

Special Inspector General for



Afghanistan Reconstruction

# WHAT WE NEED TO LEARN: LESSONS FROM TWENTY YEARS OF AFGHANISTAN RECONSTRUCTION



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Special Inspector General  
for Afghanistan Reconstruction

*What We Need to Learn: Lessons from Twenty Years of Afghanistan Reconstruction* is the 11th lessons learned report issued by the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction. The report examines the past two decades of the U.S. reconstruction effort in Afghanistan. It details how the U.S. government struggled to develop a coherent strategy, understand how long the reconstruction mission would take, ensure its projects were sustainable, staff the mission with trained professionals, account for the challenges posed by insecurity, tailor efforts to the Afghan context, and understand the impact of programs. There have been bright spots—such as lower child mortality rates, increases in per capita GDP, and increased literacy rates. But after spending 20 years and \$145 billion trying to rebuild Afghanistan, the U.S. government has many lessons it needs to learn. Implementing these critical lessons will save lives and prevent waste, fraud, and abuse in Afghanistan, and in future reconstruction missions elsewhere around the world.

As a retrospective, the report draws on SIGAR's 13 years of oversight work, including our 10 prior lessons learned reports and 760 interviews our staff conducted with current and former policymakers, ambassadors, generals, military officers, development experts, and other practitioners. These interviews in particular enable SIGAR to develop a uniquely nuanced understanding of Afghan institutions, the efforts by U.S. officials to reform those institutions, and how those efforts fared. Unlike SIGAR's previous lessons learned reports, this one does not make new recommendations for U.S. government agencies or the Congress. Instead, it poses questions that policymakers may wish to consider—both in Afghanistan and around the world—and includes some of the most relevant recommendations found in previous lessons learned reports. The questions for policymakers help frame the report's lessons and direct attention to the most critical issues.

Congress created SIGAR as an independent agency focused solely on the Afghanistan mission and its reconstruction issues. Unlike most inspectors general, who have jurisdiction only 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 over the last 20 years, regardless of the agency involved. Because SIGAR has the authority to look across the entire \$145 billion reconstruction effort, it is uniquely positioned to identify and address whole-of-government lessons.

SIGAR began its Lessons Learned Program in late 2014 at the urging of General John Allen, former commanding general of U.S. and NATO troops in Afghanistan, former U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan Ryan Crocker, and other senior officials who had served in Afghanistan. They alerted us to the need for a comprehensive review of our efforts there in order to improve similar efforts in the future. The resulting lessons learned reports comply with SIGAR's legislative

mandate to provide recommendations to promote economy, efficiency, and effectiveness of U.S.-funded reconstruction programs and operations; prevent and detect waste, fraud, and abuse; and inform the Congress and the Secretaries of State and Defense about reconstruction-related problems and the need for corrective action. 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 reconstruction goals in Afghanistan.

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: David Young, project lead; Jordan Kane, Paul Kane, Matthew Rubin, senior analysts; Harrison Akins, subject matter expert; Daniel Weggeland, senior subject matter expert, and Will Clift, student trainee. I also thank Nikolai Condee-Padunov, program manager; Tracy Content, editor; Vong Lim, senior visual information specialist; Jason Davis, visual information specialist; and, last but not least, Joseph Windrem, Lessons Learned program director, without whom the entire lessons learned project would not have been possible. In producing its reports, the program also uses the significant skills and experience found in SIGAR's Audits, Investigations, and Research and Analysis directorates. I thank all of the individuals who contributed their time and effort to this report.

In addition, I am grateful to the many U.S. government officials at the Department of Defense, the Department of State, and the U.S. Agency for International Development who have provided valuable insights and feedback for our lessons learned research. This report is truly a collaborative effort meant to not only identify problems, but also to encourage reforms to improve future reconstruction efforts.

