



In 2012, U.S. Army General Martin E. Dempsey, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, travels aboard a helicopter from Bagram to Kabul, Afghanistan for a meeting with the leadership of the International Security Assistance Force, U.S. Central Command, the U.S. State Department, and Afghan military. (DOD/ D. Myles Cullen)

Afghanistan Reconstruction

Lessons from the Long War

By John F. Sopko

On a bright fall morning in September 2001, 19 terrorists attacked the World Trade Center in New York City and the Pentagon, and they would have inflicted more carnage were it not for the heroic actions taken by the passengers on Flight 93 in the skies above Pennsylvania. All told, 2,977 innocent civilians were killed in the attacks of September 11, and more than 6,000 others were injured.

The war in Afghanistan, which began with such certainty of purpose and global support on October 7, 2001, now—nearly 18 years later—has ironically left U.S. policymakers and the public with more questions than answers. Can we win? What does winning look like? When will U.S. and coalition forces depart? Can the Afghan government and military survive without a U.S.-led military presence and continued donor support? Recent talks between the U.S. Government and the Taliban have only lengthened the list of questions that policymakers must confront, such as whether a peace deal is achievable, and if so, what that means for both the future of the U.S. role in Afghanistan and for Afghans themselves.

The office I lead as Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) is unique. We are one of only two independent inspector general offices not housed within a government agency and the only one with cross-agency jurisdiction. SIGAR has authority to look at any Federal agency that has played a role in the \$133 billion (and counting) U.S. reconstruction effort in Afghanistan.

Since SIGAR's creation by Congress in 2008, we have examined nearly every facet of the reconstruction effort. The 300-plus audits and inspections we have conducted have identified more than \$1 billion in potential savings to U.S. taxpayers and made more than 900 recommendations to improve government operations. The over 1,000 criminal and civil investigations SIGAR's law enforcement agents have conducted have produced \$1.5 billion in criminal fines, restitutions, forfeitures, civil settlements, and U.S. Government cost savings and recoveries. SIGAR has also secured more than 130 convictions of individuals who have committed crimes against the taxpayer.

SIGAR's statutorily mandated quarterly report to Congress is the most comprehensive report on the reconstruction effort. Our Research and Analysis Directorate serves as the agency's own in-house "think tank" and is responsible for producing the oft-cited quarterly report in an environment where facts on U.S.

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Government activities in Afghanistan are becoming ever harder to discern and verify.

Congress designed SIGAR specifically to cut through agency jurisdictional boundaries and combat waste, fraud, and abuse in the Afghan reconstruction effort. SIGAR has built on that mission, to benefit not only the ongoing reconstruction effort but similar future efforts as well.

I discovered soon after assuming my post in 2012 that there are holes in our whole-of-government approach in Afghanistan. And I fear these holes are not limited to U.S. efforts in Afghanistan. Given

there are nearly 40 countries assisting in the coalition effort, there is also a need for a “whole-of-governments” approach to ensure efforts are coordinated around shared objectives.

Recognizing these problems, and with the support of prominent government officials such as Ambassador Ryan Crocker and General John Allen, we established a lessons learned program to look back at what had worked—and what had not—during the past 17 years in Afghanistan. The program’s staff are some of the most experienced experts on Afghanistan in the U.S. Government.



In 2014, an Afghan military police officer stands on a wall while providing security in a village near Bagram airfield. (U.S. Army/Nikayla Shodeen)

By statute, my focus is Afghanistan reconstruction. But there are lessons from the so-called graveyard of empires that apply not only to ongoing and future efforts in Afghanistan, but also to future stabilization and reconstruction efforts elsewhere.

The tendency to think that we will never again undertake another stabilization or reconstruction mission in a failed or fragile state belies history. While we have heard that claim after every such effort from Vietnam to the present, there is always a new crisis to attend to. As much as we might want to wish them away, conflicts spanning the globe draw America and its allies in. Afghanistan, Bosnia, the Central African Republic, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Haiti, Iraq, Kosovo, Liberia, Somalia, South Sudan, Syria, Timor-Leste, Ukraine, Yemen—a familiar list of fragile and failing states, past and present. International responses to each of these situations have varied greatly, but the challenges these crises pose are not going away.

Considering that more than 2,200 Americans have died in Afghanistan, it would be a dereliction of duty not to extract lessons from nearly 18 years of engagement there. It not only makes sense but also is a statutory obligation for SIGAR. Our legislative mandate requires us to provide recommendations to promote economy, efficiency, effectiveness, and leadership on preventing and detecting waste, fraud, and abuse.

