Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction

WHY THE AFGHAN GOVERNMENT COLLAPSED

November 2022

SIGAR

Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction

WHAT SIGAR REVIEWED

As of June 30, 2021, the United States had appropriated $145.0 billion for the reconstruction of Afghanistan. Of that amount, $36.3 billion was appropriated for governance and social and economic development. A key U.S. goal was to develop a stable, representative, and democratic government in Afghanistan.

In August 2021, the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (also referred to in this report as the "Afghan government" or "the Republic") collapsed when President Ghani fled and the Taliban took control of Kabul. Remaining U.S. military and civilian personnel were evacuated, and the United States has no official presence in the country as of the date of this report.

Following the collapse of the Republic, the U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Oversight and Reform directed SIGAR to examine the factors that contributed to the dissolution of the Afghan government and the relative success or failure of U.S. reconstruction efforts to build and sustain Afghan governing institutions since 2002.

To answer these directives, the objectives of this evaluation were to determine (1) the factors that contributed to the dissolution of the Government of Afghanistan in August 2021, and (2) the extent to which U.S. reconstruction efforts achieved their stated goals and objectives to build and sustain Afghan governing institutions.

November 2022

Why the Afghan Government Collapsed

SIGAR 23-05-IP EVALUATION REPORT

WHAT SIGAR FOUND

SIGAR identified six factors that contributed to the collapse of the Afghan government in August 2021.

First, the Afghan government failed to recognize that the United States would actually leave. Over nearly 20 years and three U.S. presidencies, the United States had vacillated on the issue of military withdrawal. Even as the United States officially expressed its desire to exit Afghanistan in the years leading up to its departure, contradictory messaging by U.S. officials undermined efforts to convey the seriousness of U.S. intentions to Afghan officials who optimistically believed that alternative scenarios were possible. The result was that the Afghan government was fundamentally unprepared to manage the fight against the Taliban as the United States military and its contractors withdrew.

Second, the exclusion of the Afghan government from U.S.-Taliban talks weakened and undermined it. Before the Afghan government's collapse in August 2021, the primary U.S. goal in Afghanistan was achieving a sustainable political settlement that would bring lasting peace and stability. The Taliban's refusal to talk to the Afghan government without first negotiating with the United States was an obstacle to that goal. The United States sought to circumvent this by dealing first with the Taliban in the hopes it could set the stage for an intra-Afghan peace process and possibly an Afghan political settlement. But the U.S.-Taliban agreement did not have that effect. Instead, the Taliban reinvigorated its battlefield campaign against the Afghan government, which was weakened by its exclusion from U.S.-Taliban talks and the perception that the United States was withdrawing its support.

Third, despite its weakened position, the Afghan government insisted that the Taliban be effectively integrated into the Republic, making progress on peace negotiations difficult. When intra-Afghan talks started in September 2020, security conditions were poor, with Taliban attacks "above seasonal norms," according to the U.S. military. At the same time, political instability had increased after the highly contested September 2019 presidential election, which was marred by allegations of fraud. Exclusion from U.S.-Taliban talks and the subsequent signing of the February 2020 agreement were further blows to the credibility of the Afghan government. Despite these developments, rather than explore an entirely new constitutional framework, the Afghan government insisted during intra-Afghan negotiations that the Taliban be integrated into the Republic. This rendered a political settlement more difficult to achieve.

Fourth, the Taliban were unwilling to compromise. The U.S.-Taliban agreement emboldened the insurgent group. From that point

onward, the insurgency increasingly focused on defeating the Afghan government on the battlefield. An uptick in Taliban attacks coincided with the onset of intra-Afghan negotiations, undermining the nascent peace talks, and prompting U.S. officials to claim that the Taliban was not upholding its commitment to reduce violence. By April 2021, a U.S. intelligence community assessment had concluded that "the Taliban is confident it can achieve military victory." Over the next 2 months, the Taliban's offensive accelerated as the insurgency rapidly gained control of half of Afghanistan's 419 districts. On August 15, 2021, Kabul fell.

Fifth, former Afghan President Ashraf Ghani governed through a highly selective, narrow circle of loyalists, destabilizing the government at a critical juncture. Even at the outset of his first term in 2014, Ghani—a former World Bank official and a favorite of many in the international community—adopted an assertive and undiplomatic approach to dealing with perceived rivals. The president's political and social isolation appears to have been a function of both his personality, and his desire to centralize and micromanage policy implementation. The extent to which Ghani's isolation and tendency toward micromanagement actually caused the collapse of his government is difficult to discern in a complex political environment. However, it appears to have destabilized the Republic by (1) undermining support for the administration among slighted powerbrokers and constituencies; and (2) limiting the president's visibility of critical information, hampering effective decision-making. The net effect was a leader who was largely ignorant of the reality confronting the country he led, particularly just prior to the Republic's collapse.

Finally, the Afghan government's high level of centralization, endemic corruption, and struggle to attain legitimacy were long-term contributors to its eventual collapse. The Bonn Conference, convened in late 2001, established a process for the construction of a new political order in Afghanistan that involved the adoption of a new constitution and democratic elections. Forged between various factions of the Afghan polity, the agreement that emerged from Bonn centralized power in the Afghan presidency. By investing so much power in the executive, Afghanistan's political system raised the stakes for political competition and reignited long-running tensions between an urban elite eager to modernize and conservative rural populations distrustful of central governance. The electoral process was a poor antidote. The credibility of Afghanistan's democratic elections had long been on a downward trend, culminating in a final election for which voter turnout was estimated at only 10 percent. In contrast, the Taliban had a simple rallying message that the government could not claim: They were fighting the foreign occupiers, they were less corrupt than the government, and their legitimacy was grounded in religion. Endemic corruption, including persistent electoral fraud and predatory behavior by government officials, fundamentally undermined the Afghan state. Ultimately, the Afghan government's degree of centralization, in interaction with its fragile and corrupt nature, compounded its legitimacy problem and contributed to its demise.

SIGAR also identified four findings surrounding the question of whether U.S. governance objectives were achieved.

First, the United States sought—but failed—to achieve its goal of building stable, democratic, representative, gender-sensitive, and accountable Afghan governance institutions. The Taliban's decisive political defeat of the Afghan government, despite approximately $145.0 billion in U.S. appropriations, including more than $36.2 billion to support governance and economic development, provides unambiguous evidence of this failure.

Second, several significant shortcomings of the U.S. effort to establish viable governance institutions contributed to this overarching failure. The United States did not resolve the issue of corruption, in part because fighting corruption required the cooperation of Afghan elites whose power relied on the very structures that anticorruption efforts sought to dismantle. The United States also failed to legitimize the Afghan government through democratic elections, which were consistently marred by fraud, or through economic and social development, such as education and healthcare service delivery. The latter did not achieve the desired effect of materially increasing support for the government for a variety of reasons, not least of which was that the Taliban themselves benefitted from them, took credit for their successes, or both. The United States also failed to adequately monitor and evaluate the outcomes and impacts of its efforts, and did not appreciate the complexity of Afghanistan's political economy.

Third, at least some progress towards achieving U.S. governance objectives was made before the collapse of the Afghan government. For example, the United States and its international partners made concerted efforts to develop the human capital and institutional capacity of various Afghan government organizations. In both the public

and private sectors, the combination of available opportunities and the training and education provided by the United States and its international partners led to increased human capital and institutional capacity. Capacity building was imperfect, but did yield some results.

Finally, residual elements of the Afghan government still exist and are functioning, although their sustainability is uncertain. For example, although the Taliban have dissolved several ministries of the former government, the Afghan ministries of finance, health, and economy, as well as the country's central bank, have continued to execute some basic functions. Moreover, although the Taliban have installed their own members in many leadership positions, they have largely kept lower-ranking civil servants in their jobs.

SIGAR provided a draft of this report to the U.S. Departments of State (State) and Defense (DOD), and U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) for review and comment. SIGAR received official written comments from State, which are reproduced in appendix II. USAID and DOD did not submit any comments.

SIGAR | Office of the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction

November 15, 2022

The Honorable Carolyn B. Maloney
Chairwoman
Committee on Oversight and Reform
United States House of Representatives

The Honorable James Comer
Ranking Member
Committee on Oversight and Reform
United States House of Representatives

The Honorable Stephen F. Lynch
Chairman
Subcommittee on National Security
Committee on Oversight and Reform
United States House of Representatives

The Honorable Glenn Grothman
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on National Security
Committee on Oversight and Reform
United States House of Representatives

This evaluation responds to a directive from the House Committee on Oversight and Reform concerning the collapse of the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan in August 2021. SIGAR's evaluation answered two objectives contained in this directive: (1) determine the factors that contributed to the dissolution of the Government of Afghanistan in August 2021, and (2) determine the extent to which U.S. reconstruction efforts achieved their stated goals and objectives to build and sustain Afghan governing institutions.

We identified six factors that contributed to the collapse of the Afghan government in August 2021. First, the Afghan government did not believe that the United States would actually leave Afghanistan, rendering it unprepared for the U.S. withdrawal. Second, the exclusion of the Afghan government from U.S.-Taliban talks weakened and undermined the government. Third, despite its weakened position, the Afghan government insisted during intra-Afghan negotiations that the Taliban be effectively integrated into the Republic, hindering progress in the peace talks. Fourth, the Taliban were unwilling to compromise, which further obstructed the potential for a negotiated political settlement. Fifth, President Ashraf Ghani governed through a highly selective, narrow circle of loyalists, destabilizing the government at a critical juncture. Finally, the Afghan government's high level of centralization, endemic corruption, and struggle to attain legitimacy were long-term contributors to its eventual collapse.

We also identified four findings surrounding the question of whether U.S. governance objectives were achieved. First, the United States sought—but failed—to achieve its goal of building stable democratic, representative, gender-sensitive, and accountable Afghan governance institutions. Second, several significant shortcomings of the U.S. effort to establish viable governance institutions contributed to this overarching failure, including U.S. failures to resolve corruption, to legitimize the Afghan government through democratic elections and service delivery, to adequately monitor and evaluate the outcomes and impacts of its efforts, and to appreciate the complexity of Afghanistan's political economy. Third, at least some progress towards achievement of U.S. governance objectives was made before the collapse of the Afghan government; for example, capacity building was imperfect, but it yielded some results. Finally, residual elements of the Afghan government still exist and are functioning, although their sustainability is uncertain.

We are not making any recommendations in this report.

We provided a draft of this report to State, USAID, and DOD for review and comment. State provided official comments, which are reproduced in appendix II. USAID and DOD did not submit any comments.

SIGAR conducted this work under the authority of Public Law 110-181, as amended, and the Inspector General Act of 1978, as amended; and the Quality Standards for Inspection and Evaluation, published by the Council of the Inspectors General on Integrity and Efficiency.

John F. Sopko
Special Inspector General
for Afghanistan Reconstruction

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ABBREVIATIONS

ANDSF	Afghan National Defense and Security Forces
DOD	Department of Defense
ICS	Integrated Country Strategy
ISAF	International Security Assistance Force
OIG	Office of Inspector General
SIGACT	Significant Activity
SRAP	Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan
State	Department of State
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
USFOR-A	United States Forces–Afghanistan
USIP	United States Institute of Peace

The precipitous collapse of the U.S.-supported government in Afghanistan took less than 4 months, beginning in April 2021 and ending in August 2021 with the Taliban takeover of Kabul.[1] This catastrophe happened despite nearly 20 years of U.S. support, including approximately $145.0 billion in funds appropriated or otherwise made available for Afghanistan reconstruction.[2]

On September 10, 2021, the chair and ranking member of the House Committee on Oversight and Reform, and the chair and ranking member of its Subcommittee on National Security directed SIGAR to examine (1) the factors that contributed to the dissolution of the government of Afghanistan, and any chronic weaknesses that undermined the government's authority or legitimacy since 2002; and (2) the relative success or failure of U.S. reconstruction efforts to build and sustain Afghan governing institutions since 2002.

To accomplish the first objective, we first analyzed and summarized the factors that consistently undermined the Afghan government's authority and legitimacy from 2002 to 2021. The documentary evidence for this analysis and summary consisted primarily of SIGAR's previous audits, lessons learned reports, and quarterly reports, as well as various other works published from 2006 through 2021 that we determined could provide insight into the dynamics of the Afghan government, the U.S. war in Afghanistan, and, more broadly, Afghanistan's history. Factors that undermined the Afghan government's authority and legitimacy were considered potential contributors to the Afghan government's eventual collapse. We then compared the results of our documentary evidence analysis against the testimonial evidence we gathered from interviews to determine the major factors which contributed to the collapse. In total, we conducted more than 80 interviews with former Islamic Republic officials, current and former U.S. government officials, and various experts, such as area specialists and academics. In order to clarify interviewees' views and seek further information, we also sent follow-up questions to some individuals, and received written responses. Where we determined it was appropriate, we supplemented our analysis with other sources, including media reporting.

To accomplish the evaluation's objectives, we began by identifying the U.S. government's strategic governance goals in Afghanistan. To do so, we used judgmental sampling to select eight U.S. strategic documents that articulated interagency goals. For example, we referred to the 2002 Afghanistan Freedom Support Act, the U.S. Department of State (State) and U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) Strategic Plan for Fiscal Years 2004–2009, the 2012 U.S. Civil-Military Strategic Framework, and the 2014 and 2020 Integrated Country Strategies. Using the governance goals presented in these documents as criteria, we examined the body of literature identified above to determine what goals, if any, were achieved, again comparing the results against the views and observations of interviewees.