Despite the U.S. troop withdrawal, the Biden administration has requested more than \$3 billion for Afghanistan's reconstruction in the coming year. At this inflection point, I believe lessons learned reports such as this will continue to be critical and may ultimately 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. Using our unique interagency mandate, we intend to do everything we can to make sure the lessons from the most ambitious reconstruction effort in U.S. history are identified and applied—not just in Afghanistan, but in future conflicts and reconstruction efforts elsewhere in the world.



John F. Sopko,

Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction

Arlington, Virginia

**LETTER FROM THE INSPECTOR GENERAL II**

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY VII**



**CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION 1**



**CHAPTER 2 STRATEGY 9**

The Challenge of Ownership .....10  
 The Ends Were Murky, and Grew in Number and Complexity.....12  
 The Ends, Ways, and Means Were Poorly Aligned .....14  
 A Decade of Withdrawal.....18  
 Shifting the Strategy toward Negotiations.....19  
 Questions for Policymakers .....21



**CHAPTER 3 TIMELINES 23**

2001–2005: Harmful Spending Patterns Established .....24  
 2006–2008: Spending Ramps Up.....28  
 2009–2011: An 18-month Surge and a Flood of Cash .....30  
 2012–2014: Rapid Transition Timeline Reveals the Limits of U.S. Efforts.....33  
 2015–Present: Coming to Terms with Reduced Troops, Assistance, and Influence .....35  
 Timelines and Political Pressure Are Perennial.....36  
 Questions for Policymakers .....37



**CHAPTER 4 SUSTAINABILITY 39**

Policies Emphasize Sustainability, but Practices Fall Short .....40  
 The Afghan Government’s Fiscal and Capacity Limitations .....40  
 Poor Monitoring and Evaluation Meant the United States Was Slow to Recognize the Magnitude of Its Sustainability Problem .....43  
 Short-term Goals versus Long-term Sustainability.....44  
 Questions for Policymakers .....46



**CHAPTER 5 PERSONNEL 49**

Problems with Personnel Structures Were Well Known .....49  
 Weak Personnel Structures and Funding Prevented Quality Staffing .....50  
 Rapid Turnover Reduced Personnel Quality.....53  
 The Use of Contractors and Partners Proliferated to Fill Gaps.....54  
 Military and Civilian Personnel Faced Recurring Coordination Challenges .....55  
 Personnel Quality Is Critical in Reconstruction Missions and Is Best Ensured by Building Institutions between These Missions.....56  
 Questions for Policymakers .....56



**CHAPTER 6**  
**INSECURITY** **59**

- Undermining the Electoral Process.....59
- Obstructing the Extension of Government.....61
- Restricting Counternarcotics Efforts.....63
- Hindering Economic Development.....64
- Constraints on Building Indigenous Security Forces .....66
- Insecurity Begets Insecurity: Failures of Reintegration .....68
- Questions for Policymakers .....69



**CHAPTER 7**  
**CONTEXT** **71**

- Lack of Awareness Allowed Corruption to Grow .....72
- Imposing Formal Institutions on an Informal Environment.....74
- Poor Understanding of Local Context Exacerbated Conflict.....76
- U.S. Officials Had a Limited Understanding of the Very Institutions They Built..77
- The United States Struggled to Account for Gender Dynamics.....78
- Willful Disregard for Critical Information .....79
- Questions for Policymakers .....80



**CHAPTER 8**  
**MONITORING AND EVALUATION** **83**

- Insufficient Staffing.....84
- Perennial Struggles: Monitoring What Happened, Evaluating Whether It Worked, and Learning to Improve.....85
- Even Monitoring Was Spotty .....86
- Evaluation Was Stymied by Strategic Confusion, When It Was Tried at All.....87
- Learning Was Rare .....88
- Incorrect Theories of Change, Resistance to Honesty, and Obfuscation.....89
- Money Spent, Not Impact Achieved, Became The Primary Metric of Success...91
- Less Ambitious Programming, or Prioritize M&E.....92
- Questions for Policymakers .....92



