



# STABILIZATION:

## LESSONS FROM THE U.S. EXPERIENCE IN AFGHANISTAN



### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The full report can be found on the SIGAR website at [www.sigar.mil](http://www.sigar.mil).





Cover photo credit: USAID Afghanistan photo of the Khost-Gardez road construction project.



Special Inspector General  
for Afghanistan Reconstruction

*Stabilization: Lessons from the U.S. Experience in Afghanistan* is the fourth lessons learned report issued by the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction. The report examines the U.S. stabilization effort in Afghanistan, detailing how the U.S. Agency for International Development and the Departments of State and Defense tried to support and legitimize the Afghan government in contested districts from 2002 through 2017. The report identifies lessons to inform U.S. policies and actions to stabilize a country or region before and during a contingency operation and provides recommendations to do so. 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.

Our analysis reveals the U.S. government greatly overestimated its ability to build and reform government institutions in Afghanistan as part of its stabilization strategy. We found the stabilization strategy and the programs used to achieve it were not properly tailored to the Afghan context, and successes in stabilizing Afghan districts rarely lasted longer than the physical presence of coalition troops and civilians. As a result, by the time all prioritized districts had transitioned from coalition to Afghan control in 2014, the services and protection provided by Afghan forces and civil servants often could not compete with a resurgent Taliban as it filled the void in newly vacated territory.

SIGAR began its lessons learned program in late 2014 at the urging of General John Allen, Ambassador Ryan Crocker, and others who had served in Afghanistan. Our lessons learned reports comply with SIGAR's legislative mandate to provide independent and objective leadership and recommendations to promote economy, efficiency, and effectiveness; prevent and detect waste, fraud, and abuse; and inform Congress and the Secretaries of State and Defense about reconstruction-related problems and the need for corrective action.

Unlike other inspectors general, Congress created SIGAR as an independent agency, not housed within any single department. SIGAR is the only inspector general focused solely on the Afghanistan mission, and the only one devoted exclusively to reconstruction issues. While other inspectors general have jurisdiction over the programs and operations of their respective departments or agencies, SIGAR has jurisdiction over all programs and operations supported with U.S. reconstruction dollars, regardless of the agency involved. Because SIGAR has the authority to look across the entire reconstruction effort, it is uniquely positioned to identify and address whole-of-government lessons.

Our lessons learned reports synthesize not only the body of work and expertise of SIGAR, but also that of other oversight agencies, government entities, current and former officials with on-the-ground experience, academic institutions, and independent scholars. The reports document what the U.S. government sought to accomplish, assess what it achieved, and evaluate the degree to which these efforts helped the United States reach its strategic goals in Afghanistan. They also provide recommendations to address the challenges stakeholders face in ensuring efficient, effective, and sustainable reconstruction efforts, not just in Afghanistan, but in future contingency operations.

SIGAR's Lessons Learned Program comprises subject matter experts with considerable experience working and living in Afghanistan, aided by a team of seasoned research analysts. I want to express my deepest appreciation to the team members who produced this report, and thank them for their dedication and commitment to the project. I thank David H. Young, project lead; Jordan Kane and Paul Kane, research analysts; Jordan Schurter, student trainee; Olivia Paek, graphic designer; and Elizabeth Young, editor. In producing its reports, the Lessons Learned Program also uses the significant skills and experience found in SIGAR's Audits, Investigations, and Research and Analysis directorates, and the Office of Special Projects. I thank all of the individuals who provided their time and effort to contribute to this report. It is truly a collaborative effort meant to not only identify problems, but also to learn from them and apply reasonable solutions to improve future reconstruction efforts.

I believe our lessons learned reports will be a key legacy of SIGAR. Through these reports, we hope to reach a diverse audience in the legislative and executive branches, at the strategic and programmatic levels, both in Washington and in the field. By leveraging our unique interagency mandate, we intend to do everything we can to make sure the lessons from the United States' largest reconstruction effort are identified, acknowledged, and, most importantly, remembered and applied to ongoing reconstruction efforts in Afghanistan, as well as to future conflicts and reconstruction efforts elsewhere in the world.

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

John F. Sopko  
Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This lessons learned report draws important lessons from the U.S. experience with stabilization in Afghanistan from 2002–2017, with a special focus on the years after 2009 when most of the \$4.7 billion in stabilization funds was spent. 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. We anticipate U.S. government efforts to stabilize these areas by clearing them of terrorist groups and helping generate sufficient governance to keep them from returning will continue in fragile and conflict-affected states around the world. With U.S. stabilization efforts nascent in Syria and ramping up in Iraq, it is important that lessons from stabilizing Afghanistan inform these efforts.