We conducted our work for this report in Arlington, Virginia, and via virtual telecommunication methods from October 2021 through September 2022, in accordance with the Quality Standards for Inspection and Evaluation, published by the Council of the Inspectors General on Integrity and Efficiency. Appendix I has a more detailed discussion of our scope and methodology.

BACKGROUND

The collapse of the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (also referred to in this report as the "Afghan government" or "the Republic") on August 15, 2021, marked the end of two decades of U.S. efforts to build governance institutions in that country. The endeavor began on December 5, 2001, in Bonn, Germany, when Afghan and international stakeholders agreed on a process to establish a new government in Afghanistan. It was a victors' conference that excluded the Taliban. The Bonn Agreement, as it came to be known, resulted in the appointment of Hamid Karzai as head of the country's interim administration and,

[1] SIGAR, *Quarterly Report to the United States Congress*, SIGAR-2021-QR-4, October 30, 2021, pp. i, 3.

[2] SIGAR, *Quarterly Report to the United States Congress*, SIGAR-2021-QR-3, July 30, 2021, pp. 25, 167; SIGAR, *Quarterly Report to the United States Congress*, SIGAR-2008-QR-4, October 30, 2008, p. 21. Roughly one quarter of this total was appropriated or otherwise made available for governance and development.

eventually, in a constitution that established a highly centralized presidential system of government in a multiethnic country with a vast chasm between urban and rural populations, and no history of a centralized democratic system.[3]

In 2004, Afghanistan held its first democratic presidential election, which Karzai won, notwithstanding allegations from his opponents that the election result was fraudulent.[4] Statements of U.S. ambitions for Afghanistan—the establishment of a government that upheld the rule of law, protected human rights and civil liberties, supported democratic governance, and relied on the free market—were not matched by actual funding. Afghanistan received about $67 in annual per capita assistance in the first 2 years of post-conflict U.S. aid (2002–2003); by comparison, Bosnia—another recent post-conflict setting—received $249 in annual per capita assistance in a 2-year period following the hostilities there (1995–1997).[5]

During Karzai's presidency, government corruption was a significant issue. In 2009, General Stanley McChrystal summarized the problem by saying that Afghans were "frustrated and weary," and that "progress [was] hindered by the dual threat of a resilient insurgency and a crisis of confidence in the government and the international coalition."[6] Election fraud allegations undermined the legitimacy of the government as well. Karzai won a second term that same year, but the results were again disputed.[7] Meanwhile, the Taliban had reconstituted and violence levels were rising. President Barack Obama authorized a surge of U.S. combat forces shortly after taking office in 2009, but deep-seated governance issues remained, as corruption was exacerbated by a flood of money from U.S. and international contracts and assistance.[8]

The September 2014 election of Ashraf Ghani did not increase public confidence in the electoral process: Abdullah Abdullah, the runner-up, challenged the results and threw the government into crisis. A government collapse was averted only by last-minute negotiations led by then-Secretary of State John Kerry and personal intervention by President Barack Obama. The result was the creation of a National Unity Government and a power-sharing arrangement in which Ghani served as President and Abdullah as chief executive.[9]

Sixteen years into reconstruction, the Afghan government still struggled to accrue legitimacy. In 2018, the U.S. Department of Justice described the situation in Afghanistan as "consistent with a largely lawless, weak, and dysfunctional government."[10] Voter turnout had trended downward since Afghanistan's first election in 2004, when an estimated 68 percent of eligible voters showed up to the polls. By the 2019 presidential election, eligible voter turnout was estimated at just under 10 percent. When Ghani was again declared the winner that year, Abdullah again disputed the results. A second power-sharing arrangement brokered by the United States

[3] UN, "Agreement on Provisional Arrangements in Afghanistan Pending the Re-Establishment of Permanent Government Institutions," pp. 3–4, 12; Kofi A. Annan, "Letter dated 5 December 2001 from the Secretary-General addressed to the President of the Security Council," December 5, 2001; Thomas Barfield, *Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010), pp. 7–8, 283, 340, 344; SIGAR, Quarterly Report, SIGAR-2008-QR-4, pp. 13, 52; Carter Malkasian, *The American War in Afghanistan* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2021), epp. 87.

[4] SIGAR, Quarterly Report, SIGAR-2008-QR-4, p. 13; Council on Foreign Relations, "October 9, 2004: A New President for Afghanistan," in *The U.S. War in Afghanistan 1999–2021*, accessed June 18, 2022, https://www.cfr.org/timeline/us-war-afghanistan.

[5] Afghanistan Freedom Support Act of 2002, Pub. L. No. 107-327, 22 U.S.C. § 7511–7513 (2002); George W. Bush and Hamid Karzai, "Joint Declaration of the United States-Afghanistan Strategic Partnership," May 23, 2005; U.S. Government Accountability Office, *Afghanistan Reconstruction: Deteriorating Security and Limited Resources Have Impeded Progress; Improvements in U.S. Strategy Needed*, GAO-04-403, June 2, 2004, p. 50.

[6] General Stanley McChrystal commanded the International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan from 2009–2010. International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), "Commander's Initial Assessment," August 30, 2009, pp. 1-2, 1-4.

[7] SIGAR, *Elections: Lessons from the U.S. Experience in Afghanistan*, SIGAR 21-16-LL, February 1, 2021, p. 10.

[8] SIGAR, *Stabilization: Lessons from the U.S. Experience in Afghanistan*, SIGAR 18-48-LL, May 24, 2018, pp. 20, 25, 34, 64; James Dobbins, Michele A. Poole, Austin Long, and Benjamin Runkle, *After the War: Nation-Building from FDR to George W. Bush* (Arlington, VA: RAND Corporation, 2008), p. 103.

[9] SIGAR, *Quarterly Report to the United States Congress*, SIGAR-2014-QR-4, October 30, 2014, pp. 65, 127.

[10] SIGAR, *Quarterly Report to the United States Congress*, SIGAR-2018-QR-3, July 30, 2018, p. ii.

again narrowly averted the prospect of a government collapse.[11] However, structural state weakness and corruption remained, even if the issue of who was to be president was resolved.[12]

In February 2020, the United States and the Taliban signed an agreement that provided for the withdrawal of all U.S. troops and personnel from Afghanistan within 14 months. In exchange, the Taliban were to prevent their members from using Afghan soil "to threaten the security of the United States or its allies," enter into negotiations with the Afghan government to determine a ceasefire, and reach "agreement over the future political roadmap of Afghanistan."[13]

Peace talks between the Taliban and the Ghani government began in September 2020 amid high levels of insurgent-initiated attacks that were above seasonal norms. U.S. officials criticized the Taliban for not meeting commitments stipulated in or broadly part of the U.S.-Taliban agreement, particularly those surrounding counterterrorism guarantees and violence reduction—the importance of which U.S. officials had repeatedly stressed.[14] On April 14, 2021, after deliberations among his national security team, President Biden announced that the United States would withdraw all U.S. military and contractors by September 11, 2021, on the occasion of the 20th anniversary of the September 11th attacks. By July 2, 2021, the United States completed its withdrawal from Bagram Air Base.[15] Two days later, the Taliban seized more than a dozen districts in northern Afghanistan. By August 1, they controlled more than half the country.[16]

Meanwhile, intra-Afghan talks had failed to gain traction. On July 15, 2021, an Afghan government negotiator described the previous months' talks as a limited number of "informal" meetings that failed to discuss serious issues such as ending the war or a peaceful settlement for a shared future.[17] On July 30—approximately 2 weeks before its collapse—we reported that the Afghan government still had not officially shared a unified peace plan with the Taliban.[18]

On August 6, 2021, the Taliban seized Zaranj, the capital of Nimroz Province, on the border with Iran; this was the first provincial capital to fall. Media reporting indicated that it was captured without a fight. Over the next 3 days, five more provincial capitals fell: Shibirghan, Kunduz City, Taluqan, Sar-e Pul, and Aibak. The final disintegration of the Afghan security forces began the night of August 12 to August 13, when the Taliban captured the major cities Kandahar and Herat, and seven other provincial capitals. On August 15, Taliban forces took control of Kabul and Ghani fled to Uzbekistan, marking the dissolution of the Afghan government. The final stage of the collapse took just 10 days. U.S. involvement on the ground in Afghanistan officially ended on August 30, following the evacuation of U.S. and allied personnel and tens of thousands of Afghans by the U.S. military and international partners. The U.S. Embassy suspended all operations in the country on August 31.[19]

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[11] SIGAR, Elections, SIGAR 21-16-LL, pp. 15, 23–24.

[12] SIGAR, 2019 High-Risk List, SIGAR-19-25-HRL, March 28, 2019, p. 2; SIGAR, 2021 High-Risk List, SIGAR-21-22-HRL, March 10, 2021, p. 2.

[13] SIGAR, *Quarterly Report to the United States Congress*, SIGAR-2020-QR-2, April 30, 2020, p. 61.

[14] SIGAR, *Quarterly Report to the United States Congress*, SIGAR-2020-QR-4, October 30, 2020, p. 69.

[15] SIGAR, *Collapse of the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces: An Assessment of the Factors That Led to Its Demise*, interim report, SIGAR 22-22-IP, May 12, 2022, p. 4.

[16] DOD Office of Inspector General, "Operation Freedom's Sentinel: Lead Inspector General Report to the United States Congress, July 1, 2021–September 30, 2021," November 16, 2021, p. 6.

[17] Ruchi Kumar, "Afghan government denies Taliban offered ceasefire plan," *The National*, July 15, 2021.

[18] SIGAR, Quarterly Report, 2021-QR-3, p. 84.

[19] DOD Office of Inspector General, "Operation Freedom's Sentinel… July 1, 2021–September 30, 2021," pp. 6–7, 15; SIGAR, Quarterly Report, SIGAR-2021-QR-4, pp. 69–71.

SIX FACTORS CONTRIBUTED TO THE COLLAPSE OF THE AFGHAN GOVERNMENT, INCLUDING ITS FAILURE TO ACKNOWLEGE THE REALITY OF THE IMPENDING U.S. WITHDRAWAL

We identified six factors that contributed to the collapse of the Afghan government in August 2021. First, the Afghan government failed to recognize that the United States was actually leaving, rendering it unprepared for the U.S. withdrawal. Second, the exclusion of the Afghan government from U.S.-Taliban talks weakened and undermined it, encouraging an emboldened Taliban to seek a military victory. Third, despite its weakened position, the Afghan government insisted during intra-Afghan negotiations that the Taliban be integrated into the Republic, hindering progress in the peace talks. Fourth, the Taliban were unwilling to compromise, which further obstructed the potential for a negotiated political settlement. Fifth, President Ashraf Ghani governed through a highly selective, narrow circle of loyalists, destabilizing the government at a critical juncture. Finally, the Afghan government's high level of centralization, struggle to attain legitimacy, and endemic corruption were long-term contributors to its eventual collapse, setting the stage for the Republic's final chapter.

The Afghan Government Did Not Believe the United States Would Actually Leave, Rendering the Country Unprepared for the U.S. Withdrawal

A history of U.S. vacillation on the issue of withdrawal, each instance of which ended with the United States still in Afghanistan, led to a belief among Afghan government officials that the United States was not serious about actually leaving. As early as October 2001, President George W. Bush expressed a desire to quickly exit Afghanistan by putting the United Nations in charge of Afghanistan's administration. However, deteriorating security, particularly between 2005 and 2006, caused the nature of the U.S. and international mission to shift away from peacekeeping.[20] By the end of his presidency, President Bush was contemplating the implementation of a fully resourced counterinsurgency campaign in the face of spiking violence—a decision that he left to his successor, President Barack Obama. During his presidential campaign, Obama had repeatedly called for a renewed focus on the "just war."[21] But President Obama's commitment to stabilizing Afghanistan had limits. In December 2009, he announced a time-bound, 18-month surge of 30,000 additional troops to Afghanistan, after which, he stated, "our troops will begin to come home."[22] Nearly 6 years later, in October 2015, President Obama announced that the United States would halt its military withdrawal from Afghanistan and keep thousands of forces in the country through the end of his term.[23] Before he was elected president, candidate Donald Trump publicly expressed in no uncertain terms his opposition to remaining in Afghanistan. Yet in August 2017, he increased troop levels and expanded the U.S. military's ability to conduct operations and support the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF).[24]

Several analysts interviewed by SIGAR expressed a view that was best captured by Antonio Giustozzi, senior research fellow at the Royal United Services Institute, who told us that middle-class Afghans and elites alike believed "America had sunk so much into Afghanistan, they would never leave."[25] The fact that the United

[20] Dobbins et al., *After the War*, pp. 91, 103.

[21] SIGAR, Stabilization, SIGAR-18-48-LL, pp. 21, 23.

[22] White House, Office of Press Secretary, "Remarks by the President in Address to the Nation on the Way Forward in Afghanistan and Pakistan," December 1, 2009.

[23] SIGAR, *What We Need to Learn: Lessons from Twenty Years of Afghanistan Reconstruction*, SIGAR 21-46-LL, August 16, 2021, p. 35.

[24] SIGAR, *Collapse of Afghan National Defense and Security Forces: An Assessment of the Factors That Led to Its Demise* (Interim Report), SIGAR 22-22-IP, May 12, 2022, p. 27.