**CHAPTER 9**  
**CONCLUSION: PREPARATION NEEDED FOR RECONSTRUCTION TO SUCCEED** **95**



**APPENDICES AND ENDNOTES** **101**

- Methodology..... 101
- Acronyms ..... 102
- Endnotes ..... 103
- Acknowledgements ..... 122

**FIGURES**

Annual Appropriations by Funding Category (\$ Billions) ..... 4  
Fear for Personal Safety ..... 5  
Enemy-initiated Attacks, 2002-2020 ..... 13  
U.S. Appropriations and U.S. Troop Levels in Afghanistan by Fiscal Year, 2002-2021 ..... 17  
The Ring Road in Afghanistan ..... 25  
U.S.-appropriated Reconstruction Funding Levels as a Percentage of Afghanistan’s GDP ..... 27  
Planned Polling Centers for 2019 Presidential Election, by Status ..... 60



# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The U.S. government has now spent 20 years and \$145 billion trying to rebuild Afghanistan, its security forces, civilian government institutions, economy, and civil society. The Department of Defense (DOD) has also spent \$837 billion on warfighting, during which 2,443 American troops and 1,144 allied troops have been killed and 20,666 U.S. troops injured. Afghans, meanwhile, have faced an even greater toll. At least 66,000 Afghan troops have been killed. More than 48,000 Afghan civilians have been killed, and at least 75,000 have been injured since 2001—both likely significant underestimations.

The extraordinary costs were meant to serve a purpose—though the definition of that purpose evolved over time. At various points, the U.S. government hoped to eliminate al-Qaeda, decimate the Taliban movement that hosted it, deny all terrorist groups a safe haven in Afghanistan, build Afghan security forces so they could deny terrorists a safe haven in the future, and help the civilian government become legitimate and capable enough to win the trust of Afghans. Each goal, once accomplished, was thought to move the U.S. government one step closer to being able to depart.

While there have been several areas of improvement—most notably in the areas of health care, maternal health, and education—progress has been elusive and the prospects for sustaining this progress are dubious. The U.S. government has been often overwhelmed by the magnitude of rebuilding a country that, at the time of the U.S. invasion, had already seen two decades of Soviet occupation, civil war, and Taliban brutality.

Since its founding in 2008, SIGAR has tried to make the U.S. government's reconstruction of Afghanistan more likely to succeed. Our investigations held criminals accountable for defrauding the U.S. government; our audits and special projects reports identified weaknesses in programs before it was too late to improve them; our quarterly reports provided near real-time analysis of reconstruction problems as they unfolded; and our lessons learned reports identified challenges that threaten the viability of the entire American enterprise of rebuilding Afghanistan, and any similar efforts that may come after it. SIGAR has issued 427 audits, 191 special project reports, 52 quarterly reports, and 10 comprehensive lessons learned reports. Meanwhile, SIGAR's criminal investigations have resulted in 160 convictions. This oversight work has cumulatively resulted in \$3.84 billion in savings for the U.S. taxpayer.

After conducting more than 760 interviews and reviewing thousands of government documents, our lessons learned analysis has revealed a troubled reconstruction effort that has yielded some success but has also been marked by too many failures. Using this body of work, as well as the work of other oversight organizations, SIGAR has identified seven key lessons that span the entire 20-year campaign and can be used

in other conflict zones around the globe. These lessons form the backbone of this report, with a chapter devoted to exploring each in detail:

**1. Strategy: The U.S. government continuously struggled to develop and implement a coherent strategy for what it hoped to achieve.**

The challenges U.S. officials faced in creating long-term, sustainable improvements raise questions about the ability of U.S. government agencies to devise, implement, and evaluate reconstruction strategies. The division of responsibilities among agencies did not always take into account each agency's strengths and weaknesses. For example, the Department of State is supposed to lead reconstruction efforts, but it lacked the expertise and resources to take the lead and own the strategy in Afghanistan. In contrast, DOD has the necessary resources and expertise to manage strategies, but not for large-scale reconstruction missions with significant economic and governance components. This meant no single agency had the necessary mindset, expertise, and resources to develop and manage the strategy to rebuild Afghanistan. For the U.S. government to successfully rebuild a country, especially one still experiencing violent conflict, civilian agencies will need the necessary resources and flexibility to lead in practice, not just on paper.