The term “stabilization” is frequently invoked in U.S. foreign policy circles and by other donor nations, yet it is not uniformly, precisely defined across relevant stakeholders. Definitions have varied by U.S. agency and even changed over time within agencies. In 2018, the U.S. government defined stabilization 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 resurgence of violence. Transitional in nature, stabilization may include efforts to establish civil security, provide access to dispute resolution, and deliver targeted basic services, and establish a foundation for the return of displaced people and longer-term development.<sup>1</sup>

However, the concept of stabilization and notions about how it was to be implemented in Afghanistan took shape gradually and only coalesced as an explicit U.S. strategy in 2009.

Our analysis identifies seven key findings regarding the stabilization strategy in Afghanistan and the programs used to achieve it:

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 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.

From 2003 to 2005, the U.S. military executed a counterinsurgency (COIN) campaign in the east and south of Afghanistan. With only two brigades “to prevent a Taliban resurgence and to build support for the coalition and the central government,” U.S. military forces, the State Department, and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) used a growing number of provincial reconstruction teams to implement projects together and strengthen provincial and district governments.<sup>2</sup>

From 2005 to 2007, military and civilian agencies continued to adopt policies that called for synchronized interagency stabilization programming. However, on the ground, the agencies rarely operated in concert with one another, as the military continued with the “clear, hold, and build” phases of COIN operations, and USAID implemented several stabilization programs. U.S. Embassy Kabul was “normalizing” its operations as it moved away from a war footing and toward the kind of embassy presence State had in most countries. Still, momentum for interagency cooperation was building, particularly within the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), as more resources and troops were devoted to Afghanistan.

From 2008 to 2009, it became apparent that security in Afghanistan was worsening as the numbers of suicide attacks and improvised explosive devices skyrocketed. COIN and stabilization efforts were thought to be responsible for dramatic improvements in security in Iraq, and many policymakers felt compelled to use the same methods to help the Afghan government secure the country and out-govern the Taliban in rural communities.

Throughout 2009 and 2010, the U.S. government committed to an explicit stabilization strategy, surged more than 50,000 military forces to clear insurgents from the most dangerous and contested districts in the 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. To implement the strategy, State, USAID, and the Department of Defense (DOD) leveraged a dramatic increase in resources to refocus existing programs

and create new ones to “strengthen the reach and legitimacy of the central government in outlying regions.”<sup>3</sup> Using a robust framework for civilian-military (civ-mil) cooperation extending all the way down to the battalion level, the coalition intended to help the Afghan government out-govern the Taliban and provide services to contested populations to win their support. The coalition surge, however, was constrained to 18 months. These two decisions—to prioritize the most dangerous parts of the country and to draw down forces on timelines unrelated to conditions on the ground—had a profound and harmful impact on countless downstream decisions regarding stabilization planning, staffing, and programming.

For example, during this time, there was significant friction between military forces and the civilians tasked with stabilization programming. In theory, ISAF would choose the areas to clear in partnership with its civilian counterparts, and together they would plan and execute the holding and building of those areas. In practice, however, despite a significant increase in civ-mil interactions, the military made (or had considerable influence on) most of the key decisions on the ground, including deciding which districts to clear, hold, and build; determining when communities were ready for civilian stabilization programming; and deciding what kind of projects should be implemented to win local hearts and minds.

Some senior USAID officials said ISAF bulldozed the agency into going along with clear-hold-build and demanded it implement ineffective cash-for-work programs, despite USAID’s protests; other officials said ISAF only needed to cite President Obama’s compressed timelines and ask USAID, “How else are we going to do this if not quickly and in the most dangerous areas?” Military forces were under immense pressure and accountable for making fast progress; that pressure also affected civilian personnel, with few at State or USAID in country believing they had the ability to push back against the military’s decisions. Only rarely did USAID and DOD show significant levels of collaboration, a practice that was instrumental in the coalition’s successful stabilization of certain key terrain. One example can be found in SIGAR’s case study of Marawara District in appendix A.

More broadly, moving at such speed and in such dangerous areas created a collection of mutually reinforcing problems. First, by prioritizing the most insecure areas, the coalition made it difficult to showcase the full clear-hold-build cycle, as insecurity kept much of the coalition perpetually stuck in the clearing and holding phases as forces moved prematurely from one community to the next. Thus, rather than connecting increasingly stabilized “ink spots” of government control and influence, creating new ink spots often meant removing old ones. Focusing on the most dangerous areas first—and then generally failing

to stabilize them—meant Afghans had few models of communities that had been rewarded for publicly turning on the insurgents. Lacking reliable and continuous security in newly cleared territory, stabilization programs frequently offered services in fiercely contested communities because there was no time to wait for the fighting to stop.

Second, while insecurity created severe restrictions on coalition access to communities, spending on stabilization projects in those communities increased significantly in the hope of compensating for a lack of time. In turn, more money went to communities whose local political dynamics were poorly understood, which often exacerbated conflicts, enabled corruption, and bolstered support for insurgents.