As an independent inspector general, my job is to evaluate the effectiveness of reconstruction activities in Afghanistan, not to make policy. Nonetheless, I have been asked many times whether the United States and its coalition partners will be in Afghanistan in another 18 years. Although I cannot answer that question directly, I know that we may well be if we fail to learn the lessons from the first 18 years of our nation's experience in Afghanistan.

To carry out its lessons learned program, SIGAR assembled a team of subject matter experts

with considerable experience working and living in Afghanistan as well as a staff of experienced research analysts. Many have served in the U.S. military or worked at the State Department, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), the Intelligence Community, or with other federal agencies. Each report, to date, has taken from two to three years to produce due to extensive fieldwork, robust fact-checking, and thorough reviews by external subject matter experts and relevant U.S. agencies.

As they conduct their work, our lessons learned teams utilize published materials but also submit requests for access to government documents unavailable to the public, consult with experts in academia and research institutions, and conduct in-depth interviews with current and former personnel from federal agencies that have played significant roles in Afghanistan.

The work of the lessons learned teams is informed by the hundreds of audits and inspections, investigations, and other oversight work that SIGAR has conducted. While many academics, journalists, pundits, and columnists have written extensively about Afghanistan, only a government agency with authority like SIGAR can access all the relevant source documentation and individuals necessary, partly because, as a statutory Office of Inspector General, cooperation from U.S. Government agencies with SIGAR is mandated by law. The SIGAR seal on the cover of each of our lessons learned reports bestows upon it an authoritativeness that cannot be matched by a non-government entity.

It may seem odd that it would fall to an Inspector General's office to undertake this work. But I quickly found upon assuming my post that individual agencies were constrained from deriving any long-term lessons in Afghanistan and adjusting their operations accordingly often because their personnel in Afghanistan rotate out of country after

a year or less in what we at SIGAR have come to call the “annual lobotomy”—essentially the routine loss of institutional memory among U.S. agencies working in Afghanistan.

Additionally, even if an agency does produce a lessons learned report, it rarely, if ever, coordinates with other government agencies in its preparation. And lessons learned efforts that were undertaken often are long forgotten by the time they are needed again. SIGAR’s own staff in Kabul found a USAID-commissioned study from 1988 entitled “A Retrospective Review of U.S. Assistance to Afghanistan: 1950 to 1979.” Many of the report’s lessons are not only still relevant, but also could have made a real impact if they had been taken into account in the early 2000s. Unfortunately, we could not find anybody at USAID or the State Department who was aware of the report’s existence, let alone its findings.

Given all this, it was left to SIGAR to step into the breach. To date, SIGAR has published 5 reports on lessons observed from the past 17 years of reconstruction efforts in Afghanistan. While we routinely call them lessons learned, we recognize that they are only truly learned if the 78 recommendations we have made are implemented—something that we are working to ensure through a robust outreach program by our staff of subject matter experts.

All of SIGAR’s reports are available on our website, and each lessons learned report is also available in interactive format, making them more accessible to the nonacademic reader or policymaker who rarely has time to read a 200-page report.

SIGAR’s first lessons learned report, *Corruption in Conflict*, issued in September 2016, examined how the U.S. Government—primarily the Departments of Defense, State, Treasury, and Justice, and USAID—understood the risks of corruption in Afghanistan, how the U.S. response to corruption evolved, and the effectiveness of that response.¹

In September 2017, SIGAR released *Reconstructing the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF)*, which looked at how the U.S. Government developed and executed security sector assistance programs to build, train, advise, and equip the ANDSF, both unilaterally and as part of a coalition, from 2002 through 2016.²

The third SIGAR lessons learned report, *Private Sector Development and Economic Growth*, released in April 2018, examined how the U.S. Government supported private sector development through efforts led by USAID, with additional significant roles played by State, Defense, Commerce, and Treasury.³

May 2018 saw the release of our fourth lessons learned report, *Stabilization: Lessons from the U.S. Experience in Afghanistan*, which detailed how USAID and the departments of State and Defense tried to support and legitimize the Afghan government from 2002 through 2017, with a primary focus on the years of the military surge (2009 to 2012).⁴

And most recently, in June 2018, SIGAR released its fifth lessons learned report on counternarcotics, which described how USAID, the departments of State and Defense, and the Drug Enforcement Administration attempted to deter cultivation and the trade of opium, build Afghan counterdrug capacity, and develop the country’s licit economy.⁵

While SIGAR has published more than 1,200 pages of research in these 5 lessons learned reports, our work is far from done. We have an additional four reports in the pipeline, with more on the horizon. While agencies such as the State and Defense departments initially were skeptical of the value of our lessons learned initiative, they are now asking SIGAR to look into topics of immediate interest to their senior officials, including elections and reintegration issues.