This poor division of labor resulted in weak strategy. While initially tied to the destruction of al-Qaeda, the strategy grew considerably to include the defeat of the Taliban, an insurgent group deeply entrenched in Afghan communities, then expanded again to include corrupt Afghan officials who undermined U.S. efforts at every turn. Meanwhile, deteriorating security compelled the mission to grow even further in scope. U.S. officials believed the solution to insecurity was pouring ever more resources into Afghan institutions—but the absence of progress after the surge of civilian and military assistance between 2009 and 2011 made it clear that the fundamental problems were unlikely to be addressed by changing resource levels. The U.S. government was simply not equipped to undertake something this ambitious in such an uncompromising environment, no matter the budget. After a decade of escalation, the United States began a gradual, decade-long drawdown that steadily revealed how dependent and vulnerable the Afghan government remains.

**2. Timelines: The U.S. government consistently underestimated the amount of time required to rebuild Afghanistan, and created unrealistic timelines and expectations that prioritized spending quickly. These choices increased corruption and reduced the effectiveness of programs.**

The U.S. reconstruction effort in Afghanistan could be described as 20 one-year reconstruction efforts, rather than one 20-year effort. U.S. officials often underestimated the time and resources needed to rebuild Afghanistan, leading to short-term solutions like the surge of troops, money, and resources from 2009–2011. U.S. officials also prioritized their own political preferences for what they wanted

reconstruction to look like, rather than what they could realistically achieve, given the constraints and conditions on the ground. Early in the war, U.S. officials denied the mission resources necessary to have an impact, and implicit deadlines made the task even harder. As security deteriorated and demands on donors increased, so did pressure to demonstrate progress. U.S. officials created explicit timelines in the mistaken belief that a decision in Washington could transform the calculus of complex Afghan institutions, powerbrokers, and communities contested by the Taliban.

By design, these timelines often ignored conditions on the ground and forced reckless compromises in U.S. programs, creating perverse incentives to spend quickly and focus on short-term, unsustainable goals that could not create the conditions to allow a victorious U.S. withdrawal. Rather than reform and improve, Afghan institutions and powerbrokers found ways to co-opt the funds for their own purposes, which only worsened the problems these programs were meant to address. When U.S. officials eventually recognized this dynamic, they simply found new ways to ignore conditions on the ground. Troops and resources continued to draw down in full view of the Afghan government's inability to address instability or prevent it from worsening.

**3. Sustainability: Many of the institutions and infrastructure projects the United States built were not sustainable.**

Reconstruction programs are not like humanitarian aid; they are not meant to provide temporary relief. Instead, they serve as a foundation for building the necessary institutions of government, civil society, and commerce to sustain the country indefinitely. Every mile of road the United States built and every government employee it trained was thought to serve as a springboard for even more improvements and to enable the reconstruction effort to eventually end. However, the U.S. government often failed to ensure its projects were sustainable over the long term. Billions of reconstruction dollars were wasted as projects went unused or fell into disrepair. Demands to make fast progress incentivized U.S. officials to identify and implement short-term projects with little consideration for host government capacity and long-term sustainability. U.S. agencies were seldom judged by their projects' continued utility, but by the number of projects completed and dollars spent.

Over time, U.S. policies emphasized that all U.S. reconstruction projects must be sustainable, but Afghans often lacked the capacity to take responsibility for projects. In response, the U.S. government tried to help Afghan institutions build their capacity, but those institutions often could not keep up with U.S. demands for fast progress. Moreover, pervasive corruption put U.S. funds sent through the Afghan government at risk of waste, fraud, and abuse. These dynamics motivated U.S. officials to provide most assistance outside Afghan government channels. While expedient, the approach meant that Afghan officials were not getting experience in managing and sustaining U.S. reconstruction projects over the long term. As a result,

even when programs were able to achieve short-term success, they often could not last because the Afghans who would eventually take responsibility for them were poorly equipped, trained, or motivated to do so.