Third, it was difficult for coalition personnel to recognize these unintended consequences in any given community, as the same chronic insecurity that inhibited thoughtful project identification and implementation also precluded adequate monitoring and evaluation of those projects.

Fourth, the coalition's inability to reduce violence in many ISAF-designated key terrain districts made it exceptionally difficult to recruit Afghan civil servants to help implement and sustain stabilization programs, particularly under the timeline provided. As a result, hiring standards were lowered, and the civil servants who were recruited were often less experienced and less well-suited for the roles. Persistent insecurity meant that even the civil servants who were successfully recruited faced significant mobility constraints. An area deemed relatively permissive by the military, with its heavily armed convoys and vehicles designed to withstand improvised explosive devices, presented a very different risk to Afghan government officials and informal leaders, who relied on civilian vehicles and did not live on heavily guarded bases.

DOD implemented stabilization programs that faced similar pressures and created similarly perverse incentives as some civilian programs. For example, the Commander's Emergency Response Program (CERP) aimed to provide "urgent humanitarian or reconstruction projects," in part, to reduce violence.<sup>4</sup> Starting in 2009, the program encouraged military commanders to spend money in a way that would benefit the Afghan population through projects that could be transferred to the Afghan government and thus help improve the government's legitimacy. CERP generally suffered from poor data collection and struggled to develop measures of effectiveness to understand the impact of its projects. The limited number of qualified and experienced civil affairs teams to oversee the program's implementation led CERP to focus less on effective programming and more on spending. Once DOD deemed money a "weapon system" in 2009, commanders were often judged on the amount of CERP money



they disbursed. With insufficient attention to impact and a frequent assumption that more money spent would translate into more progress, these projects may have exacerbated the very problems commanders hoped to address.

Taken together, these and other obstacles meant that most Afghans in key terrain districts were not convinced of the Afghan government's benevolence or staying power, and their communities had not stabilized when transition began in the summer of 2011. The next deadline, transitioning control of the entire country to the Afghan government by the end of 2014, proved equally unrealistic. "We went from an end state to an end date," former ISAF commander General John Allen observed in a SIGAR interview, adding, "Stabilization requires time to measure and adapt, and we lost all that. It was pulled out from under us."<sup>5</sup> In Kabul, U.S. civilian agencies tried to shift their focus from the district level to the provincial and municipal level to reflect a new orientation toward traditional governance support, akin to the support provided in USAID governance programming around the world. However, for both DOD and the civilian agencies, efforts to transition proved difficult, as insecurity compelled DOD to continue stabilizing key terrain (albeit with decreasing force levels), and USAID continued to be tethered to military operations and was thus mostly unable to realign with the new policy focus on governance until after transition. As a result, many of the challenges stabilization efforts faced from 2009–2012 continued during transition, through 2014.

A second DOD stabilization 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 military hoped to connect these villages to formal district and provincial government by offering communities various services, particularly security, in the form of an Afghan Local Police (ALP) force, whose members were drawn from the same communities being protected.

While VSO began on a solid conceptual footing during the surge, once transition began in 2011, the program compromised many of its core principles. DOD came to believe VSO could compensate for the aggressive transition timelines by using the ALP to fill the security void created by the coalition's withdrawal, which 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 U.S. SOF to staff VSO sites and train the ALP units, forcing

the coalition to rely on other SOF with little experience in training indigenous security forces or communicating across cultures. 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 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. While working through Afghan government officials in the districts had always been explicitly viewed as vital to the mission, during transition, the coalition followed through on this commitment more often.

More broadly, our analytical review of stabilization points to a number of coalition assumptions that proved problematic: (1) communities were unstable because of the government's absence, rather than its behavior when present; (2) communities would only stabilize if the government provided them diverse social services, even if the Taliban had stabilized them with only modest law and order efforts; and (3) stabilization could succeed despite obstacles inherent to the Afghan government's structure and the divergent interests of its political leadership.

## LESSONS

Given the constraints explored at length in this report, Afghanistan was likely among the most difficult environments for a large-scale stabilization mission. The challenges there make it difficult to discern whether and how the problems seen in Afghanistan were specific to the environment or systemic to stabilization.

In fact, the poor results of this particular stabilization mission make it tempting to conclude that stabilization should not be conducted in the future at all. However, in any area that has been cleared, 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.

Given the substantial recent increase in investment in stabilization efforts in Syria and Iraq, realistic assessments that align the ends, ways, and means of prospective and ongoing stabilization efforts are critical.

Moreover, given that stabilization was occasionally effective in Afghanistan, we believe it may be more effective in other countries if the lessons below are learned and applied in future stabilization missions.