With five reports complete, we have identified what we consider the ten most important and consistently observed lessons of U.S. and coalition



In 2010, U.S. marines conduct a patrol alongside a poppy field while visiting settlements in Boldak, Afghanistan. (U.S. Marine Corps/ Lindsay L. Sayres)

engagement in Afghanistan that have impacted the reconstruction effort. They include:

- persistent insecurity and uncertainty about the future;
- a lack of comprehensive and coordinated strategies within the U.S. Government and among our coalition partners;
- misaligned priorities between the United States, coalition partners, and the government of Afghanistan;
- a failure to understand the Afghan operating environment;
- insufficient monitoring and evaluation of ongoing efforts;
- spending decisions that exacerbated corruption;
- the failure to take into account the Afghan government's actual capabilities and political will;
- politically driven timelines; and
- counterproductive military and civilian personnel policies.

Lastly, our tenth lesson was that with the right people and the right resources, it was possible to build capacity in Afghanistan—albeit on a smaller scale.

For the sake of brevity, I will focus on the five common threads that I feel are particularly important:

- the impact of continued insecurity;
- corruption and how the United States and coalition contributed to it;
- the impact from the lack of comprehensive strategies;
- the effect of politically driven timelines; and
- counterproductive personnel policies.

Insecurity

One of the most important common themes across SIGAR's lessons learned reports has been that security is the critical component needed for reconstruction to succeed.

While U.S. and coalition military operations in late 2001 were largely successful, by early 2002 there was a misconception that Afghanistan was a post-conflict state. Demonstrating this, in 2003, the White House proposed just \$151 million in assistance for Afghanistan—a figure that included just \$1 million for the Afghan National Army (the ANDSF now routinely receives over \$4 billion from the United States annually). While Congress later increased assistance to just under \$1 billion, the message was clear—the United States intended to maintain a light footprint and failed to foresee that the Taliban could reemerge to challenge the new Afghan government.

Accelerating the Taliban's return was the coalition's reliance on warlords who had been pushed out of power by the Taliban. The coalition paid warlords not only to provide security but also, in many cases, to run provincial and district governments. One senior U.S. official told our researchers that this was seen as a pragmatic approach—that it was necessary to work with unsavory characters in order to pursue U.S. counterterrorism objectives, and that there was an assumption that the United States would

eventually hold the warlords to account. But that rarely, if ever, happened.

The abuses, whether political, economic, or purely violent, committed by coalition-aligned Afghans led many frustrated Afghans into the arms of the resurgent Taliban. The deterioration of security that resulted from the rise of the Taliban insurgency negatively impacted virtually every U.S. and coalition initiative in Afghanistan to this day.

For example, as the Taliban threat grew, efforts to sustain and professionalize the ANDSF became secondary to immediate combat needs by coalition commanders. The coalition built—or attempted to build—the Afghan force that the United States and coalition needed at the time, a force that would allow non-Afghan forces to return home. There was little concern for the capabilities and resources the Afghans would be left with once coalition forces departed. Nearly 18 years later, the Afghan security forces still cannot sustain themselves, and the United States and its coalition partners spend billions annually to support them.

Afghanistan's economy was also negatively impacted by increasing insecurity, which of course discouraged trade, investment, and other economic activity. Insecurity also increased the difficulty of building government institutions needed to support the private sector. In particular, the U.S. Government's announcement of the military draw-down and the resulting anticipation of dramatic aid reductions reinforced existing uncertainty and pessimism about the economy and fostered a "last call" mentality that encouraged Afghans to make money off the coalition presence while they still could—something that has had a lasting impact on the success of all the coalition's assistance programs.

Corruption

The second common lesson from SIGAR's lessons learned reports is that corruption negatively affected the reconstruction effort and that the coalition,

particularly the United States, exacerbated corruption in Afghanistan.

The injection of billions of dollars into the Afghan economy by international donors led by the United States—combined with the limited ability of the Afghan government to expend funds, poor donor oversight and contracting practices, and built-in institutional incentives to spend money—quickly increased the risks of corruption.

