption," 2017, p. 5.

[6] DOD, *Enhancing Security and Sustainability in Afghanistan*, June 2018, p. 38.

[7] CSTC-A trains, advises, and assists Afghan security institutions to develop resource management and rule of law capabilities, and provides resources in accordance with ANDSF requirements. CSTC-A's Counter Corruption Advisory Group analyzes and targets corruption networks in the Afghan Ministry of Defense and Ministry of Interior, as well as corruption stemming from criminal patronage and narcotics networks.

[8] Lead Inspector General for Operation Freedom's Sentinel, *Report to the U.S. Congress, Operation Freedom's Sentinel*, April 1, 2019–June 30, 2019, p. 23.

[9] SIGAR, 2019 High Risk List, 2019, p. 27.

This audit evaluates DOD and Afghan MOD efforts to address challenges associated with corruption in the AAF and SMW. The objective of this audit was to assess the extent to which the MOD vets AAF and SMW recruits for corruption.

To accomplish this objective, we reviewed the Afghan National Anti-Corruption Strategy and the MOD Policy to Prevent and Combat Corruption to identify the Afghan anti-corruption objectives and actors.[10] Further, to obtain information on Afghan vetting processes, we interviewed U.S. counterintelligence officials, U.S. intelligence advisors to the MOD, and advisors to the SMW from NATO's Special Operations Advisory Group. We also interviewed U.S. anti-corruption advisors to determine what assistance the U.S. government has provided to the Afghan government for developing and implementing vetting policies and procedures for the AAF and SMW. We reviewed information provided to us by the Afghan National Army (ANA) General Staff for Intelligence (GSG2) director and the SMW commander, and we interviewed senior Afghan MOD officials with experience in the AAF and SMW to understand their vetting procedures.

We conducted our work in Arlington, Virginia, and Kabul, Afghanistan, from May 2019 to July 2020 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Appendix I has a more detailed discussion of our scope and methodology.

BACKGROUND

Since 2007, the NATO Air Training Command–Afghanistan has managed an effort to build a sustainable and professional air force in Afghanistan. In 2015, the training command was renamed "TAAC-Air," and continued efforts to develop the air force's capacity and sustainability. TAAC-Air is now responsible for training, advising, and assisting the AAF. As of May 2020, the AAF had 7,505 personnel and was responsible for air transport and attack missions throughout Afghanistan. According to DOD, the AAF has shown "steady improvement" in pilot skill, ground crew proficiency, and air-to-ground integration.[11] Further, DOD stated that the AAF can independently plan and mobilize aircraft for logistics, resupply, humanitarian relief efforts, medical evacuations, and attack and escort missions.[12]

The Afghan government initially formed the Special Mission Wing (SMW) in 2005 under the Ministry of Interior as the Air Interdiction Unit. In 2012, the Afghan government repurposed the group as the SMW under the MOD to support the Afghan Special Security Forces during counterterrorism and counternarcotics missions in Afghanistan. The SMW is the only ANDSF organization with night-vision and helicopter assault capabilities. NATO's Special Operations Advisory Group trains, advises, and assists the SMW, which primarily recruits from the AAF, and has higher standards and additional levels of screening. As of May 2020, the SMW had 943 personnel. In 2019, DOD stated that the Afghan Special Security Forces, which includes the SMW, is one of the most capable forces in the Afghan military and continued to improve.[13]

Afghan Anti-Corruption Guidance

To address challenges with corruption, the Afghan government released Afghanistan's National Anti-Corruption Strategy in September 2017, and revised it in 2018. The strategy described the Afghan government's broad anti-corruption agenda and identified ending corruption in the security sector as a top priority. According to the strategy, corruption in the defense forces costs lives, territory, and the trust of the Afghan people. However,

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[10] The Afghan government uses the term "anti-corruption" to describe the prevention and deterrence of corruption, and the detection and punishment of corruption after it has occurred. For the purposes of this report, we use the Afghan government's definition.

[11] DOD, *Enhancing Security and Sustainability in Afghanistan*, June 2019, p. 54.

[12] DOD, *Enhancing Security and Sustainability in Afghanistan*, June 2019, p. 54.

[13] DOD, *Enhancing Security and Sustainability in Afghanistan*, December 2019, p. 2.