[25] The Royal United Services Institute is a United Kingdom-based organization that focuses on defense and security policy research. Antonio Giustozzi, Senior Research Fellow, Royal United Service Institute, SIGAR interview, January 28, 2022; Andrew Watkins, Senior Afghanistan Expert, U.S. Institute of Peace, SIGAR interview, January 4, 2022; Ben Connable, Nonresident Senior Fellow, Atlantic Council, SIGAR interview, December 28, 2021; Laurel Miller, former Acting Special

States had supported Afghanistan for 20 years and that Afghanistan had been highly dependent on external support for much of its modern history, made it all the harder for Afghan politicians and leaders to envision a future without such support. Their inability to imagine that scenario prevented the Afghan government from preparing for a U.S. withdrawal, former Acting Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan (SRAP) Laurel Miller suggested. Miller described this phenomenon as "the unfathomability of 'what do we do when the Americans leave?'"[26]

Contradictory Messaging by U.S. Officials Undermined Efforts to Convey the Seriousness of U.S. Intentions to Afghan Government Officials

Because of tensions within the U.S. government surrounding the issue of whether full withdrawal was the right policy, Afghan officials heard what they considered to be contradictory messages about whether a U.S. withdrawal would actually happen. That made it possible for Afghan officials to listen only to those "who were giving them more optimistic scenarios," Miller said.[27] One U.S. official close to negotiations described to us continual friction between Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation Zalmay Khalilzad's team and State country teams in Doha, Qatar, and Kabul throughout the U.S.-Taliban negotiation process. This U.S. official believed that the root of this friction was that some U.S. Embassy Kabul staff did not fully accept the withdrawal of U.S. military forces and the potential of the Taliban exercising meaningful political power in a post-withdrawal Afghanistan. This official cited examples of U.S. government officials, including senior officials, who accepted that U.S. forces were leaving—and took steps to implement presidential intent—who were socially sanctioned by other U.S. government officials at the embassy who disagreed with this policy. This official also told SIGAR that some U.S. officials based their opposition to the withdrawal decision on an idealized vision of advancing the rights of Afghan women. According to the official, this group interacted with a small number of women's rights advocates who were not representative of the overall population.[28] According to a United States Institute of Peace report authored by Steve Brooking, who served as a special advisor on peace and reconciliation for the UN, gaps between Khalilzad's team and the U.S. Embassy in Kabul persisted during intra-Afghan negotiations.[29]

The Afghan government also received mixed messages from U.S. policymakers and others in Washington. President Ghani maintained a back channel to U.S. members of Congress and former U.S. military and civilian officials.[30] In the view of Barnett Rubin, a former senior adviser to the Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan, these U.S. government officials—working during both the Obama and Trump administrations—assured Ghani that "the U.S. would never withdraw its troops" and that "this [withdrawal] is just a bluff."[31] Another former senior U.S. official told SIGAR that Ghani appeared to have gotten the impression "that the [United States] was not altogether on the same page on full withdrawal," which may have led President Ghani to interpret discussions surrounding withdrawal as "an attempt by the United States to shape his behavior." This former senior State official stated, "I tried to plead with [Ghani], saying that I know he's very well-connected, but in our system, the President ultimately decides, and [Ghani] should take this seriously not to

Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan, SIGAR interview, January 21, 2022; Charlotte Bellis, former journalist for Al Jazeera, SIGAR interview, December 23, 2021; Thomas Barfield, Afghanistan expert and professor at Boston University, SIGAR interview, February 9, 2022.

[26] Miller, SIGAR interview, January 21, 2022.

[27] Miller, SIGAR interview, January 21, 2022.

[28] U.S. government official close to the negotiations, SIGAR interview, February 2, 2022.

[29] Steve Brooking, *Why Was a Negotiated Peace Always Out of Reach in Afghanistan: Opportunities and Obstacles, 2001-21*, USIP Peaceworks, August 2022, p. 21.

[30] Steve Coll and Adam Entous, "The Secret History of the U.S. Diplomatic Failure in Afghanistan," *New Yorker*, December 10, 2021, https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2021/12/20/the-secret-history-of-the-us-diplomatic-failure-in-afghanistan.

[31] Barnett Rubin, former senior advisor to the U.S. Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan, SIGAR interview, January 13, 2022.

miscalculate."[32] According to Hekmat Karzai, a former deputy minister of foreign affairs for the Afghan government, one of President Ghani's "great miscalculations [was] that he thought he knew Washington…. Yet, at the end of the day, he couldn't read the most basic signals that Washington had for him."[33]

Inconsistent U.S. Policies Amplified the Confusion

Even after the U.S. officially transitioned to a non-combat role in 2014, the U.S. military found itself pulled back into the fighting between the insurgency and Afghan security forces. When the provincial capital of Kunduz Province fell to the Taliban in 2015, for example, U.S. forces provided close-air support to Afghan security forces clearing the city.[34] According to Thomas Barfield, a professor at Boston University and expert on Afghanistan, this might have given President Ghani the false impression that the United States would ultimately step in if the Afghan government encountered "a real test." [35]

Early actions by the Trump administration may have reinforced such an impression. In August 2017, as the security situation in Afghanistan continued to deteriorate rapidly, President Trump announced a new Afghanistan strategy, promising that henceforth "conditions on the ground, not arbitrary timetables" would guide U.S. strategy.[36] As part of this strategy, he authorized U.S. troop increases, as well as additional funding, and expanded authorities for American commanders on the ground so that they could more effectively target terrorists and insurgents. Subsequent increases in American air strikes showed that U.S. forces were taking a more active combat role.[37] Recalling former National Security Advisor H.R. McMaster's first trip to Afghanistan representing the Trump administration, former Acting SRAP Miller stated, "Ghani and his team were just over the moon excited. Now they were going to be saved again by the Americans. And I and others thought, be careful, this is not going to happen. This is not sustainable."[38] Speaking to the UN General Assembly a month after President Trump's announcement, President Ghani said, "We welcome this strategy, which has now set us on a pathway to certainty. The Afghan people have looked to the United States for this type of resolve for years."[39]

But U.S. policy changed again—this time, dramatically. In February 2020, the Trump administration signed a peace agreement with the Taliban, without the Afghan government's participation. The agreement stipulated, "The United States is committed to withdraw from Afghanistan all military forces of the United States, its allies, and Coalition partners, including all non-diplomatic civilian personnel, private security contractors, trainers, advisors, and supporting services personnel."[40] At the same time, however, as covered in detail in our April 2020 quarterly report to the U.S. Congress, the United States issued a joint declaration with the Afghan government that reaffirmed U.S. support for Afghan security forces and for continued military cooperation against international terrorist groups.[41]

Both the language of the U.S.-Taliban agreement and statements by senior U.S. officials left open the possibility that the United States would not leave Afghanistan until all the agreement's conditions were met. For example, at the signing ceremony for the agreement in February 2020, then-Secretary of State Michael

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[32] Senior U.S. government official, SIGAR interview.

[33] Hekmat Karzai, Former Deputy Foreign Minister, Government of Afghanistan, SIGAR interview, January 10, 2022.

[34] SIGAR, *Quarterly Report to the United States Congress*, SIGAR-2015-QR-4, October 30, 2015, p. 65.

[35] Barfield, SIGAR interview, February 9, 2022.

[36] SIGAR, What We Need to Learn, SIGAR 21-46-LL, p. 35.

[37] SIGAR, *Quarterly Report to the United States Congress*, SIGAR-2017-QR-4, October 30, 2017, pp. 97–98.

[38] Miller, SIGAR interview, January 21, 2022.

[39] Radio Free Europe, "Afghanistan's Ghani Welcomes New U.S. 'Resolve' To Win War in UN Address," *REF/RL,* September 20, 2017.

[40] SIGAR, Quarterly Report, SIGAR-2020-QR-2, p. 97; "Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan between the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan Which Is Not Recognized by the United States as a State and Is Known as the Taliban and the United States of America," February 29, 2020.

[41] SIGAR, Quarterly Report, SIGAR-2020-QR-2, p. 97.

Pompeo described the planned U.S. troop withdrawal as "conditions-based," and stated that such a withdrawal would occur only "if the Taliban abide by their promises." Similarly, Ambassador Khalilzad, at a September hearing, told the U.S. House Committee on Oversight and Reform that the U.S. troop withdrawal would be "determined based on conditions on the ground and delivery by the Taliban on their commitments."[42] One senior U.S. official told SIGAR that even though "President Trump was quite clear that he wants to withdraw completely from Afghanistan," a scenario the U.S. deliberated was, "if there was an agreement among Afghans, that if the new government in Afghanistan was agreeable, then we would be open to maintaining some residual force for monitoring and implementing counter terrorism objectives and also helping, if the new government wanted to, the Afghan security forces."[43] Former Afghan National Security Advisor Hamdullah Mohib told SIGAR that "our understanding [of the agreement] was the conditionality part of it."[44] In an August 25, 2022, interview with PBS, President Ghani stated that "the U.S. was of two minds," despite President Trump's apparent promise to withdraw from Afghanistan.[45] James Dobbins, a former SRAP, told us,

> U.S. officials held out that hope [that the Biden administration would reverse President Trump's withdrawal decision], I mean they said it was condition-based, and they alluded somewhat vaguely to the conditions, but I think they created the expectation that if there was no progress in [intra-Afghan] negotiations, no progress towards a reduction of violence, … [the agreement] would be a dead letter.[46]

President Biden's April 2021 Announcement Made U.S Intentions to Complete a Full Withdrawal Clearer

Two days after President Biden's inauguration, the White House announced it would review the U.S.-Taliban agreement. The review was to include an assessment of whether the Taliban were living up to their commitments.[47] At this point in time, it was unclear how the withdrawal process would proceed, and whether U.S. policy towards Afghanistan would shift again. According to the U.S.-Taliban agreement, a full withdrawal of U.S. troops was supposed to take place by May 2021.[48] However, completion of the withdrawal was, per the agreement, to be conditions-based.[49] In February 2021, the congressionally commissioned Afghanistan Study Group released a report concluding that "the Taliban [had] fallen short of their commitments" to not cooperate with groups and individuals threatening the security of the United States. The report also questioned whether the Taliban were seriously committed to a negotiated political settlement with the Afghan government.[50] It recommended that the United States "reinforce the conditionality of a final U.S. troop withdrawal," and noted that the Biden administration had the option of "continuing to maintain military pressure on the Taliban."[51]

According to reporting from Steve Coll and Adam Entous writing for *The New Yorker* in December 2021, during the policy review period, Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General

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[42] Secretary Michael R. Pompeo at a Press Availability After the Afghanistan Signing Ceremony, Remarks to the Press, *State Department press release*, February 29, 2020; U.S. House of Representatives, "Examining The Trump Administration's Afghanistan Strategy, Part 2," Hearing before the Subcommittee on National Security of the Committee on Oversight and Reform, 116th Second Session, September 22, 2020, p. 5.

[43] Senior U.S. government official, SIGAR interview.

[44] Hamdullah Mohib, Afghanistan's former National Security Advisor, email correspondence with SIGAR, September 20, 2022.

[45] PBS News Hour, "Afghanistan's former President Ashraf Ghani on the U.S. withdrawal and Taliban takeover," August 25, 2022.

[46] James Dobbins, former Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan, SIGAR interview, December 20, 2022.

[47] SIGAR, *Quarterly Report to the United States Congress*, SIGAR-2021-QR-2, April 30, 2021, pp. 55, 92.

[48] Afghanistan Study Group, *Afghanistan Study Group Final Report*, February 2021, p. 11.

[49] "Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan between the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan Which Is Not Recognized by the United States as a State and Is Known as the Taliban and the United States of America," February 29, 2020, p. II.

[50] The Afghanistan Study Group was created by Congress through the Further Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2020. According to its enabling legislation, the purpose of the group was to "consider the implications of a peace settlement, or the failure to reach a settlement, on U.S. policy, resources, and commitments in Afghanistan." Afghanistan Study Group, *Afghanistan Study Group Final Report*, pp. 8–9, 60.

[51] Afghanistan Study Group, *Afghanistan Study Group Final Report*, pp. 47, 56.

Mark Milley proposed keeping 2,500 U.S. troops in Afghanistan for up to 1 year, with the hopes that the Taliban would take intra-Afghan talks more seriously.[52] Meanwhile, as the Biden administration considered its options, intra-Afghan peace talks were making little progress.[53] The *Wall Street Journal* reported that negotiations did not meaningfully advance "as both sides waited to see what policy the Biden administration would adopt."[54] Former senior advisor to Afghanistan's State Ministry for Peace Shoaib Rahim told SIGAR that during this period the intra-Afghan negotiations were in "limbo," and that "everyone was doing backdoor negotiations and lobbying in DC."[55]

On April 14, 2021, President Biden announced that it was "time to end America's longest war," and declared that his administration would continue his predecessor's withdrawal policy, although he moved the date from May to September 2021.[56] At the same time, President Biden promised that the U.S. would continue funding the Afghan security forces and provide humanitarian and diplomatic support.[57] He subsequently requested $3.33 billion in funding for Afghan security forces for fiscal year 2022, a $280.2 million increase over the prior year's appropriation.[58]

State told SIGAR, "in communications with the government of then-Afghan President Ghani, high-level officials in the Biden administration made clear that the United States was preparing for a full withdrawal of forces from Afghanistan."[59] Hamdullah Mohib affirmed to SIGAR that the April announcement made U.S. intentions clearer to the Afghan government.[60] However, he added that the Afghan government was surprised by the announcement and contrasted it with his impression of prior U.S. messaging surrounding the U.S.-Taliban agreement:

> We were caught off guard by President Biden's decision to withdraw completely without conditions being met in the U.S.'s agreement with the Taliban. That April announcement was a shock to us because prior to that, throughout our partnership with the [United States], U.S. officials had consistently—at every opportunity—assured the Afghan government that they were committed to a "independent and democratic Afghanistan at peace with itself and its neighbors," and they refuted profusely any argument that their negotiations with the Taliban and their subsequent deal with the Taliban was essentially a guise to withdraw all of their troops.[61]

Despite the apparent clarity provided by President Biden's announcement, it is unclear whether the Afghan government as a whole, and particularly President Ghani, fully grasped the implications of the impending U.S. withdrawal. In June 2021, President Ghani, accompanied by senior Afghan government officials, visited Washington to meet with President Biden.[62] During this visit, President Ghani also separately met with various experts and former U.S. officials.[63] One of those officials, former International Security Assistance Force commander General David Petraeus, detected what he called "a degree of denial" in President Ghani's thinking. According to Petraeus, although there was some acceptance that the withdrawal was occurring, there

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[52] Coll and Entous, "The Secret History of the U.S. Diplomatic Failure in Afghanistan."