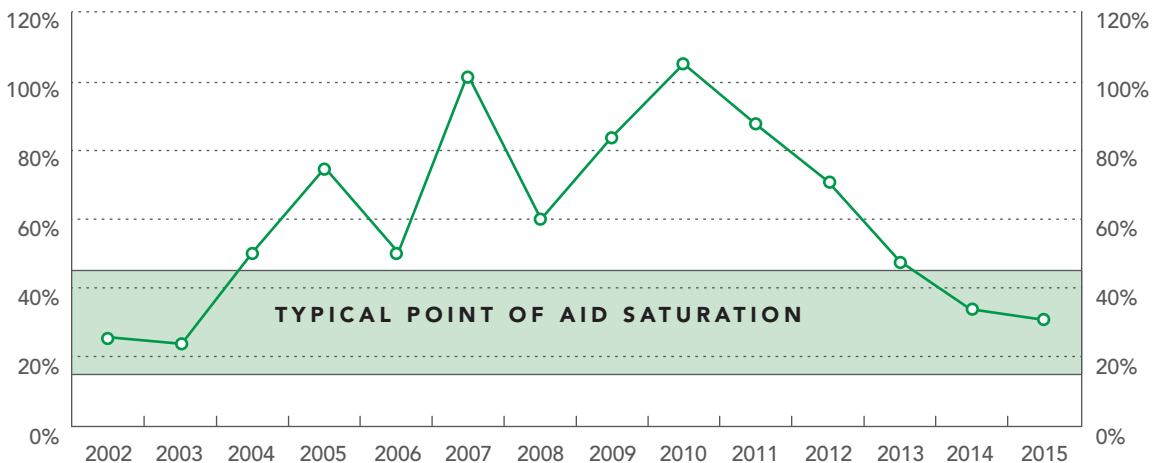
The United States and its partners spent too much, too fast, in too small an economy, with too little oversight. While donors berate Afghanistan for being, according to Transparency International, the sixth-most corrupt country in the world, it had plenty of help getting there. The \$133 billion the United States has appropriated for reconstruction—more than the nation spent on the entire Marshall Plan to rebuild Western Europe after World War II—flooded the Afghan economy. And that excludes the more than \$740 billion the United States has spent on warfighting or funds provided by coalition partners and other donors.

Most development economists agree that the generally accepted amount of foreign aid a country’s economy can absorb is 15 to 45 percent of the country’s gross domestic product (GDP). Afghanistan, with a relatively small economy, would be able to safely absorb an amount toward the lower end of that range. Anything more than that would be at risk of spilling over into the illicit economy like water running over the sides of a saturated sponge.

But by 2004, aid to Afghanistan from the United States alone consistently exceeded the 45 percent threshold and totaled more than 100 percent of Afghanistan’s GDP in both 2007 and 2010. This immense amount of aid distorted the Afghan economy, fueled corruption, and bought a lot of real estate in Dubai, the United States, and elsewhere. And again, this amount does not even take into account funds provided by non-U.S. donors.

As former U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates put it, “For all our handwringing and hectoring on corruption we seemed oblivious to how much we were contributing to it and on a scale that dwarfed the

FIGURE 1. U.S. Appropriated Reconstruction Funding for Afghanistan Shown as a Percentage of Afghan Gross Domestic Product.



Source: SIGAR Lessons Learned Program analysis of SIGAR, *Quarterly Report to the United States Congress* (Arlington, VA: SIGAR, January 30, 2016): 187; SIGAR, *Quarterly Report to the United States Congress* (Arlington, VA: SIGAR, October 30, 2014): 202–03. *World Bank, World Development Indicators: GDP at Market Prices (current U.S. dollars)*, World Bank Databank, accessed July 12, 2016.

drug trade. Tens of billions of dollars were flooding into Afghanistan from the U.S. and our partners and we turned a blind eye or simply were ignorant of how regularly some portion was going to payoffs, bribes, and bank accounts in Dubai.”⁶

The U.S. Government’s historic inclination to believe that throwing more money at a problem automatically leads to better results exacerbated an already bad corruption situation. For one, the reconstruction effort in Afghanistan was derailed as money spent—rather than the outcomes of those expenditures—became the metric used to determine success.