1. Even under the best circumstances, stabilization takes time. Without the patience and political will for a planned and prolonged effort, large-scale stabilization missions are likely to fail.
2. Most U.S. government capabilities and institutions necessary in a large-scale stabilization mission should be established and maintained between contingencies if they are to be effective when they matter most.
3. Having qualified and experienced personnel in the right positions at the right times is vital to stabilization's success.
4. Increased funding alone cannot compensate for stabilization's inherent challenges, and believing that it will can exacerbate those challenges.
5. Physical security is the bedrock of stabilization.
6. The presence of local governance is a precondition for effective stabilization programming.
7. Stabilizing communities requires a tailored approach.
8. Stabilization efforts must be rigorously monitored and evaluated.
9. Successfully conceiving and implementing a stabilization strategy requires extensive local knowledge of the host-nation government and population.
10. Winning hearts and minds requires a close examination of what has won and lost the hearts and minds of that particular population in the recent past.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations drawn from the U.S. stabilization experience in Afghanistan may help increase the likelihood of success in future stabilization missions. Some of these recommendations require substantial effort. However, given the inherent difficulty of stabilization missions, without the political will and technical investment necessary to implement the reforms outlined below, in our view large-scale stabilization missions should not be conducted.

## Executive Branch

1. State should take the lead in laying out a robust whole-of-government stabilization strategy, USAID should be the lead implementer, and DOD should support their efforts.
2. DOD and USAID should update COIN and stabilization doctrine and best practices to stagger stabilization's various phases, with the provision of reliable and continuous physical security serving as the critical foundation. SIGAR offers a blueprint to serve as a model. (See page 196.)
3. DOD should develop measures of effectiveness for any CERP-like program in the future.
4. USAID should prioritize the collection of accurate and reliable data for its stabilization projects.
5. DOD and USAID should prioritize developing and retaining human terrain analytical expertise that would allow a more nuanced understanding of local communities.
6. DOD should ensure it has a sufficient number and mix of civil affairs personnel with the right training and aptitude for the next stabilization mission.
7. State and USAID should designate a new civilian response corps of active and standby civilian specialists who can staff stabilization missions.

## Legislative Branch

Congress should consider providing adequate resources to ensure executive branch agencies implement the reforms laid out above. Specifically, Congress should consider:

1. Funding a modified civilian response corps.
2. Requiring State, the designated lead on stabilization, to develop and implement a stabilization strategy within a broader campaign strategy and in coordination with USAID and DOD.
3. Requiring USAID, the designated lead on implementation, to develop and implement a monitoring and evaluation plan in coordination with State and DOD.
4. Focusing its oversight on stabilization outcomes.



**The National Defense Authorization Act for FY 2008 (P.L. 110-181) established the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR).**

SIGAR's oversight mission, as defined by the legislation, is to provide for the independent and objective

- conduct and supervision of audits and investigations relating to the programs and operations funded with amounts appropriated or otherwise made available for the reconstruction of Afghanistan.
- leadership and coordination of, and recommendations on, policies designed to promote economy, efficiency, and effectiveness in the administration of the programs and operations, and to prevent and detect waste, fraud, and abuse in such programs and operations.
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Afghanistan reconstruction includes any major contract, grant, agreement, or other funding mechanism entered into by any department or agency of the U.S. government that involves the use of amounts appropriated or otherwise made available for the reconstruction of Afghanistan.

As required by the National Defense Authorization Act for FY 2018 (P.L. 115-91), this report has been prepared in accordance with the Quality Standards for Inspection and Evaluation issued by the Council of the Inspectors General on Integrity and Efficiency.

Source: P.L. 110-181, "National Defense Authorization Act for FY 2008," January 28, 2008; P.L. 115-91, "National Defense Authorization Act for FY 2018," December 12, 2017.

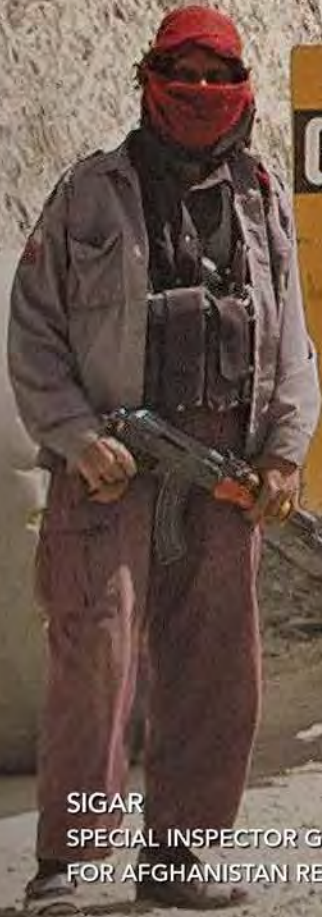
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