[53] SIGAR, Quarterly Report, SIGAR-2021-QR-2, pp. 90–91, 93.

[54] Sune Engel Rasmussen and Jessica Donati, "U.S. Plan to Withdraw Troops From Afghanistan Hampers Peace Talks With Taliban," *Wall Street Journal*, April 14, 2021.

[55] Shoaib Rahim, former senior advisor to the State Ministry for Peace, SIGAR interview, August 3, 2022.

[56] The White House, "Remarks by President Biden On the Way Forward in Afghanistan," April 14, 2021.

[57] The White House, "Remarks by President Biden."

[58] SIGAR, What We Need to Learn, SIGAR 21-46-LL, p. 36; White House, "Appendix: Budget of the U.S. Government, Fiscal Year 2022," May 28, 2021, p. 261.

[59] State, correspondence with SIGAR, August 24, 2022.

[60] Mohib, correspondence with SIGAR, April 13, 2022.

[61] Mohib, correspondence with SIGAR, April 13, 2022.

[62] Coll and Entous, "The Secret History of the U.S. Diplomatic Failure in Afghanistan"; The White House, "Readout of President Joseph R. Biden, Jr. Meeting with President Ghani and Chairman Abdullah of Afghanistan," June 15, 2021.

[63] Jack Detsch and Robbie Gramer, "U.S. Questioned …," *Foreign Policy*, June 30, 2021.

was also, "right up to the last meeting, I think there was a sense of, you know, they're really not going to do this. … They're going to peer into the abyss and they're going to say, 'Oh, you know, not a good idea.'"[64] At the same gathering, former U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan Ronald Neumann recalled speaking with President Ghani briefly about Ghani's desire that the United States appoint "a sort of czar for the military cooperative" who could "do things like order the dispatch of more helicopters, [and] make decisions on procurement." Neumann told Ghani that this would not work in the American system, and commented, "he heard me politely, but I'm sure he went right ahead and asked the president the next day for a czar."[65]

On July 2, 2021, the *New York Times* reported that, according to "officials and security experts," the causes of "the current breakdown within Mr. Ghani's administration" included "the delusion of security provided by the Americans, whose determination to leave was never fully believed by civilian or military leadership."[66] On August 1, still seemingly unaware of the increasing security crisis, President Ghani announced that the Afghan government had a "new plan" to turn around the security situation within 6 months.[67] Two weeks later, the Republic collapsed.[68] "The [Afghan] government seems to have been caught in a surreal bubble," the Afghanistan Analysts Network reported on the day of the collapse. "While the Taliban were advancing, senior government officials were still releasing statements about donor-driven ceremonies and meetings," it added.[69]

The Exclusion of the Afghan Government from U.S.-Taliban Talks Weakened and Undermined It

Before the collapse of the Afghan government in August 2021, the primary U.S. goal in Afghanistan was to achieve a sustainable political settlement that would bring lasting peace and stability. The Taliban's refusal to talk to the Afghan government without first negotiating with the United States was an obstacle to that goal. The United States sought to circumvent this by first dealing with the Taliban in the hopes of setting the stage for an intra-Afghan peace process, and possibly an Afghan political settlement.[70] However, the U.S.-Taliban talks excluded the Afghan government, making it appear weak and abandoned by its primary ally, while bolstering the legitimacy of the Taliban.

The Afghan Government Made Overtures to the Taliban in Early 2018 with Limited Success

In February 2018, President Ghani offered to negotiate with the Taliban if they would halt their ties with terrorism and respect the Afghanistan constitution. He raised the possibility that the Taliban could become a political party and proposed a ceasefire as a way of creating a pathway for further talks.[71] The Taliban did not respond to President Ghani's offer and proceeded to launch their spring offensive. A grassroots peace

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[64] General David Petraeus, former commander of U.S. and international military forces in Afghanistan, SIGAR interview, January 14, 2022.

[65] We do not necessarily interpret Ambassador Neumann's comment to mean that President Ghani literally asked President Biden for a military czar. Rather, we believe the exchange described by the ambassador suggests that President Ghani was still trying to feel out the limits of U.S. military cooperation even after President Biden's April 2021 withdrawal announcement. In follow-up correspondence with SIGAR, Ambassador Neumann explained, "quite apart from how much interest [the United States] had in Afghanistan, [Ghani's] request was bureaucratically impossible," which Ghani did not appear to understand. Ambassador Ronald Neumann, former U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan, SIGAR interview, February 1, 2022; Neumann, email correspondence with SIGAR, September 20, 2022.

[66] Adam Nossiter, "As Afghan Forces Crumble, an Air of Unreality Grips the Capital," *New York Times*, July 2, 2021 (updated July 22, 2021).

[67] SIGAR, Collapse of the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces, SIGAR 22-22-IP, p. 4.

[68] SIGAR, Quarterly Report, SIGAR-2021-QR-4, p. 96.

[69] Martine van Bijlert, "Is This How It Ends? With the Taleban closing in on Kabul, President Ghani faces tough decision," Afghanistan Analysts Network, August 15, 2021.

[70] SIGAR, *Reintegration of Ex-Combatants: Lessons from the U.S. Experience in Afghanistan*, SIGAR-19-58-LL, September 19, 2019, p. 77.

[71] SIGAR, *Quarterly Report to the United States Congress*, SIGAR-2018-QR-2, April 30, 2018, p. 119.

movement began to take hold over the following months, culminating with a meeting of more than 2,000 clerics from around the country in June 2018. Following this meeting—which was interrupted by a suicide bombing—the Taliban unexpectedly reciprocated the earlier ceasefire offer by declaring a truce during the three days of the Eid holidays that year, which began on June 15. An estimated 30,000 Taliban fighters participated, celebrating peacefully with civilians and Afghan security forces.[72]

Hamdullah Mohib, former national security advisor to President Ghani, cited these developments as reasons to be optimistic at the time about an eventual peace agreement between the Taliban and the Afghan government. The Ghani government's expectation, he said, was that negotiations would eventually result in the Taliban emerging as a political group within the existing framework of the Republic that would participate in elections.[73] In early 2018, State and DOD mobilized to coordinate peace efforts, with State creating an action group to synchronize efforts across various agencies and provide weekly updates to Washington. The UN Secretary General's Special Representative for Afghanistan told the UN Security Council that "the possibility of a negotiated end to the conflict has never been more real" since 2001.[74] According to State, the 3-day overlapping ceasefires created hope that a peace process was imminent. However, the Taliban did not respond to either President Ghani's June 16 offer to extend the 3-day ceasefire or his August 19 call for a joint ceasefire starting over Eid al-Adha.[75]

In October 2018, the United States Began Direct Talks with the Taliban, Excluding the Afghan Government

In fall 2018, with the path to peace talks stalled and the Taliban publicly demanding direct negotiations with the United States, U.S. Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation Zalmay Khalilzad met with representatives of the Taliban, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, and the United Arab Emirates in Abu Dhabi. According to Khalilzad, the United States' main goal was an intra-Afghan peace agreement that would ensure that international terrorist organizations could never use Afghan territory against the United States and international community.[76]

However, the U.S. direct negotiations with the Taliban excluded the Afghan government, weakening the negotiating position of the Ghani government and strengthening the Taliban. Mohib said, "A lot changed toward the end of 2018 when the United States appointed a peace envoy and began negotiating their own agreement with the Taliban. It completely changed the dynamics."[77] Mohib's assessment was echoed by a former Afghan member of parliament who blamed the U.S. negotiations with the Taliban for bringing about the collapse of the Afghan republic's governing institutions.[78] In December 2018, Reuters reported that a member of the Taliban's leadership council had rejected an Afghan government proposal for talks in Saudi Arabia in January 2019. The unnamed Taliban official said they would meet with U.S. officials, but not representatives of the Afghan government.[79] As Hugo Llorens, former U.S. special chargé d'affaires for Afghanistan, summarized, "Just talking to the Taliban alone and excluding our allies proved the Taliban's point: The Afghan government were our puppets, you didn't need to talk to them. You only need to talk to the Americans."[80]

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[72] SIGAR, Reintegration of Ex-Combatants, SIGAR-19-58-LL, pp. 78-79.

[73] Mohib, correspondence with SIGAR, April 13, 2022.

[74] SIGAR, Reintegration of Ex-Combatants, SIGAR-19-58-LL, pp. 78–79.

[75] SIGAR, *Quarterly Report to the United States Congress*, SIGAR-2018-QR-4, October 31, 2018, p. 110.

[76] SIGAR, *Quarterly Report to the United States Congress*, SIGAR-2019-QR-1, January 30, 2019, pp. 65–66.

[77] Mohib, correspondence with SIGAR, April 13, 2022.

[78] Fawzia Koofi, SIGAR Interview, December 27, 2021.

[79] SIGAR, Quarterly Report, SIGAR-2019-QR-1, p. 112.

[80] In a discussion with SIGAR on September 19, 2022, Ambassador Llorens emphasized that, in using the term "puppets," he was characterizing the Taliban's view of the Afghan government, not his own. Ambassador Llorens stated in no uncertain terms that he did not view the Afghan government as "puppets" of the United States. Hugo Llorens, former U.S. special chargé d'affaires for Afghanistan, SIGAR Interview, February 2, 2022; Llorens, telephone conversation with SIGAR, September 19, 2022.

During the talks, Taliban negotiators secured several major concessions from the United States, starting with the October 2018 release of Abdul Ghani Baradar by Pakistani authorities.[81] Baradar was a cofounder of the Taliban movement and a senior leader who led a council of prominent Taliban members in the insurgency prior to his arrest. The United States also agreed to the release of 5,000 Taliban prisoners held by the Afghan government, in exchange for a Taliban pledge to reduce the level of violence during intra-Afghan talks. The Taliban also agreed to release 1,000 prisoners.[82]

U.S. and Taliban Negotiators Signed an Agreement

The U.S.-Taliban agreement, also known as the "Doha Agreement," was announced on February 29, 2020. At the same time, U.S. and Afghan government negotiators issued a joint declaration reaffirming the U.S. partnership with the Afghan government, including U.S. support for Afghan security forces and continued military partnership against international terrorist groups. The U.S.-Taliban agreement provided for the withdrawal of all U.S. troops and personnel from Afghanistan within 14 months, provided that the Taliban committed to preventing the use of Afghan soil "to threaten the security of the United States or its allies," and its promise to enter into negotiations with the Afghan government to determine both a ceasefire and to reach "agreement over the future political roadmap of Afghanistan."[83]

However, the U.S.-Taliban agreement appears to have emboldened the Taliban. According to the Long War Journal, "Shortly after the Trump administration signed its accord with the Taliban on February 29, Taliban leader Haibatullah Akhundzada declared 'victory' on behalf 'of the entire Muslim and Mujahid nation.'"[84] Lisa Curtis, a senior director for South and Central Asia on the National Security Council from 2017 to 2021, told SIGAR, "It was a U.S. withdrawal process.... all the Taliban really did was agree not to attack U.S. forces on their way out."[85] As a result, the agreement likely led Taliban leaders to seek a resolution to its conflict with the Afghan government on the battlefield rather than through peace talks. In March 2020, following the signing of the agreement, the Taliban increased attacks against the ANDSF to levels above seasonal norms and the frequency of attacks continued to climb.[86]

The U.S.-Taliban Agreement Created the Perception of a Weak Afghan Government Abandoned by Its Main Ally

The exclusion of the Afghan government from direct talks between the United States and Taliban undercut the government's credibility. As we reported in our May 2021 interim evaluation report on the causes of the ANDSF's collapse, the Afghan government bore the greatest costs of the U.S.-Taliban agreement, which served to legitimate the Taliban.[87] Lt. Gen. David Barno, former senior American commander of U.S. and coalition forces in Afghanistan, told SIGAR that some observers characterized the U.S.-Taliban deal as a "surrender agreement." In his view, the agreement had only one objective: facilitating a U.S. withdrawal.[88] "The public started to see the Taliban as a kind of 'government-in-waiting' and the Republic as abandoned by its main ally," said Mohib, who added that this perception made it seem that the "U.S. was ushering in a Taliban regime," and took away "a fighting chance for the Republic's survival."[89] At the same time, according to Mohib, Taliban propaganda campaigns sought to portray the Taliban as a new and improved version of its former self, and the

[81] SIGAR, Reintegration of Ex-Combatants, SIGAR-19-58-LL, p. 133.

[82] SIGAR, Quarterly Report, SIGAR-2020-QR-2, p. 104.

[83] SIGAR, Quarterly Report, SIGAR-2020-QR-2, pp. 67, 97.

[84] Thomas Joscelyn and Bill Roggio, "Analysis: Taliban leader declares victory after U.S. agrees to withdrawal deal," Long War Journal, March 3, 2020.