As SIGAR’s various audits and other oversight products have repeatedly noted, U.S. Government agencies are very good at measuring inputs—usually the amount of money spent. The agencies are decent at measuring outputs—for example, how many clinics were built or soldiers trained. But time and time again, SIGAR has seen little, if any, focus on the outcomes of projects and programs. Measuring inputs and outputs alone cannot tell us if a clinic is staffed, has medicine, is connected to the electrical grid or has fuel for its generators, has access to clean water, and is being used by the local community. More importantly, it cannot tell us

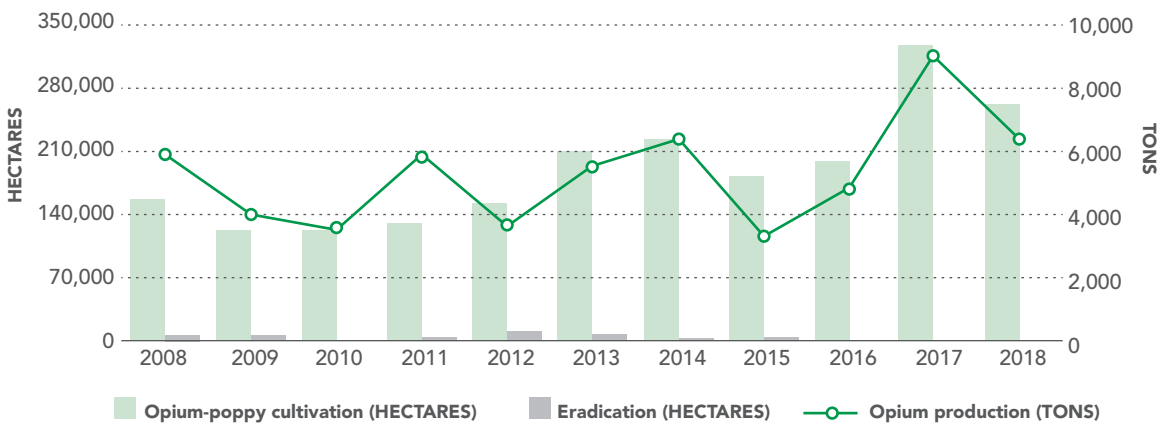
the extent to which its existence contributes to the overall health of the people who live there. But no individual or agency in Afghanistan seems to ever be held accountable for successful outcomes—only whether they spend funds.

The most glaring example of this in Afghanistan may be the \$9 billion the United States has spent to date fighting narcotics. Only if the goal was to increase poppy and opium production to all-time highs can U.S. efforts be considered a success.

By 2013—a dozen years after the United States set foot in Afghanistan—the U.S. military belatedly had come to realize that corruption was a critical threat to U.S. security objectives in Afghanistan, particularly to the effectiveness of the ANDSF. The military finally started placing conditions on Afghan security institutions in exchange for U.S. funding—but not until 2014, well after the horse was out of the barn and significant damage had already been done.

When the 215th Corps in Helmand collapsed in the face of a Taliban offensive in 2016, it was in large part due to an overestimation of the corps’ strength based on a personnel roster that had been inflated by the inclusion of nonexistent “ghost soldiers” by senior commanders who pocketed the coalition-funded salaries of those “ghosts.”

FIGURE 2. Afghan Opium-Poppy Cultivation, Eradication, and Production Since 2008



Source: UNODC, *World Drug Report 2016*, 5/2016, Annex, vii, ix, xii; UNODC, *Afghanistan Opium Survey 2017: Cultivation and Production*, 11/2017, 5–6, 64–71.

While the U.S. military and civilian agencies in Afghanistan have made anti-corruption efforts more of a priority in recent years, the legacy of those early days still poses an almost insurmountable challenge. Last year, the Department of Justice attaché in Kabul described Afghanistan as having “a largely lawless, weak, and dysfunctional government,” citing the number of corruption cases languishing in the Afghan justice system due to a lack of political will—rather than capacity—of the Afghan government.⁷

No one argues that Afghanistan did not have a corruption problem prior to 2001, but U.S. and coalition spending acted as gasoline poured on an already smoldering fire. Money cannot solve all the world’s problems, and in places where governments do elect to spend it, they must be aware of the operating environment and ensure that the proper controls and oversight bodies are in place to protect it.⁸

Lack of Comprehensive Strategies

The third key lesson from SIGAR’s lessons learned reports is that a lack of comprehensive strategies inhibited assistance efforts. One of the most consistent failures SIGAR has identified in all of its work since the agency’s inception has been a lack of coherent, whole-of-government strategies to address challenges facing the reconstruction effort.

Strategies are critical to ensuring that all parties move in the same direction and are especially important when missions, like the Afghanistan reconstruction mission, require multiple government agencies—and multiple governments—to coordinate.