**4. Personnel: Counterproductive civilian and military personnel policies and practices thwarted the effort.**

The U.S. government's inability to get the right people into the right jobs at the right times was one of the most significant failures of the mission. It is also one of the hardest to repair. U.S. personnel in Afghanistan were often unqualified and poorly trained, and those who were qualified were difficult to retain. DOD police advisors watched American TV shows to learn about policing, civil affairs teams were mass-produced via PowerPoint presentations, and every agency experienced annual lobotomies as staff constantly rotated out, leaving successors to start from scratch and make similar mistakes all over again. These dynamics had direct effects on the quality of reconstruction. There were often not enough staff to oversee the spending, and certainly not enough who were qualified to do so. This was particularly true for civilian agencies, such as State or the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), which should have been leading the effort but were unable to meaningfully perform that role. This compelled the better-resourced DOD to fill the void, creating tensions with civilian agencies that often had different ideas but fewer staff to offer.

**5. Insecurity: Persistent insecurity severely undermined reconstruction efforts.**

The absence of violence was a critical precondition for everything U.S. officials tried to do in Afghanistan—yet the U.S. effort to rebuild the country took place while it was being torn apart. For example, helping Afghans develop a credible electoral process became ever more difficult as insecurity across the country steadily worsened—intimidating voters, preventing voter registration, and closing polling stations on election day. In remote areas where the Taliban contested control, U.S. officials were unable to make sufficient gains to convince frightened rural Afghans of the benefits of supporting their government. Insecurity and the uncertainty that it spawns have also made Afghanistan one of the worst environments in the world to run a business. The long-term development of Afghanistan's security forces likewise saw a number of harmful compromises, driven by the immediate need to address rising insecurity. The danger meant that even programs to reintegrate former fighters faltered, as ex-combatants could not be protected from retaliation if they rejoined their communities.

**6. Context: The U.S. government did not understand the Afghan context and therefore failed to tailor its efforts accordingly.**

Effectively rebuilding Afghanistan required a detailed understanding of the country's social, economic, and political dynamics. However, U.S. officials were

consistently operating in the dark, often because of the difficulty of collecting the necessary information. The U.S. government also clumsily forced Western technocratic models onto Afghan economic institutions; trained security forces in advanced weapon systems they could not understand, much less maintain; imposed formal rule of law on a country that addressed 80 to 90 percent of its disputes through informal means; and often struggled to understand or mitigate the cultural and social barriers to supporting women and girls. Without this background knowledge, U.S. officials often empowered powerbrokers who preyed on the population or diverted U.S. assistance away from its intended recipients to enrich and empower themselves and their allies. Lack of knowledge at the local level meant projects intended to mitigate conflict often exacerbated it, and even inadvertently funded insurgents.

**7. Monitoring and Evaluation: U.S. government agencies rarely conducted sufficient monitoring and evaluation to understand the impact of their efforts.**

Monitoring and evaluation (M&E) is the process of determining what works, what does not, and what needs to change as a result. Conceptually, M&E is relatively straightforward, but in practice, it is extremely challenging. This is especially true in complex and unpredictable environments like Afghanistan, where staff turnover is rapid, multiple agencies must coordinate programs simultaneously, security and access restrictions make it hard to understand a program's challenges and impact, and a myriad of variables compete to influence outcomes. The absence of periodic reality checks created the risk of doing the wrong thing perfectly: A project that completed required tasks would be considered "successful," whether or not it had achieved or contributed to broader, more important goals.