[85] Lisa Curtis, SIGAR Interview, February 17, 2022.

[86] SIGAR, Quarterly Report, SIGAR-2020-QR-2, p. 61.

[87] SIGAR, Collapse of the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces, SIGAR 22-22-IP, p. 6.

[88] Lt. Gen. David Barno, former commander of U.S. and coalition forces in Afghanistan, SIGAR interview, April 21, 2022.

[89] Mohib, correspondence with SIGAR, April 13, 2022.

Afghan government as "irreparably corrupt and weak."[90] Afghan leaders observed the United States making a deal with the Taliban, he stated, and rushed to secure their own arrangements.[91]

The sense that the United States had sold out the Afghan government caused some Afghan leaders to also abandon their support for the ANDSF. Some even acted as mediators between Taliban and ANDSF commanders seeking an agreement to avoid more fighting.[92] Former Afghan corps commander General Sami Sadat told us that the agreement's psychological impact was so great that the average Afghan soldier switched to survival mode and became susceptible to accepting other offers and deals.[93] As Curtis told SIGAR, "The Doha agreement … did not demand enough of the Taliban, undermined the confidence of the Afghan government," and "undermined the morale of the Afghan security forces."[94]

Despite its Weakened Position, the Afghan Government Insisted that the Taliban be Integrated into the Republic, Making Progress on Peace Negotiations Difficult

When intra-Afghan talks started in September 2020, security conditions were poor. Average daily enemy-initiated attacks were 50 percent higher from July through September 2020, compared to April through June 2020.[95] This prompted the then-NATO Resolute Support and United States Forces–Afghanistan (USFOR-A) commander General Austin Scott Miller to comment that the Taliban's increased violence "is not consistent with the U.S.-Taliban agreement and undermines the ongoing Afghan peace talks."[96] At the same time, political instability increased after the highly contested September 2019 Afghan presidential election, which was marred by allegations of fraud.[97]

Exclusion from U.S.-Taliban talks and the subsequent signing of the February 2020 agreement was a blow to the credibility of the Afghan government. Despite these developments, the Afghan government insisted during intra-Afghan negotiations that the Taliban be integrated into the Republic.[98] As Fatima Gailani, a member of the Republic's negotiating team told SIGAR, after 6 months of negotiations, it was clear to her that not everyone, but most people close to President Ghani, were delusional because they were unwilling to compromise.[99]

As part of the U.S.-Taliban agreement, the United States agreed to withdraw its forces in exchange for the Taliban's pledge not to host terrorist groups and to engage in good faith negotiations with the Afghan government.[100] Also as part of the agreement, the United States agreed to release 5,000 Taliban prisoners, another Taliban condition before they would participate in the intra-Afghan negotiations.[101] Under intense pressure from the United States, including a threat to withhold aid, President Ghani ultimately agreed.[102] Shortly after, on September 12, 2020, the Afghan government's negotiating team travelled to Doha, Qatar, to begin direct talks with the Taliban.[103] However, progress was slow due to a lack of interest in negotiations on both

[90] Mohib, correspondence with SIGAR, April 13, 2022.

[91] Mohib, correspondence with SIGAR, April 13, 2022.

[92] Mohib, correspondence with SIGAR, April 13, 2022.

[93] SIGAR, Collapse of the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces, SIGAR 22-22-IP, p. 6.

[94] Curtis, SIGAR Interview, February 17, 2022.

[95] SIGAR, Quarterly Report, SIGAR-2020-QR-4, p. 69.

[96] SIGAR, Quarterly Report, SIGAR-2020-QR-4, p. 69.

[97] SIGAR, Elections, SIGAR-21-16-LL, pp. 15, 91–92.

[98] SIGAR, Quarterly Report, SIGAR 2020-QR-4, p. 109.

[99] Fatima Gailani, member of the Afghan government's negotiating team, SIGAR interview, March 18, 2022.

[100] SIGAR, Quarterly Report, SIGAR-2020-QR-4, p. 102.

[101] "Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan between the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan Which Is Not Recognized by the United States as a State and Is Known as the Taliban and the United States of America," February 29, 2020; Coll and Entous, "The Secret History of the U.S. Diplomatic Failure in Afghanistan."

[102] SIGAR, Collapse of Afghan National Defense and Security Forces, SIGAR 22-22-IP, p. 6.

[103] SIGAR, Quarterly Report, SIGAR-2020-QR-4, p. 69.

sides, according to Steve Brooking. The Taliban did not have an incentive to negotiate now that they had a date for the U.S. withdrawal. Meanwhile, President Ghani waited for U.S. presidential election results, likely hoping for a U.S. policy change under the new administration, including Khalilzad's departure, Brooking writes.[104]

The two teams finally drafted, and verbally agreed on, a proposed agenda for the intra-Afghan talks in December, after 3 months of discussion on the rules and procedures for the talks themselves. According to the Afghanistan Analysts Network, given the increased violence in the months leading to the talks, the number one item proposed for discussion by the Afghan government's negotiating team was a comprehensive ceasefire and mechanisms for monitoring it. For the Taliban, a ceasefire was at the bottom of the priority list. Instead, they focused on issues associated with Afghanistan's future political order, including a discussion on the establishment of an "Islamic government," what type that would be, and who would lead it.[105]

While the two negotiating teams continued to meet in Doha in early 2021, no substantive negotiations took place. To break the stalemate, U.S. officials formulated a plan.[106] On March 7, 2021, Afghan media released what they claimed were items of correspondence from Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken to President Ghani. The letter called for a high-level conference in Turkey and included an eight-page outline of a peace plan.[107] This ambitious plan, which Ambassador Khalilzad had helped draft, proposed a new constitution, the framework for a transitional government that would essentially end President Ghani's term, an expanded parliament, a ceasefire, and the establishment of a new body, the High Council for Islamic Jurisprudence. Khalilzad believed that President Ghani had to give up power for a transitional government that included the Taliban, according to Coll and Entous.[108] Brooking writes that efforts by Khalilzad to replace President Ghani with an interim administration soured the relationship between the two.[109]

President Ghani rejected this U.S. peace plan and later announced a plan of his own—a three-part peace process in which he proposed an early presidential election, on the condition that the Taliban agree to a ceasefire. Other components of Ghani's peace plan included a political agreement between the Afghan government and the Taliban to be endorsed by a Loya Jirga, and principles for forming a "government of peacebuilding."[110]

President Ghani's insistence on another presidential election was based on his conviction that it was the only way to preserve the Republic, Masoom Stanekzai, head of the Afghan government's negotiating team, told SIGAR.[111] "Only the Afghan people will determine their future leader," President Ghani told a conference in April. "No one can designate the future leader of Afghanistan from outside. This is our right and the principle of our constitution and the desire of our nation."[112]

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[104] Brooking, *Why Was a Negotiated Peace Always Out of Reach in Afghanistan*, p. 21.

[105] Ali Yawar Adili, "Intra-Afghan Talks (1): Rules of procedure agreed, but still no agenda as talks resume," Afghanistan Analysts Network, January 3, 2021; SIGAR, *Quarterly Report to the United States Congress*, SIGAR-2021-QR-1, January 30, 2021, p. 83.

[106] SIGAR, Quarterly Report, SIGAR-2021-QR-2, p. 90; Coll and Entous, "The Secret History of the U.S. Diplomatic Failure in Afghanistan."

[107] SIGAR, Quarterly Report, SIGAR-2021-QR-2, p. 93; Coll and Entous, "The Secret History of the U.S. Diplomatic Failure in Afghanistan."

[108] Coll and Entous, "The Secret History of the U.S. Diplomatic Failure in Afghanistan."

[109] Brooking, *Why Was a Negotiated Peace Always Out of Reach in Afghanistan*, p. 22.

[110] SIGAR, Quarterly Report, SIGAR-2021-QR-2, p. 93; Hamid Shalizi, "Exclusive: Afghan president, rejecting U.S. peace plan, to offer election in six months, officials say," Reuters, March 23, 2021. According to a 2019 USIP report, loya jirgas are "rooted in traditional Afghan practices," but "are essentially modern political institutions that are convened to address problems of great national importance." The gatherings include representatives from across Afghanistan, including religious and spiritual leaders, judges, intellectuals, and national elites. Scott Smith, *Loya Jirgas and Political Crisis Management in Afghanistan: Drawing on the Bank of Tradition*, USIP, pp. 1, 8.

[111] Masoom Stanekzai, head of the Afghan government negotiating team, SIGAR interview, April 27, 2022.

[112] SIGAR, Quarterly Report, SIGAR 2021-QR-2, p. 93.

Even as high levels of Taliban violence demonstrated the insurgency's strength, the Afghan government continued to imagine a political order in which the Taliban were to be integrated under the umbrella of the Republic.[113] For example, in May 2021, as the U.S. intelligence community assessed that Afghan government forces "remain tied down in defensive missions and have struggled to hold recaptured territory," President Ghani said that a "political settlement and the integration of the Taliban into society and government was the only way forward."[114] Hekmat Karzai, the former deputy foreign minister, told SIGAR that "on both sides, there was this enormous amount of push to absorb each other."[115] Former Afghan National Army Corps commander Lt. Gen. Sami Sadat told us that from what he had heard, "the negotiations were meant not to replace the Afghan government, but actually include the Taliban within the current government." He added, "We were mentally preparing to accept some Taliban in [our] rank and file …. There were some good fighters amongst the Taliban, [and] I definitely wish[ed] to … train them and use them in the Afghan army."[116] Hamdullah Mohib stated that until the week leading up to the collapse, the government considered itself to be the dominant party.[117]

Mohib told SIGAR that the Afghan government's "insistence on elections as the mode of determining leadership never changed, but later, as the U.S.-led process advanced and the prospects for peace got worse, the government was prepared to accept an interim agreement, endorsed by a Loya Jirga." According to Mohib, the Afghan government had already made significant concessions by releasing prisoners, and felt frustrated as Khalilzad asked for more concessions. "Khalilzad only pressed Ghani relentlessly," Mohib said. "We never felt that he had applied the same pressure to the Taliban."[118] Khalilzad, meanwhile, has said he considered his biggest mistake to be not putting *more* pressure on President Ghani to give up power to allow for the formation of a transition government.[119] To some extent, this latter point of view was echoed by a senior member of the Afghan negotiating team, Fatima Gailani, who was of the opinion that Khalilzad had the power and influence to put pressure on Ghani to reach a political settlement but failed to use it.[120]

President Ghani refused to relinquish power even at the last hour. Habiba Sarabi, another member of the Afghan negotiating team, told SIGAR that "President Ghani never, never, ever thought that he [would] lose his power."[121] According to Afghanistan expert Thomas Barfield, "Once the Americans recognized him [Ghani—after the highly contested 2019 presidential election], he became more entrenched in terms of refusing to negotiate, refusing to do anything." Barfield added, "His belief was that if it really got bad, the Americans would step in and fix it."[122]

President Ghani's inflexibility frustrated the Afghan government's negotiating team. Gailani told SIGAR that President Ghani was waiting for another U.S. government to come and undo President Trump's withdrawal policy. Referring to months of stalled talks with the Taliban, she stated, "Three months we wasted because they [Ghani and his inner circle] were 100 percent sure that Mr. Biden will come and will say what Mr. Trump did was a disaster. 'Goodbye, no talks, no agreement—the Doha Agreement—let's start from the beginning.' And the big Republic family will start all over again."[123]

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[113] SIGAR, Quarterly Report, SIGAR 2020-QR-4, p. 109.

[114] SIGAR, Quarterly Report, SIGAR 2021-QR-3, p. 84; Office of the Director of National Intelligence, *Annual Threat Assessment of the U.S. Intelligence Community*, April 9, 2021, p. 25.

[115] Karzai, SIGAR interview, January 10, 2022.

[116] Sami Sadat, former Afghan Army Corps commander, SIGAR interview, November 26, 2021.

[117] Mohib, correspondence with SIGAR, September 20, 2022.

[118] Mohib, correspondence with SIGAR, April 13, 2022.

[119] Coll and Entous, "The Secret History of the U.S. Diplomatic Failure in Afghanistan."

[120] Gailani, SIGAR interview, March 18, 2022.

[121] Habiba Sarabi, member of the Afghan government's negotiating team, SIGAR interview, January 6, 2022.

[122] Barfield, SIGAR interview, February 9, 2022.

[123] Gailani, SIGAR interview, January 15, 2022.