Numerous reconstruction initiatives suffered from the lack of comprehensive strategies. Stabilization efforts were impaired by frequent battles between the Defense Department and USAID. The absence of a U.S. Government anticorruption strategy allowed security, counterterrorism, and political objectives to trump anticorruption priorities.

Counternarcotics initiatives suffered from the absence of a strategy that empowered the State

Department to direct other agencies to provide the resources needed to ensure that U.S. security, development, and governance efforts accounted for the impact the drug trade had on those efforts, and conversely, how those efforts might impact the drug trade.

The effort to rebuild the Afghan security forces—essentially the coalition’s exit strategy—required integrated whole-of-government support from civilian and military agencies with expertise in training and advising foreign countries in security operations and their governing institutions. But here lies a cautionary tale.

In the United States, the State Department holds responsibility for training foreign police forces, such as the Afghan National Police. But the State Department lacks the ability to operate in nonpermissive environments like Afghanistan. So the mission fell, in large part, to the U.S. military by default. But the U.S. military has limited expertise in training civilian police forces. SIGAR’s research found instances where Blackhawk helicopter pilots were assigned to train police, which obviously was not their primary skill set. Some soldiers turned to watching television shows such as “NCIS” and “Cops” to try and develop curricula for their training programs. And because the U.S. military was more focused on defeating the Taliban than civilian policing, the Afghan National Police developed more as a paramilitary force than the sort of beat cops Afghans wanted and needed.

These may be dramatic examples, but they have had serious implications for the development of the Afghan National Police. More broadly, they demonstrate that a lack of comprehensive, coordinated strategies among government agencies negatively affected the reconstruction effort.

Artificial Timelines

The fourth common theme from SIGAR’s lessons learned reports is that politically driven timelines undermined the reconstruction effort. U.S.

military plans for Afghan security force readiness were designed to meet politically driven timelines dictated from Washington. These plans also consistently underestimated the resilience of the Taliban insurgency and overestimated the capacity of the ANDSF, leaving those forces ill prepared to deal with deteriorating security after the drawdown of U.S. combat forces concluded in 2014.

As General Allen, the commanding general at the time, told us, “We went from an end state to an end date.” It is likely not a coincidence that after U.S. combat forces withdrew, Kunduz City temporarily fell to the Taliban, and the 215th Corps in Helmand disintegrated in the face of a Taliban offensive. The accelerated timeline dictated by Washington did not provide time for U.S. forces to adequately train their Afghan counterparts before the coalition ceased offensive operations and left Afghan forces largely on their own.

Artificial timelines also hampered efforts to develop the Afghan economy as overly ambitious targets and unrealistically short timeframes for success compromised program performance. For example, fearing that USAID’s development strategy would not quickly bring significant economic benefit to Afghanistan before the end of the surge, the Department of Defense expanded its Task Force for Business and Stability Operations (TFBSO) to Afghanistan. TFBSO was the Defense Department’s \$675 million effort to jump-start the Afghan economy. The Defense Department, of course, is not known for being particularly skilled at economic development, but the compressed timelines mandated from Washington and the department’s determination that the Afghan economy needed massive improvement before the end of the surge led to TFBSO’s role in Afghanistan.

For \$675 million of taxpayer money, TFBSO made minimal economic impact and quite a few questionable decisions. Among some of TFBSO’s more novel initiatives was a \$2.3 million program

to purchase and fly white Italian goats into Afghanistan on military aircraft to mate with native Afghan goats in an effort to improve the quality of Afghan cashmere.

Things did not turn out as intended. There was an outbreak of disease that necessitated that part of the herd be culled, and the project manager quit in frustration that TFBSO was trying to achieve in a few years what ordinarily would take decades. And like many of the project and programs SIGAR has examined in Afghanistan, the project faced sustainability issues. As of April 2017, SIGAR inspectors were unable to locate any remaining goats associated with the project.

TFBSO also spent millions to construct a compressed natural gas (CNG) station in Sheberghan, Afghanistan, in an effort to quickly create a CNG market in Afghanistan. This was a noble goal, perhaps, but unfortunately, there were no other CNG stations in Afghanistan, so any cars running on CNG and using the filling station could not travel far from home. Afghanistan also happened to lack any cars that ran on CNG—and the cost to convert a gasoline or diesel-powered vehicle was steep—so the U.S. taxpayer paid to convert a number of local taxis to run on CNG to produce a limited market for the CNG station. To our knowledge, the station remains the sole CNG filling station in Afghanistan.