SIGAR reported in 2019 that the Afghan government faced difficulties implementing the strategy and there were concerns that several anti-corruption initiatives were little more than bureaucratic exercises.[14]

Consistent with Afghanistan's National Anti-Corruption Strategy priority on reducing corruption in Afghanistan's security forces, the MOD developed the Policy to Prevent and Combat Corruption in 2017. The MOD policy established short-term reduction and long-term elimination goals for corruption throughout all levels of the ministry and the ANA. The policy defined corruption as the "abuse of public office for private gain," and defined anti-corruption actions as "defensive and preventive measures in the war on corruption."[15] These actions included plans, policies, and internal controls that focus on limiting opportunities for corruption.[16]

The MOD policy also established anti-corruption guidance and identified organizations responsible for executing anti-corruption measures throughout the government. Specifically, the policy identified the ANA GSG2 as a "key actor" responsible for preventing and fighting corruption in Afghanistan's defense forces.[17] The GSG2 is responsible for intelligence support to the ANA.

In addition to the MOD Anti-Corruption Policy, the MOD Inspector General developed the 2017 Long-Term Plan on Eliminating Corruption Ensuring Transparency, Accountability, and Creating Good Governance. The plan adopted the World Bank and International Transparency Organization's definition for corruption as the "misuse of governmental authority for personal interests."[18] The plan also lists specific categories considered corrupt among government employees, including bribery, theft, use of government authority for personal affairs, falsifying official documents, and involving ethnicity, religion, gender, or region in the execution of official duties.[19]

THE U.S. HAS REDUCED ITS ADVISING FOR VETTING RECRUITS AND THE MOD DOES NOT HAVE ENOUGH PERSONNEL TO VET ALL NEW RECRUITS OR EXISTING PERSONNEL

Based on our interviews with U.S. intelligence advisors and reviews of documentation describing the Afghan MOD vetting process, we found that the MOD had a process to vet ANA recruits, including recruits to the AAF and SMW. However, the vetting process focused primarily on security and force protection, and did not screen recruits for corruption.

As part of the security vetting process, the GSG2 manages the PCASS and CELLEX screening systems. The MOD uses PCASS, along with CELLEX, to identify connections to terrorist organizations and "the enemy." According to the Afghan Security Forces Fund request for 2020, the PCASS is similar to a polygraph and is intended to help the MOD with security counterintelligence. CELLEX extracts cellphone data like call logs, SMS messages, and social networking information, and is used in conjunction with PCASS during the vetting process.[20] The GSG2 director confirmed that the GSG2 uses PCASS to complete security screenings of some ANA personnel including some AAF personnel and all SMW personnel. We reviewed a list of sample PCASS screening questions provided by the GSG2, and found the questions focused primarily on security. According to

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[14] SIGAR, *Afghanistan's Anti-Corruption Efforts: The Afghan Government Made Progress in Meeting its Anti-Corruption Strategy Benchmarks, but Serious Challenges Remain to Fighting Corruption*, SIGAR 20-06-AR, November 2019.

[15] Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan MOD, "Policy to Prevent and Combat Corruption," 2017, p. 5.

[16] MOD, "Policy to Prevent and Combat Corruption," 2017, p. 4.

[17] MOD, "Policy to Prevent and Combat Corruption," 2017, p. 15.

[18] Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan Ministry of National Defense Inspector General's Office, *Ministry of National Defense Long-Term Plan on Eliminating Corruption, Ensuring Transparency/Accountability and Creating Good Governance*, May 2017, p. 6.

[19] MOD Inspector General's Office, *Long-Term Plan on Eliminating...*, May 2017, p. 7.

[20] DOD, *Fiscal Year 2020 Overseas Contingency Operations Request–Afghanistan Security Forces Fund*, UNCLASSIFIED, March 2019, pp. 22, 49. The PCASS funding requirement for 2020 sustains 90 PCASS instruments and 26 CELLEX machines to perform basic counterintelligence operations across Afghanistan.

the GSG2, it completed PCASS screenings of some AAF personnel that resulted in administrative actions that included transfers, removals, and arrests. Additionally, the GSG2 completed PCASS screenings for some ANA personnel that resulted in similar administrative actions, but it has not screened the majority of ANA personnel.

During our fieldwork, U.S. intelligence advisors told us that they reduced advising for vetting because the Afghans manage the vetting process, including PCASS screenings, themselves. As a result, the advisors' knowledge of the vetting and screening process was limited. However, the advisors told us that while PCASS question sets could be designed to focus on anti-corruption, the time required that work exceeded the resources available in the ANDSF's counterintelligence system.

In addition, a senior Afghan MOD official told us that the MOD should use PCASS as an anti-corruption tool because corruption is the "biggest enemy." The official said the direction to incorporate anti-corruption measures into the MOD's vetting process would have to come "from the very top," and would require additional personnel to support its implementation. Furthermore, the GSG2 director stated that while the GSG2 has experienced instructors and all of its staff have completed intelligence-related training, there is still a shortage of "professional personnel" to conduct more complete screening operations.