Observers also found President Ghani and his team to be out of touch with reality and uninformed about the security situation around the country. "It was almost like they were running Kabulistan," Charlotte Bellis, a former Al-Jazeera correspondent, told SIGAR. According to some of the Afghan government negotiators that spoke to Bellis, President Ghani "hid in the clouds, clutching to power, poorly informed." Even when they received bad news reports, Bellis stated, "I don't think they paid much attention to them, because they were so determined to live in this kind of world where everything was fine."[124] Mohib blamed President Ghani's trusted advisors and security officials for "giving rosy assessments to the President," which were "hard to reject because [they] came with such confidence."[125]

On July 29, 2021, at the insistence of the Biden administration, President Ghani announced a new action plan that was supposed to improve security within 6 months.[126] By this time, the Taliban were in control of about half the districts in Afghanistan, at least six international border crossings with revenue-generating customs posts, and long stretches of highways throughout the country. Despite some U.S. air strikes launched in support of the Afghan security forces, the ANDSF continued to lose ground.[127] Afghan government officials, however, continued to sell a narrative that they could contain the Taliban. Bellis said that government propaganda was widespread. "I was surprised how much fake information came out from official government sources," she told SIGAR.[128] According to Hekmat Karzai, the Afghan team approached the negotiations as if there were a battlefield stalemate and did not change their strategy even as Afghan security force casualties mounted. "There were days when we lost 150 security forces a day," he told SIGAR.[129]

In early August 2021, Secretary Blinken urged President Ghani to send representatives to Doha to discuss an orderly transfer of power with the Taliban. The 13-member team included Abdullah, the chair of the High Council for National Reconciliation, and former President Hamid Karzai.[130] Gailani told SIGAR that Mohib was also on the list, at President Ghani's insistence. The Taliban did not agree to Mohib's presence and the dispute delayed the delegation's departure for Doha.[131]

As the Taliban entered the outskirts of Kabul on August 14, 2021, President Ghani dropped his demand for an election, yet still insisted on a Loya Jirga to endorse the transfer of power.[132] In the meantime, Gailani and other negotiating team members in Doha were making headway with the Taliban, who had reportedly agreed to a small-scale Loya Jirga. By this time, President Ghani had lost whatever trust he had in Khalilzad or the Taliban. According to some Afghan negotiators, if President Ghani had stayed and had agreed to step down, some elements of the Republic would have endured. There was a possibility that with the U.S. mediation, some form of a transition government in which both the Afghan government and the Taliban participated could have been formed and some elements of the constitution would have been preserved.[133] Khalilzad informed President Ghani about a U.S. plan to arrange a 2-week ceasefire and an orderly transfer of power in Kabul, to be endorsed by a small Loya Jirga gathering. However, Ghani fled the country on August 15.[134]

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[124] Bellis, SIGAR interview, December 23, 2021.

[125] Mohib, correspondence with SIGAR, September 20, 2022.

[126] Martine van Bijlert, "Is This How It Ends? With the Taleban closing in on Kabul, President Ghani faces tough decision," Afghanistan Analysts Network, August 15, 2021, p. 3.

[127] SIGAR, Quarterly Report, SIGAR 2021-QR-4 p. 68.

[128] Bellis, SIGAR interview, December 23, 2021.

[129] Karzai, SIGAR interview, January 10, 2022.

[130] Coll and Entous, "The Secret History of the U.S. Diplomatic Failure in Afghanistan."

[131] Gailani, SIGAR interview, March 18, 2022.

[132] Coll and Entous, "The Secret History of the U.S. Diplomatic Failure in Afghanistan."

[133] Sarabi, SIGAR interview, April 14, 2021; Gailani, SIGAR interview, March 18, 2022; Mohammad Nateqi, member of Afghan government negotiating team, SIGAR interview, April 26, 2022.

[134] Coll and Entous, "The Secret History of the U.S. Diplomatic Failure in Afghanistan"; SIGAR, Quarterly Report, SIGAR 2021-QR-4, p. 3.

The Taliban Were Unwilling to Compromise

Notwithstanding this notional, last-minute agreement, given the withdrawal of international military forces, and the success of their military campaign, the Taliban were generally unwilling to negotiate or compromise. The Taliban viewed the Afghan government as illegitimate and in their eyes, joining it constituted a disavowal of the very reason they fought. As discussed in detail in our 2019 report on reintegration of ex-combatants, the Taliban viewed their insurgency as a "lawful jihadic struggle," and had repeatedly justified their fight against the U.S. forces and the Afghan government as a "legal, religious, and national obligation."[135]

The U.S.-Taliban agreement and the subsequent April withdrawal announcement gave the Taliban its core demand: the complete withdrawal of U.S. and coalition troops, as well as contractors.[136] According to a report from the International Crisis Group, following the signing of the U.S.-Taliban agreement, Taliban statements suggested that the agreement "was, in effect, a framework for bringing the movement back to power."[137] Given the impending withdrawal, the insurgency had little incentive not to go about defeating the Afghan government on the battlefield. As we reported in our May 2022 report on the collapse of the ANDSF, lowering U.S. troop levels was intended to stimulate Afghan peace negotiations, but it also created a major gap in military capabilities against the Taliban.[138] An uptick in Taliban attacks coincided with the onset of intra-Afghan negotiations, undermining the nascent peace talks and prompting U.S. officials to claim that the Taliban were not upholding their commitment to reduce violence.[139] By April 2021, a U.S. intelligence community assessment concluded that "the Taliban is confident it can achieve military victory."[140] Over the next 2 months, the Taliban's offensive accelerated as the insurgency rapidly gained control of half of Afghanistan's 419 districts.[141] On August 15, 2021, Kabul fell.[142]

USAID-funded monitoring of the Taliban's public communications found the Taliban's tone to be resoundingly triumphant in April and May following the announced withdrawal of U.S. military forces.[143] They consistently rejected a comprehensive ceasefire, which, they said, could only happen after discussion and agreements over a political settlement. They also refused to participate in a high-level conference in Turkey, stating that they "will not participate in any conference that shall make decisions about Afghanistan" until "all foreign forces completely withdraw" from Afghanistan.[144]

Despite public statements that they did not want a monopoly on power and were in favor of forming an inclusive government, the Taliban focused on achieving a military victory. On July 23, 2021, Taliban spokesperson Suhail Shaheen told the Associated Press, "I want to make it clear that we do not believe in the monopoly of power because any governments who (sought) to monopolize power in Afghanistan in the past, were not successful governments." This statement was made when the Taliban had captured more than half of Afghanistan's districts and major border crossings.[145] "I think the military victory was plan A for [the Taliban].

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[135] SIGAR, Reintegration of Ex-Combatants, SIGAR-19-58-LL, p. 86.

[136] SIGAR, Collapse of the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces, SIGAR 22-22-IP, p. 6; Brooking, *Why Was a Negotiated Peace Always Out of Reach in Afghanistan,* p. 25.

[137] International Crisis Group, *What Future for Afghanistan Peace Talks under a Biden Administration?*, January 13, 2021, p. 7.

[138] SIGAR, Collapse of the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces, SIGAR 22-22-IP, p. 12.

[139] SIGAR, Quarterly Report, SIGAR 2020-QR-4, p. 70.

[140] SIGAR, Quarterly Report, SIGAR 2021-QR-2, p. 57.

[141] SIGAR, Quarterly Report, SIGAR 2021-QR-3, p. ii.

[142] SIGAR, Quarterly Report, SIGAR 2021-QR-4, p. 3.

[143] SIGAR, Quarterly Report, SIGAR 2021-QR-3, p. 85.

[144] SIGAR, Quarterly Report, SIGAR 2021-QR-2, p. 95.

[145] Kathy Gannon, "To reach a peace deal, Taliban say Afghan president must go," *Associated Press News*, July 23, 2021; SIGAR, Quarterly Report, SIGAR-2021-QR-4, p. 68.

The negotiations were plan B," Kate Clark, co-director of the Afghanistan Analyst Network, told SIGAR.[146] The U.S. approach to peace talks with the Taliban was based on a "fantasy" that the Taliban wanted peace; attempts to create the conditions for this illusory goal undermined the Afghan government by cutting it out, she added. The Taliban continued to view the Afghan government as illegitimate and un-Islamic, and that a governance system based on Islam was "the only system for making everything perfect," Sarabi told us.[147]

According to Laurel Miller, the Taliban "were very successful at maintaining their cohesion, and they were very consistent [with] just one main goal: to get the foreigners out."[148] This goal of fighting the occupation put the Taliban at an "advantage in morale," according to Carter Malkasian, former special assistant for strategy to the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, because it was something "deeply tied to the Afghan identify." The Taliban's claim of stronger ties to Islam made it easier for them to justify their cause and to "inspire its forces to go the extra mile."[149] By contrast, Bellis said, "The Afghan government side came across as lost and frustrated, and bound by President Ghani, and then turning to U.S. negotiators for help."[150]

In his United States Institute of Peace report, Steve Brooking succinctly describes the Taliban's unchanging perspective on reconciliation since an earlier round of direct negotiations in the 2010–2013 period:

> It is remarkable that over the next decade [2012–21], the Taliban never significantly deviated from these lines: their message in talks was that the problem lay with the United States. The standard Taliban propaganda lines were that the United States had invaded and overthrown the legitimate Islamic Emirate government; the 2004 constitution was created under the shadow of B-52 bombers and so was unacceptable; and therefore the Taliban needed to resolve their problems only with the United States, not with what they viewed as the puppet government in Kabul.[151]

Brooking's analysis mirrors what Mohammad Nateqi, one of the Afghan government's negotiators, told SIGAR. Nateqi recounted a conversation he had with Abbas Stanekzai, a senior member of the Taliban's negotiating team. "We don't accept that puppet government in Afghanistan," the Taliban negotiator told him. "You don't understand. We are the superpower of Afghanistan. We are the superpower in the world.'"[152]

President Ghani Governed through a Highly Selective, Narrow Circle of Loyalists, Destabilizing the Government at a Critical Juncture

Ghani was isolated from voices and opinions beyond his handpicked inner circle of confidants. Eventually, this circumstance contributed to the unraveling of Afghanistan's loosely knit government. The president's political and social isolation appears to have been a function of both his personality and his desire to centralize and micromanage policy implementation. Consequently, Ghani made decisions without a diversity of contrasting perspectives or contextual information, which undermined the effectiveness of the government institutions that he led. At the same time, the gulf between the president's inner circle and reality outside the palace walls meant that Afghanistan's most senior powerbrokers were unable to effectively respond to security developments.

Even at the outset of his first term in 2014, Ghani—a former World Bank official and a favorite of many in the international community—adopted an assertive and undiplomatic approach to dealing with perceived rivals.

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[146] Kate Clark, Co-Director, Afghan Analyst Network, SIGAR interview, January 7, 2022.

[147] Sarabi, SIGAR interview, January 6, 2022.

[148] Miller, SIGAR interview, January 21, 2022.

[149] Carter Malkasian, former Special Assistant for Strategy to Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman, SIGAR interview, December 14, 2021.

[150] Bellis, SIGAR interview, December 23, 2021.

[151] Brooking, *Why Was a Negotiated Peace Always Out of Reach in Afghanistan*, p. 10.

[152] Nateqi, SIGAR interview, April 26, 2022. According to Nateqi, Abbas Stanekzai pretended what he said was a joke. However, Nateqi interpreted it as serious because Stanekzai had made similar remarks in a public speech.

Fawzia Koofi, former Afghan lawmaker and member of the Republic's negotiating team, told us that she believes the seeds of the government's collapse were laid in 2014.[153] At that time, she added, Ghani pursued a policy of centralizing power and promoting his political allies, despite the fact that his term had begun with a contested election and a power-sharing agreement with his opponent, Abdullah.[154] Likewise, former Ambassador Michael McKinley, who was deputy ambassador in Afghanistan during the 2014 election, told SIGAR he believed that Ghani "profoundly rejected" the idea that Abdullah should be seen "as anything approaching a coequal."[155] McKinley added that Ghani often attempted to exclude Abdullah from meetings with senior visiting dignitaries, American cabinet secretaries, and American officials during a visit to Washington in March 2015.[156] Former acting SRAP Laurel Miller told us there are many accounts of how Ghani's style of governing meant that he "had more enemies than friends."[157] In Miller's view, the 2014 election was an inflection point in the deterioration of Afghanistan's political stability, which was helped along by Ghani's recalcitrance toward implementing the power-sharing agreement with Abdullah.[158]

Even as Ghani sought to sideline his political rivals within his National Unity Government, he also attempted to marginalize local and regional leaders, including northern power brokers, according to Barfield and Murtazashvili.[159] While this may have been part of an overall centralization strategy, Ghani's sometimes abrasive personality also tended to alienate even those whose cooperation he needed. One former Afghan official told SIGAR that Ghani seemed unable to form effective political alliances.[160] Khalid Payenda, former Acting Minister of Finance, recalled being personally and publicly berated by Ghani, which precipitated Payenda's resignation.[161] According to reporting from the *New York Times* in July 2021, several former aides of the president "noted that cabinet members were afraid to contradict him because of his tendency to yell at them."[162] Ghani's reputation was well known. Former SRAP James Dobbins told us that Ghani was a "notoriously scratchy person" who was fired as minister of finance under President Karzai because he "couldn't get along with anybody," and "annoyed all of his colleagues."[163]

As Ghani cultivated political enemies within and without the Afghan government, he also attempted to route an increasing number of decisions through a shrinking group of confidants. Although the small size of his inner circle may reflect the alienation of potential allies, it also seems clear that the president made a conscious choice to consolidate decision-making within his administration. For example, one of Ghani's first initiatives after his election in 2014 was to centralize Afghanistan's procurement system around his newly established National Procurement Authority, through which the president personally reviewed Afghan government construction and procurement contracts.[164] A September 2016 *Washington Post* article noted, "One persistent complaint is that Ghani has hamstrung government agencies and ministers by taking centralized oversight to

[153] Koofi, SIGAR interview, December 27, 2021.

[154] Koofi, SIGAR interview, December 27, 2021.

[155] Michael McKinley, former U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan, SIGAR interview, February 18, 2022.

[156] McKinley, SIGAR interview, February 18, 2022; McKinley, email correspondence with SIGAR, September 21, 2022.

[157] Miller, SIGAR interview, April 26, 2022.

[158] Miller, SIGAR interview, April 26, 2022.

[159] Barfield, SIGAR interview, February 9, 2022; Jennifer Brick Murtazashvili, governance expert and professor at the University of Pittsburgh, SIGAR interview, December 9, 2021.

[160] Abdullah Azada Khenjani, former Deputy Minister of Coordination, Strategy and Policy in Afghanistan's State Ministry for Peace, SIGAR interview, January 10, 2022.