A comprehensive SIGAR audit of TFBSO found that over half of the program’s expenditures went to overhead costs.⁹ The large number of projects and programs that TFBSO financially supported failed for a number of reasons, including their managers’ penchant for ignoring the need for projects to be sustainable once the United States ceased funding them. TFBSO also routinely failed to conduct adequate risk and market analysis. A senior Defense Department official, in testimony before Congress several years later, suggested that economic development was perhaps not a mission the department should undertake

again.¹⁰ One wonders whether an effort such as TFBSO would have been undertaken in Afghanistan at all had it not been for the department's knowledge that it had to produce quick results in Afghanistan based on a politically driven timeline.

Finally, stabilization and counternarcotics efforts suffered from unrealistic timelines as well. Both endeavors, by their very nature, take long periods of time to be successful—time they were not allowed because timelines were not dictated by events on the ground.

Personnel

The fifth common lesson our reports identified is that the most basic of things—human resourcing—negatively affected the reconstruction effort by inhibiting continuity and institutional memory. I assumed my current post in 2012. I am now working with my fifth U.S. ambassador to Afghanistan, my sixth North Atlantic Treaty Organization and U.S. commanding general, and ninth head of the U.S. train, advise, and assist command. Some 80 percent of the U.S. embassy departs each summer, and most of the U.S. military assigned to Afghanistan is deployed for a year or less.

Annual rotations of personnel for unaccompanied posts such as Afghanistan have long been standard practice for the military, State Department, and USAID, and there are understandable reasons for this. But if the “annual lobotomy” in Kabul is going to continue, ways must be found to avoid this routine loss of institutional memory. As one report affirmed, brief rotational deployments and frequent shifts in command contribute to a “lack of proper continuity of effort, a breakdown, or gaps in critical U.S.-host country relationships, and a mutual lack of trust.” Retired Sergeant Major Robert Rush noted that “one tenet of [counterinsurgency doctrine] . . . is to know the populace, and one-year tours . . . did not give organizations or the community they were supporting the time to get to know one other. [One unit]

leaves and another unit would come in and begin the learning phase all over again.”¹¹

Knowing that their deployment would last just a year, commanders knew they quickly had to demonstrate progress. As former senior State Department official Eliot Cohen noted:

*Commanders starting a rotation [in Afghanistan] would say, ‘This is going to be difficult.’ Six months later, they’d say, ‘We might be turning a corner.’ At the end of their rotation, they would say, ‘We have achieved irreversible momentum.’ Then the next command group coming in would pronounce, ‘This is going to be difficult.’*¹²

As for the civilians based in Kabul, journalist Christina Lamb sensed that “it was as if [they believed] history had only started when they had arrived a few months earlier.”¹³ British journalist and current Member of Parliament Rory Stewart noted that “individual [development] officers are never in any one place and rarely in any one organization long enough to be assessed. . . . in fact, their very uselessness benefits them.”¹⁴

Short personnel rotations have affected every aspect of the reconstruction effort and almost every member of the coalition in Afghanistan. Military officials build relationships with their civilian counterparts, which are then lost. Advisors to Afghan security units build trust and then depart. Afghan government officials must deal with a revolving door of U.S. and coalition government officials and have learned to wait out officials they dislike or disagree with, knowing that the foreign official will soon be gone. Contracting officers approve projects knowing they won't be in the country when the project is completed and their replacements may have little, if any, knowledge of or interest in the project they inherited.

Any solution to this problem will be difficult; many members of SIGAR's staff serve multiple tours

in Kabul, and some have been there for as long as five years, so I know the toll their tours take on them and their families. But we simply must find a better way to maintain continuity of effort and knowledge, even if we must face some inconvenient and unpleasant decisions.

From Lessons Observed to Lessons Learned

As anybody who has served in government knows, when you undertake an effort such as our lessons learned initiative, you will inevitably gore somebody's ox. The programs, policies, and strategies SIGAR has reviewed were all the result of decisions made by people who, in large part, were doing the best they could at the time. While our lessons learned reports identify failures, missed opportunities, and bad judgment, the response to our lessons learned reports within the U.S. Government has generally been positive.

The Defense Department was especially interested in our review of efforts to rebuild the Afghan security forces, asking us to brief numerous senior officials in Washington, Kabul, Tampa, and elsewhere, and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs General Joseph Dunford asked to be personally briefed. Following his briefing, the Defense Department requested that SIGAR subject matter experts join their failure analysis team, which was looking back over the previous decade and a half of experience in Afghanistan as they were developing new policy proposals ahead of the President's rollout of his administration's South Asia strategy.