SIGAR's extensive audit work on sectors spanning health, education, rule of law, women's rights, infrastructure, security assistance, and others collectively paints a picture of U.S. agencies struggling to effectively measure results while sometimes relying on shaky data to make claims of success. As detailed in this chapter, the U.S. government's M&E efforts in Afghanistan have been underemphasized and understaffed because the overall campaign focused on doing as much as possible as quickly as possible, rather than ensuring programs were designed well to begin with and could adapt as needed. As a result, the U.S. government missed many opportunities to identify critical flaws in its interventions or to act on those that were identified. These shortcomings endangered the lives of U.S., Afghan, and coalition government personnel and civilians, and undermined progress toward strategic goals.

\* \* \* \* \*

In conclusion, this report raises critical questions about the U.S. government's ability to carry out reconstruction efforts on the scale seen in Afghanistan. As an inspector general's office charged with overseeing reconstruction spending in Afghanistan, SIGAR's approach has generally been technical; we identify specific problems and offer

specific solutions. However, after 13 years of oversight, the cumulative list of systemic challenges SIGAR and other oversight bodies have identified is staggering. As former National Security Advisor Stephen Hadley told SIGAR, “We just don’t have a post-conflict stabilization model that works. Every time we have one of these things, it is a pick-up game. I don’t have confidence that if we did it again, we would do any better.”<sup>1</sup>

This was equally apparent after the Vietnam War, when a war-weary and divided country had little appetite to engage in another similar conflict. After Vietnam, for example, the U.S. Army disbanded most active duty civil affairs units and reduced the number of foreign area officers, the Army’s “regionally focused experts in political-military operations.”<sup>2</sup> Special Forces moved away from counterinsurgency and instead focused on conducting small-scale operations in support of conventional forces. And USAID’s global staff was gradually cut by 83 percent.

In other words, according to former Vice Chief of Staff of the Army General Jack Keane, “After the Vietnam War, we purged ourselves of everything that had to do with irregular warfare or insurgency, because it had to do with how we lost that war. In hindsight, that was a bad decision.”<sup>3</sup> After all, declining to prepare after Vietnam did not prevent the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan; instead, it ensured they would become quagmires.

Rather than motivating the U.S. government to improve, the difficulty of these missions may instead encourage U.S. officials to move on and prepare for something new. According to Robert Gates, former secretary of defense from 2006–2011:

I have noticed too much of a tendency towards what might be called ‘Next-War-itis,’ the propensity of much of the defense establishment to be in favor of what might be needed in a future conflict. . . . Overall, the kinds of capabilities we will most likely need in the years ahead will often resemble the kinds of capabilities we need today.<sup>4</sup>

The post-Afghanistan experience may be no different. As this report shows, there are multiple reasons to develop these capabilities and prepare for reconstruction missions in conflict-affected countries:

1. They are very expensive. For example, all war-related costs for U.S. efforts in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Pakistan over the last two decades are estimated to be \$6.4 trillion.
2. They usually go poorly.
3. Widespread recognition that they go poorly has not prevented U.S. officials from pursuing them.
4. Rebuilding countries mired in conflict is actually a continuous U.S. government endeavor, reflected by efforts in the Balkans and Haiti and smaller efforts currently underway in Mali, Burkina Faso, Somalia, Yemen, Ukraine, and elsewhere.
5. Large reconstruction campaigns usually start small, so it would not be hard for the U.S. government to slip down this slope again somewhere else and for the outcome to be similar to that of Afghanistan.

Nevertheless, after the last two decades in Afghanistan and Iraq, State, USAID, and DOD have all signaled they do not see large-scale missions as likely in the future. The Stabilization Assistance Review approved by all three agencies in 2018 noted, “There is no appetite to repeat large-scale reconstruction efforts, and therefore our engagements must be more measured in scope and adaptable in execution.”<sup>5</sup> Just as after Vietnam, today U.S. policymakers and the public they serve may have sound reasons for avoiding another prolonged conflict and reconstruction mission. However, that does not mean such an endeavor is avoidable in the future.