[161] Khalid Payenda, former acting Minister of Finance, SIGAR interview, March 22, 2022.

[162] Adam Nossiter, "As Afghanistan Forces Crumble, an Air of Unreality Grips the Capital," *New York Times*, July 2, 2021.

[163] Dobbins, SIGAR interview, April 20, 2022.

[164] International Crisis Group, *Afghanistan: The Future of the National Unity Governmen*t, Asia Report No. 285, April 10, 2017, pp. 2, 4; SIGAR, *Quarterly Report to the United States Congress*, SIGAR-2017-QR-1, January 30, 2017, p. ii.

absurd extremes."[165] In Murtazashvili's view, President Ghani "centralized control in order to speedily realize his vision of reform. But by doing so, the president alienated almost everyone around him, including the people."[166]

Under Ghani, only a handful of advisors wielded any real power, according to former officials. For example, Hekmat Karzai told SIGAR that "the entire government of Afghanistan was run by six people."[167] Bashir Fatehi, the former head of Afghanistan's Anti-Corruption Commission, stated that ministers could not make their own decisions. Instead, every decision had to be routed through two of Ghani's closest advisors.[168] Scott Guggenheim, former senior advisor to President Ghani, told SIGAR, "Ashraf [Ghani] wanted to be his own chief of staff; he wanted to be his own finance minister, his own defense minister."[169]

The coterie of officials who Ghani did allow into his inner circle were loyalists unwilling to deliver unvarnished opinions at odds with what the Afghan president wanted to hear, Karzai and Payenda said. The former told SIGAR that Ghani "sidelined actors that would tell him the truth."[170] Payenda stated that Ghani surrounded himself with men who were intimidated by him and unwilling to provide the sort of frank assessments that ultimately would have benefited decision-making.[171] He described Ghani as isolated and alone.[172] Abdullah Azada Khenjani, former Deputy Minister of Coordination, Strategy and Policy in Afghanistan's State Ministry for Peace, told SIGAR that Ghani was not open to criticism or advice, "he was thinking everyone is conspiring against him."[173]

The net effect was a leader who was largely ignorant of the reality confronting the country he led. Journalist Charlotte Bellis, who was present in Kabul at the time of the collapse in August 2021 and who had contact with a range of Afghan officials, described a culture of obliviousness within the Ghani administration.[174] Some officials were hosting parties in the weeks prior to the collapse, unaware of what was unfolding around them, Bellis told SIGAR.[175] Meanwhile, Ghani seemed to be conducting business as usual. Hekmat Karzai told SIGAR, "For God's sake, we had provinces falling, and [Ghani] would still bloody hold National Procurement Council meetings for 4 hours. He would hold urban planning meetings while we had districts falling. I mean, the guy had completely wrong priorities on so many different levels."[176] Another interviewee observed that as late as July, the presidential palace was still holding meetings on a law concerning nongovernmental organizations, despite an increasingly dire security environment.[177] As Vicki Aken, the International Rescue Committee's Afghanistan Country Director, told us, it was "like Nero fiddling while Rome is burning."[178]

Ghani's obliviousness to the troubling realities confronting his country was a problem even in the early days of his administration. Ambassador McKinley told SIGAR that the Afghan president consistently suggested

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[165] Pamela Constable, "Afghanistan has many problems. Its president may be one of them," *Washington Post*, September 2, 2016.

[166] Jennifer Brick Murtazashvili, "The Collapse of Afghanistan," Journal of Democracy, vol. 33, no. 1 (2022), p. 49.

[167] Karzai, SIGAR interview, January 10, 2022; Payenda, SIGAR interview, April 19, 2022; Barfield, SIGAR interview, February 9, 2022.

[168] Bashir Fatehi, former head of the Afghanistan Anti-Corruption Commission, SIGAR interview, August 5, 2022.

[169] Scott Guggenheim, former senior advisor to President Ghani, SIGAR interview, April 20, 2022. Guggenheim added that Ghani inherited "a bad hand" coming to power in the midst of economic, security, and governance crises—an environment which "played into his natural paranoia and micromanagement and just made it worse." In addition to the "dog's breakfast" that Ghani inherited, U.S. missteps also "worsened some of the Ghani administration's personal and structural flaws," Guggenheim told SIGAR.

[170] Karzai, SIGAR interview, January 10, 2022.

[171] Payenda, SIGAR interview, March 22, 2022.

[172] Payenda, SIGAR interview, March 22, 2022.

[173] Khenjani, SIGAR interview, January 10, 2022.

[174] Bellis, SIGAR interview, December 23, 2021.

[175] Bellis, SIGAR interview, December 23, 2021.

[176] Karzai, SIGAR interview, January 10, 2022.

[177] Vicki Aken, Afghanistan Country Director, International Rescue Committee, SIGAR interview, December 16, 2021.

[178] Aken, SIGAR interview, December 16, 2021.

development goals that were "completely off the charts," and that his apparent "separation from Afghan reality" was concerning.[179] Ghani was "living in fantasyland," McKinley said.[180] For example, according to Ajmal Shams, a former deputy minister in the National Unity Government, when Ghani took power he "claimed his government would generate more electric power during the coming few years than the combined production throughout the nation's history. But 7 years down the road, the government [was] unable to properly manage even the imported electricity," due to poor security, technical issues, and late payments to suppliers.[181]

Ghani's drive to centralize decision-making coupled with his disconnection from reality had serious consequences in the management of his security forces. According to Fawzia Koofi, senior members of his administration appointed Afghan National Police commanders down to the district level, across 365 districts, even though they were reportedly unfamiliar with some of the areas in question.[182] Likewise, Ghani inserted himself into command decisions, personally appointing every commander with the rank of brigadier general and above a former Afghan Army Corps commander, Sami Sadat, told us.[183] In the process, Barfield remarked, Ghani often sidelined competent generals who he feared might stage a coup.[184] According to former U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan Ronald Neumann, the turnover in Afghan military leadership was particularly acute during the final year of the administration. Neumann told us that when he was in Kabul in 2021, about 6 weeks before that city's fall to the Taliban, "Everybody was talking about how all these command changes have taken place directed by Ghani, influenced by Mohib, and the result was that none of these commanders had time to even [prove] if they were good. Most of them had not had time to get ahold of their unit."[185]

The extent to which Ghani's isolation, obliviousness, and tendency toward micromanagement actually caused the collapse of his government is difficult to discern in a complex political environment. The president's isolation, either through deliberate centralization or by virtue of an abrasive personality, appears to have destabilized the Afghan government in two ways: (1) by undermining support for the administration among slighted powerbrokers and constituencies; and (2) by limiting the president's awareness of critical information, thereby hampering effective decision-making. The consensus among a range of American and Afghan officials and subject matter experts with direct knowledge of people and events is that Ghani's personality and leadership style were significant contributing factors to the government's August 2021 collapse.

The Afghan Government's High Level of Centralization, Endemic Corruption, and Struggle to Attain Legitimacy Were Long-Term Contributors to its Eventual Collapse

From the outset of the U.S. reconstruction effort until its ultimate collapse in August 2021, the Republic struggled to attain legitimacy.[186] The Afghan government's high degree of centralization, combined with its fragile and corrupt nature, compounded its legitimacy problem and ultimately contributed to its demise.

[179] McKinley, SIGAR interview, February 18, 2022.

[180] McKinley, SIGAR interview, February 18, 2022.

[181] Ajmal Shams, "Ghani's Unrealistic Targets Not Helping Afghanistan's Cause," *Arab News*, May 4, 2021.

[182] Koofi, SIGAR interview, December 27, 2021.

[183] Sadat, SIGAR interview, November 26, 2021.

[184] Barfield, SIGAR interview, February 9, 2022.

[185] Neumann, SIGAR interview, February 1, 2022.

[186] According to U.S. Army Field Manual 3-07 for Stability Operations, legitimacy is central to building trust and confidence among the people and derives from both the supremacy of the law and the foundation upon which the law was developed: the collective will of the people. A legitimate, effective state—one of the goals of the U.S. mission in Afghanistan—upholds basic human rights, is responsive to its citizens, exercises effective sovereignty, and limits the reach of government by protecting the institutions of civil society. Department of the Army, *Stability Operations*, Field Manual No. 3-07, October 6, 2008, pp. 1–7.

The Highly Centralized Structures Instituted at the Bonn Conference, Combined with the Republic's Fragility, Sowed the Seeds of Failure

The Bonn Conference, convened in late 2001, established a process for the construction of a new political order in Afghanistan. That order involved the adoption of a new constitution and democratic elections. Forged between various factions of the Afghan polity, the agreement that emerged from Bonn relied on the 1964 constitution as an interim legal framework, but modified provisions relating to the country's former monarchy by fusing the powers of the monarch and the premier into a powerful president.[187] The 2004 constitution, ratified by a Loya Jirga, similarly endowed power in a strong executive. Proponents of a centralized system argued that this approach mitigated the risk of fracture along ethnic and regional lines.[188] They were also looking for a way to empower an executive with unity of command that could "without a lot of checks on that authority, just do things quickly," governance expert and professor at the University of Pittsburgh, Dr. Jennifer Brick Murtazashvili, told SIGAR. She added, "The idea that you're building state capacity, without building constraints on state authority, was the biggest mistake."[189] Ultimately, the re-centralization of power in the executive interacted corrosively with the Afghan state's fragility, perceived illegitimacy, and corruption.

According to some historians and a number of experts on Afghanistan social systems we interviewed, centralization, while rooted in historical precedent, was no longer a viable option. The result of the 2004 constitution, notes Barfield, was a government "barely distinguishable from the centralized monarchies and dictatorships that had characterized earlier regimes." Afghanistan in 2004, however, was no longer the same country it had been when dynastic autocrats ruled. Preceding conflicts—specifically, the 1978 coup and the Afghan-Soviet war of the 1980s—politically and militarily empowered a multitude of ethnic and regional groups who could challenge the central authority. By contrast, past challenges to Afghan regimes had been confined to either the dynastic elite or outside invaders. The result, writes Barfield, was that the body politic was now "afflicted with an autoimmune disorder in which the antibodies of resistance threatened to destroy any state structure, regardless of who controlled it or its ideology."[190]

The goal of the Bonn Conference had been to foster representative democracy. But the design of the new political order established in Bonn worked against that objective. By investing so much power in the executive, some observers noted, the newly created system instead raised the stakes for political competition by limiting the channels through which diverse constituencies could be represented in government.[191] As Colin Jackson, former Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Afghanistan, Pakistan, Central Asia, wrote in 2017, "Whereas Western powers and Afghan modernizers assumed that political participation would release pressure and stabilize the system, such mobilization proved to be a catalyst for a broader and more violent competition for power."[192] The result was the re-emergence of historical tensions between the center and the periphery.

Several analysts have noted that much of the century preceding the U.S. intervention was characterized by conflict between autocratic urban elites eager to modernize and centralize, and conservative, rural egalitarian populations that were distrustful of the government.[193] By backing the urban elites in this contest, the United States "became the underwriter of a renewed war between the center and the periphery," writes Jackson.[194]

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[187] SIGAR, Quarterly Report, SIGAR-2008-QR-4, pp. 13, 65; Murtazashvili, "The Collapse of Afghanistan," p. 43.

[188] Barfield, *Afghanistan*, p. 8.

[189] Murtazashvili, SIGAR interview, December 9, 2021.

[190] Barfield, *Afghanistan*, pp. 4, 6–7, 293.

[191] Alex Thier, "The Nature of the Afghan State: Centralization vs. Decentralization," Afghan Peace Process Issues Paper, USIP, November 2020, p. 2; Mohammad Qadam Shah, "Centralization Is at the Core of Afghanistan's Problems," *The Diplomat*, August 24, 2021.

[192] Colin Jackson, "U.S. Strategy in Afghanistan: A Tragedy in Five Acts," in *Our Latest Longest War: Losing Hearts and Minds in Afghanistan*, ed. Aaron B. O'Connell (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2017), p. 107.

[193] Jackson, "U.S. Strategy in Afghanistan," pp. 72, 107; Barfield, *Afghanistan*, p. 339; Thier, "The Nature of the Afghan State: Centralization vs. Decentralization," p. 1.

[194] Jackson, "U.S. Strategy in Afghanistan," p. 72.

"[C]ontempt for the people in the countryside" was a long-running and dangerous phenomenon, Barfield told SIGAR.[195] Outsiders and the Afghan elites thought of people in rural Afghanistan as "[needing] to be brought out from the Stone Ages," Murtazashvili told us. But what they failed to realize is that the governance systems already in place "[weren't] so backwards or so Stone Age."[196] Extending the reach of the central government, a key tenet of the U.S. stabilization strategy, proved difficult in part because "[t]rading autonomy and established social structures for the possibility of services, education, social upheaval, and government control never appealed to more than a fraction of rural elites," according to Jackson.[197]

Extending the Afghan government's control into rural tribal areas required it to achieve a monopoly over the use of force in order to "provide enough basic security to allow the people to stand with the government and against the Taliban," in the words of Aaron MacLean, a senior fellow at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies who served as an infantry officer in Afghanistan.[198] But the Republic could not exercise that degree of control on its own. Following the conclusion of the 13-year NATO combat mission in Afghanistan in December 2014—U.S. and international troops having drawn down from a peak of 130,000 to just 12,000—the percentage of districts controlled or influenced by the Afghan government declined from 72% in November 2015 to 57% one year later.[199] As MacLean wrote in 2017, the Republic maintained "control of Kabul and a few other productive centers but lack[ed] authority throughout the country."[200] Afghan security forces were generally successful in defending heavily populated urban areas, but only with significant assistance from the United States, which again began taking a more active combat role in 2017 by substantially increasing airstrikes.[201] As the DOD Inspector General reported in 2018, even areas that were nominally under Afghan government control were not necessarily "secure and free from violence." For example, as the DOD IG stated, Kabul was controlled by the government, yet "frequent violence result[ed] in hundreds of deaths in the capital each year."[202] These circumstances raised questions about whether the government could exert sufficient control to secure the country.