SIGAR's report on stabilization was also well received. State and Defense, along with USAID, requested our input as they completed their own Stabilization Assistance Review.¹⁵ We have been told that the report was made mandatory reading in at least one State Department bureau and at the request of Her Majesty's Government, SIGAR's Deputy Inspector General met with more than 90 senior

interagency officials of the British government to discuss the report's findings. Additionally, our program has enjoyed bipartisan support on Capitol Hill. Recommendations from our reports on corruption and on reconstructing the ANDSF were added to the National Defense Authorization Acts for fiscal years 2018 and 2019, respectively.

It is to the credit of many of the government officials we have worked with—and, in some cases, whose decisions we have criticized—that they see the value of SIGAR's lessons learned work and are suggesting new topics for us to explore further.

Conclusion

SIGAR's lessons learned program may be the longest lasting legacy of our agency. But the program will only truly matter if the lessons we have identified are addressed and the recommendations we have made are implemented. While our writ extends only to Afghanistan, many of the lessons we have identified can be applied to virtually any stabilization or reconstruction effort in a fragile or failing state.

SIGAR is a temporary agency, but, as I noted before, it is a near certainty that the United States will engage in similar operations in the future; each will have its own character, but they will all require whole-of-government responses, and no matter how well executed, there will always be lessons to be learned from these missions. For policymakers interested in good governance and effective foreign and defense policy, it is worth considering what entity will conduct whole-of-government lessons learned reports in the future.

For all the blood and treasure the United States and its coalition partners have expended in the dusty plains and on the frozen mountaintops of Afghanistan, the very least governments can do is conduct fair and comprehensive evaluations of what has been done well and what could have been done better. We hope that the lessons SIGAR has observed and the recommendations we have made will help

policymakers avoid the mistakes of the past as they lead our nation's responses to the challenges of the future. **PRISM**

Maximizing the Effectiveness of U.S. Government Efforts to Stabilize Conflict-Affect Areas (Washington, DC: Department of State, 2018).

Notes

¹ Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR), *Corruption in Conflict: Lessons from the U.S. Experience in Afghanistan*, SIGAR 16-58-LL (Arlington, VA: SIGAR, 2016).

² SIGAR, *Reconstructing the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces: Lessons from the U.S. Experience in Afghanistan*, SIGAR 17-62-LL (Arlington, VA: SIGAR, 2017).

³ SIGAR, *Private Sector Development and Economic Growth: Lessons from the U.S. Experience in Afghanistan*, SIGAR 18-38-LL (Arlington, VA: SIGAR, 2018).

⁴ SIGAR, *Stabilization: Lessons from the U.S. Experience in Afghanistan*, SIGAR 18-48-LL (Arlington, VA: SIGAR, 2018).

⁵ SIGAR, *Counternarcotics: Lessons from the U.S. Experience in Afghanistan*, SIGAR 18-52-LL (Arlington, VA: SIGAR, 2018).

⁶ Christina Lamb, *Farewell Kabul: From Afghanistan to a More Dangerous World* (London: Williams Collins, 2015).

⁷ SIGAR, *Quarterly Report to United States Congress* (Arlington, VA: SIGAR, June 30, 2018).

⁸ John F. Sopko, "Rebuilding Afghanistan: A Fight Against Corruption," *New York University Journal of International Law and Politics* 50, no. 4 (2018): 1247.

⁹ SIGAR, *DOD Task Force for Business and Stability Operations: \$675 Million in Spending Led to Mixed Results, Waste, and Unsustained Projects*, SIGAR 18-19-AR (Arlington, VA: SIGAR, 2018).

¹⁰ Brian McKeon, "Statement for the Record," testimony before the U.S. Senate Armed Services Subcommittee on Readiness and Management Support hearing on "Oversight of Task Force for Business and Stability Operations Projects in Afghanistan," January 20, 2016.

¹¹ Robert Rush, "What's Better to Use in Combat: Unit Replacement or Individual Troop Rotation?" *Foreign Policy*, January 26, 2016.

¹² Steve Coll, *Directorate S: The C.I.A. and America's Secret Wars in Afghanistan and Pakistan* (New York: Penguin Press, 2018).

¹³ Lamb, *Farewell Kabul*.

¹⁴ Rory Stewart, *The Places in Between* (Orlando, FL: Harcourt, 2006), 248.

¹⁵ U.S. Agency for International Development, U.S. Department of Defense, U.S. Department of State, *Stabilization Assistance Review: A Framework for*