As SIGAR’s *Stabilization* report notes, “there will likely be times in the future when insurgent control or influence over a particular area or population is deemed an imminent threat to U.S. interests.”<sup>6</sup> If the U.S. government does not prepare for that likelihood, it may once again try to build the necessary knowledge and capacity on the fly. As seen in Afghanistan and Iraq, doing so has proven difficult, costly, and prone to avoidable mistakes.

As former U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan Ryan Crocker observed, “You have to start working on it before you need it.”<sup>7</sup> One former senior DOD official likewise noted that rebuilding another country requires advanced skills that must be cultivated ahead of time. “You wouldn’t invent how to do infantry operations [or] artillery at the start of a war. You need [to already have] the science behind [reconstruction] and people who think about it 24/7.”<sup>8</sup>

Building on SIGAR’s body of work, as well as the work of inspector general offices across the government, this report points to conceptual, administrative, and logistical work that should be done between large-scale reconstruction efforts to increase the U.S. government’s chances of success in future campaigns.

The nature and range of the investment necessary to properly prepare for these campaigns is an open question. In previous lessons learned reports, SIGAR has made recommendations for existing U.S. government offices to create a database of qualified personnel to call up when necessary, build interagency doctrine for security sector assistance, and establish anti-corruption offices within key agencies. As former U.S. envoy to Afghanistan James Dobbins observed, properly preparing “doesn’t mean that you have to have a standing capability to immediately train [an entire army], but you need to have the know-how and an ability to surge those kinds of resources.”<sup>9</sup> Others have argued that such an ability requires a permanent office with the authority and funding to prepare for, plan, execute, and evaluate all reconstruction missions.

U.S. agencies should continue to explore how they can ensure they have the strategic planning capabilities, reconstruction doctrine, policies, best practices, standard operating procedures, institutional knowledge, and personnel structures necessary for both large and small reconstruction missions.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

This report is built on all of SIGAR's work and everyone who supported the organization. Across its 13 years in operation, SIGAR has employed 655 full time staff, 11 detailees from other agencies, 62 contractors, and 12 Afghan staff. Their collective efforts made it possible for SIGAR to keep American taxpayers informed about Afghanistan's reconstruction, and the prospects for improving such efforts in the future. This report would not have been possible without them.

### **Research Team**

Harrison Akins, Subject Matter Expert  
Will Clift, Student Trainee  
Jordan Kane, Senior Research Analyst  
Paul Kane, Senior Research Analyst  
Matthew Rubin, Senior Research Analyst  
Daniel Weggeland, Senior Subject Matter Expert  
David H. Young, Supervisory Research Analyst/Project Lead

### **Lessons Learned Program Team**

Nikolai Condee-Padunov, Program Manager  
Tracy Content, Editor  
Jason Davis, Visual Information Specialist  
Vong Lim, Senior Visual Information Specialist  
Joseph Windrem, Director of Lessons Learned Program





## **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.
- means of keeping the Secretary of State and the Secretary of Defense fully and currently informed about problems and deficiencies relating to the administration of such programs and operation and the necessity for and progress on corrective action.

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.

Source: P.L. 110-181, "National Defense Authorization Act for FY 2008," 1/28/2008.

**WASTE, FRAUD, OR ABUSE MAY BE REPORTED TO SIGAR'S HOTLINE**

By phone: Afghanistan

Cell: 0700107300

DSN: 318-237-3912 ext. 7303

All voicemail is in Dari, Pashto, and English.

By phone: United States

Toll-free: 866-329-8893

DSN: 312-664-0378

All voicemail is in English and answered during business hours.

By fax: 703-601-4065

By email: [sigar.hotline@mail.mil](mailto:sigar.hotline@mail.mil)

By web submission: [www.sigar.mil/investigations/hotline/report-fraud.aspx](http://www.sigar.mil/investigations/hotline/report-fraud.aspx)

SIGAR 21-46-LL

**SIGAR  
SPECIAL INSPECTOR GENERAL  
FOR AFGHANISTAN RECONSTRUCTION**

2530 Crystal Drive  
Arlington, VA 22202

[www.sigar.mil](http://www.sigar.mil)