CONCLUSION

The Afghan government developed, and the U.S. government supported, vetting processes to help ensure individuals that posed a security risk were not among the ranks of the AAF and SMW. However, those processes did not include extensive anti-corruption measures, even though corruption posed a serious risk to the operational capacity and sustainability of the forces. The PCASS and CELLEX systems were tools that could help identify individuals prone to corruption during the recruiting phase and help deter individuals from corrupt behavior after they join the air forces. In order to increase the usefulness of these systems as anti-corruption tools for the AAF, however, the GSG2 needed more screening questions focused specifically on anti-corruption, as well as additional personnel to conduct screenings.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To maximize the GSG2's anti-corruption vetting capacity, SIGAR recommended that the commander of CSTC-A:

1. **Direct U.S. advisors to coordinate with the ANA GSG2 to develop additional, anti-corruption-specific questions for the PCASS program.**

2. **Direct U.S. advisors to advise and assist the MOD in identifying resource requirements that would allow GSG2 to impose PCASS and CELLEX screening on all recruits to the Afghan air forces and high-risk individuals.**

AGENCY COMMENTS

We provided a draft of this report to the DOD for review and comment. We received written comments on the draft from the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Central Asia; CSTC-A; and the TAAC-Air. These DOD components each either concurred or did not concur with the two recommendations in the report. Specifically, the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Central Asia did not concur with our first recommendation, but concurred with our second. CSTC-A concurred with our first recommendation, partially concurred with our second, and stated it would work with TAAC-Air to implement them. TAAC-Air concurred with both recommendations and identified specific actions it would take to implement them.

All comments we received contained classified information and are therefore not being published in this report. However, an unclassified summary of the comments we received is below:

With regard to our first recommendation, the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Central Asia did not concur and stated that the vetting program's purpose is to increase force protection, and that modifying existing processes would not help identify corrupt or potentially corrupt actors. However, DOD advisors told us during our fieldwork that anti-corruption questions could be developed and used in PCASS screenings, and both CSTC-A and TAAC-Air concurred with our first recommendation. Both CSTC-A and TAAC-Air committed to implementing our recommendation, and TAAC-Air stated that it is coordinating with the GSG2 to incorporate additional questions into the screening process.

Both the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Central Asia and TAAC-Air concurred with our second recommendation, and CSTC-A partially concurred with it. The Deputy Assistant Secretary stated that increased PCASS and CELLEX screenings would enable consistent DOD advising, which would result in meaningful progress in the air forces' anti-corruption efforts. CSTC-A and TAAC-Air identified specific actions they would take to implement our second recommendation. CSTC-A also provided technical comments, which we incorporated into the report, as appropriate.

APPENDIX I - SCOPE AND METHODOLOGY

This audit evaluated U.S. Department of Defense and Afghan Ministry of Defense (MOD) efforts to address challenges associated with corruption in the Afghan Air Force (AAF) and the Special Mission Wing (SMW). The objective of this audit was to assess the extent to which MOD vets AAF and SMW recruits for corruption.

To accomplish this objective, we reviewed the revised 2018 Afghan National Strategy for Combatting Corruption and MOD's 2017 "Policy to Prevent and Combat Corruption" to identify the Afghan anti-corruption objectives and actors. We also reviewed Afghan government anti-corruption plans and guidance. Further, we interviewed U.S. counterintelligence officials, U.S. intelligence advisors to the MOD, and advisors to the SMW from the NATO Special Operations Advisory Group to obtain information on the Afghan vetting processes for AAF and SMW recruits and personnel, and to determine the extent to which those processes screened for corruption. We interviewed officials from the Train, Advise, Assist Command–Air, the Combined Security Transition Command–Afghanistan, and intelligence advisors to the MOD to determine what assistance the U.S. government has provided to the Afghan government for developing and implementing vetting policies and procedures. Additionally, we interviewed senior Afghan MOD officials with experience in the AAF and SMW, and reviewed written information provided by the Afghan National Army General Staff for Intelligence director and SMW commander.

For the purpose of the audit objective, we did not rely on computer-processed data, nor did we assess internal controls.

We conducted our audit work in Arlington, Virginia, and Kabul, Afghanistan, from May 2019 through July 2020, in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. This audit was performed by SIGAR under the authority of Public Law No. 110-181, as amended, and the Inspector General Act of 1978, as amended.

APPENDIX II - ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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