Autocracy previously worked in Afghanistan, according to Barfield, because "traditional systems of elite dynastic rule" were historically able to provide "security of life and property in exchange for obedience."[203] The father of centralization in Afghanistan, Abdur Rahman, consolidated power by destroying his political rivals, earning him the title of "Iron Emir."[204] By contrast, the Afghan state after 2001 was not only unable to provide security of life and property, but had abdicated the responsibility of providing security—a central pillar of the social contract—to foreign invaders "by allowing," as MacLean describes, "an international force of thousands of its non-Muslim backers to move unimpeded throughout the country."[205]

Indeed, that the United States was not an Islamic country appears to have influenced perceptions of the Republic and its leaders. For example, as former Combined Security Transition Command–Afghanistan commander Lt. Gen. Dan Bolger put it, the Taliban were able to leverage the narrative that "Hamid Karzai and

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[195] Barfield, SIGAR interview, February 9, 2022.

[196] Murtazashvili, SIGAR interview, December 9, 2021.

[197] Jackson, "U.S. Strategy in Afghanistan," p. 100.

[198] Aaron MacLean, "Liberalism Does Its Thing," in *Our Latest Longest War: Losing Hearts and Minds in Afghanistan*, ed. Aaron B. O'Connell (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2017), p. 228.

[199] SIGAR, *Quarterly Report to the United States Congress*, SIGAR-2015-QR-1, January 30, 2015, pp. 91–92; SIGAR, Quarterly Report, SIGAR-2017-QR-4, p. 107.

[200] MacLean, "Liberalism Does Its Thing," p. 227.

[201] SIGAR, *The Risk of Doing the Wrong Thing Perfectly: Monitoring and Evaluation of Reconstruction Contracting in Afghanistan*, SIGAR 21-41-LL, July 14, 2021, pp. 152–153; SIGAR, 2021 High-Risk List, SIGAR 21-22-HRL, pp. 2, 10; SIGAR, Quarterly Report, SIGAR-2017-QR-4, p. 98.

[202] DOD Office of Inspector General, "Operation Freedom's Sentinel Report to the United States Congress, January 1, 2018–March 31, 2018," May 21, 2018, p. 17.

[203] Barfield, *Afghanistan*, p. 8.

[204] Barfield, *Afghanistan*, pp. 5, 11, 12, 341.

[205] MacLean, "Liberalism Does Its Thing," p. 231.

his clique in Kabul were damaged goods, forever stained by their reliance on the infidels."[206] In contrast to the Afghan government, the Taliban derived legitimacy from their religious credentials. Malkasian told SIGAR, "The Taliban had a stronger ability to claim, whether it's correct or not, that they had a stronger tie to Islam …. And that meant it was easier for the Taliban to inspire its forces to go to the extra mile."[207] They had a simple rallying message that the government could not claim: they were fighting the foreign occupiers, they were less corrupt than the government, and their legitimacy came from God.[208] Former acting SRAP Laurel Miller told SIGAR that this "very clear and simplified narrative" was one reason why the Taliban were successful at maintaining cohesion.[209]

The United States was trying to transform a deeply conservative country in which religion played "a determinative role in culture and politics," notes Barfield.[210] As we highlighted in our 2021 lessons-learned report, *Support for Gender Equality*, restrictive patriarchal norms informed by religious and cultural beliefs predated and transcended the Taliban, and were not confined solely to rural parts of the country.[211] Conservative views were evident even in Kabul. Reflecting on the brutal murder of Farkhunda Malikzada, an Afghan woman who was driven over by a car and set on fire in Kabul after being falsely accused of burning the Koran, Malkasian writes, "I am hard-pressed to find incidents when the menfolk of Kabul spontaneously beat a suspected Taliban to death."[212] Ambassador Michael McKinley told SIGAR,

> It wasn't that everyone, including conservative rural populations, didn't appreciate services, having elementary schools, having some clinics. And certainly in the cities a lot more. But that didn't seem to change their views to embrace, in its totality, what we thought was being constructed, which was a representative democracy that allowed for a more modern, liberal Afghanistan to emerge.

"This idea that many had that we had transformed a country," McKinley explained, "because there was education for girls, women could work, particularly in cities, that there [were] elements of rule of law surfacing, that there was a parliament that debated issues, that there was a free press, masked what I felt was the reality when I was there: That Afghanistan remains profoundly conservative."[213]

Endemic Corruption, Including Persistent Electoral Fraud, and Predatory Behavior by Government Officials, Fundamentally Undermined the Afghan State

What the United States attempted to construct in Afghanistan was ambitious. Former President Bush characterized it as "the ultimate nation building mission," one that involved "helping the Afghan people build a free society."[214] The Afghanistan Freedom Support Act of 2002 declared that U.S. policy should support the establishment of a new Afghan government that would be democratic, "broad-based, multiethnic, gender-sensitive, and fully representative."[215] Initially, the Afghan government's legitimacy derived from the Loya Jirga that had approved it; subsequently, its legitimacy was to be based on the electoral process.[216] However, the Republic generally did not offer Afghans credible elections free of fraud, corruption, or accusations of U.S. interference. In late 2009, U.S. Admiral Mike Mullen, then-chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said that as a

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[206] Daniel P. Bolger, *Why We Lost: A General's Inside Account of the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2014), p. 88–89.

[207] Malkasian, SIGAR interview, December 14, 2021.

[208] Ali Jalali, former Afghanistan Minister of Interior, SIGAR interview, April 15, 2022.

[209] Miller, SIGAR interview, January 21, 2022.

[210] Malkasian, *The American War in Afghanistan*, ep. 415; Barfield, *Afghanistan*, p. 9.

[211] SIGAR, S*upport for Gender Equality: Lessons from U.S. Experience in Afghanistan*, SIGAR-21-18-LL, February 17, 2021, p. 3.

[212] Malkasian, *The American War in Afghanistan*, epp. 414–415.

[213] McKinley, SIGAR interview, February 18, 2022; McKinley, email correspondence with SIGAR, September 21, 2022.

[214] George W. Bush, *Decision Points* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2010), p. 205.

[215] Afghanistan Freedom Support Act of 2002, Pub. L. No. 107-327, 22 U.S.C. § 7501 (2002).

[216] Barfield, *Afghanistan*, p. 341.

result of the Afghan government's failure to prosecute electoral fraud, the Afghan government's legitimacy "is, at best, in question right now and, at worst, doesn't exist."[217] Habiba Sarabi told SIGAR that the belief that the United States made decisions about who was in power in Afghanistan became widespread, adding, "Especially after 2014, [Afghans] didn't believe in democracy [or] election."[218] Ali Jalali, former Afghanistan Minister of Interior, told SIGAR that the failure of the international community to hold the Afghan government accountable for electoral fraud gave the "wrong impression that legitimacy in Afghanistan is based on support from the international community."[219]

That support was substantial. Donor grants totaling at least $8.6 billion per year, covering both security and civilian assistance, financed more than half of the Afghan government's budget—but nearly 80 percent of Afghanistan's $11 billion in total public expenditures when off-budget assistance was counted along with on-budget aid.[220] The largest financial outlay by far went to training, equipping, and sustaining Afghan security forces. For fiscal year 2021, DOD estimated Afghanistan's security funding requirement at approximately $4.29 billion, for which the United States appropriated $3.05 billion. The Afghan government planned to contribute just $610 million.[221] Beyond financial assistance, Afghan security forces remained heavily dependent on the United States for resource management, maintenance, and leadership support until the very end.[222] Despite promises from the Biden Administration of continued funding and non-military aid following the withdrawal of U.S. forces, the cessation of direct support via a continued troop presence and in-country equipment maintenance from the United States and its allies contributed to a feeling among Afghans that they were being abandoned.[223]

As Afghanistan's current economic crisis demonstrates, the Afghan economy, too, was unsustainably dependent on international funding. A 2015 study of the Afghan private sector by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute concluded, "The significant amount of aid and vast international military spending post-2001 has re-ingrained a culture of aid-rentierism: the Afghan elite competes internally for political rents from the international community."[224] Murtazashvili has argued that the volume of foreign aid, combined with a central government that was unaccountable to its people and "beholden only to international donors," delegitimized the Republic in the eyes of the Afghan people and contributed to its collapse. "Money cannot win hearts and minds," she writes.[225]

As we reported in our 2016 lessons-learned report *Corruption in Conflict*, the Taliban derived its legitimacy in part by opposing those corrupt strongmen with histories of human rights abuses who constituted much of the post-Bonn Conference political order. In the 1990s, the Taliban partly drew popular support because of their goal of restoring order, and ending corruption and predation. As the insurgency gained steam in the 2000s, the Taliban again employed this rallying cry against the Karzai administration, and the strongmen and commanders associated with it.[226] By including leaders of the major Afghan resistance factions in the process that emerged out of the Bonn Agreement, its organizers hoped to prevent a return to civil war among the

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[217] SIGAR, Elections, SIGAR 21-16-LL, p. 91.

[218] Sarabi, SIGAR interview, January 6, 2022.

[219] Jalali, SIGAR interview, April 15, 2022.

[220] On-budget assistance encompasses donor funds that are aligned with Afghan government plans, included in Afghan government budget documents, and included in the budget approved by the parliament and managed by the Afghan treasury system. Off-budget assistance encompasses donor funds that are excluded from the Afghan national budget and not managed through Afghan government systems. SIGAR, Quarterly Report, SIGAR-2021-QR-2, pp. 96, 131.

[221] SIGAR, 2021 High-Risk List, SIGAR 21-22-HRL, p. 10.

[222] SIGAR, Collapse of the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces, SIGAR 22-22-IP, p. 12.

[223] White House, "Remarks by President Biden on the Drawdown of U.S. Forces in Afghanistan," July 8, 2021; Lt. Gen. Daniel Bolger, former Combined Security Transition Command–Afghanistan Commander, SIGAR interview, September 8, 2021.

[224] SIGAR, *Quarterly Report to the United States Congress*, SIGAR-2016-QR-1, January 30, 2016, p. 5.

[225] Murtazashvili, "The Collapse of Afghanistan," pp. 40–54.

[226] SIGAR, *Corruption in Conflict: Lessons from the U.S. Experience in Afghanistan*, SIGAR 16-58-LL, September 14, 2016, p. 18.

victors and create buy-in to the political reconstruction project.[227] But efforts to build Western-style governance institutions and populate them with the heads of preexisting patronage networks simply empowered malign actors, some of whom had been deposed by the Taliban in the 1990s to widespread cheers.[228]

This challenged the legitimacy of the liberal democratic project. According to corruption expert Sarah Chayes, U.S. officials were aware of the "abusive, predatory nature" of the local Afghan strongmen, who had grown "like cancerous tumors, out of control" during the Soviet occupation and ensuing civil war; yet, the United States still chose to work with them in the years following the 2001 invasion.[229] At a time when Afghans were looking to the United States for protection against these men, the United States legitimized them with political and financial support, helping to lay a foundation for continued impunity, weak rule of law, and the growth of corruption.[230] Ambassador McKinley explained the effect this had on the perception of the international intervention: "My impressionistic sense was that there was great dissatisfaction among younger Afghans asking, 'What was the international community doing, working with this leadership that had, at least part of it, been responsible for the civil war and the rise of the Taliban in the first place, in the nineties?'"[231] Dr. Mohammad Qadam Shah, assistant professor of global development at Seattle Pacific University, told SIGAR, "The actors that the [United States] I think trusted [were] one of the factors that really caused the failure of the Afghan state."[232]

Similarly, Hamdullah Mohib told SIGAR that putting human rights violators in charge of governance at local and national levels turned people against the state and gave rise to the Taliban again:

> This is where the challenges for the Republic started, as its righteousness was directly drawn into question by the people when they saw these figures elevated again. The crimes committed by the strongmen-turned-officials in Helmand, Kandahar, Faryab, Balkh, Jowzjan, Nangarhar, Uruzgan, and other places gave rise to the Taliban and attracted sympathies from the public.[233]

The continued employment of government officials who reportedly committed acts of child sexual abuse and exploited their positions to extract resources from the population contributed to a perception of the Afghan government as abusive and predatory.

So too did the behavior of the security forces. As we reported in our 2017 lessons-learned report on reconstructing the ANDSF, Afghan Local Police—auxiliary police units organized under the Ministry of Interior—reinforced the legitimization of corrupt, criminal, warlord-loyal militias, and reportedly engaged in human rights abuses.[234] Similarly, a human rights report issued by State in 2015 described the Afghan National Police as a major predatory actor, noting that accountability for "torture and abuse was weak, not transparent, and rarely enforced."[235] As Barfield describes, "The [Afghan] government had supplied little or nothing to rural areas, where it was associated primarily with predatory police, the conscription of young men, and greedy government officials who demanded bribes."[236] Murtazashvili told SIGAR, "What people wanted more than anything else was

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[227] Jackson, "U.S. Strategy in Afghanistan," p. 79.

[228] SIGAR, What We Need to Learn, SIGAR 21-46-LL, p. 73; Sarah Chayes, *Punishment of Virtue: Inside Afghanistan After the Taliban* (New York: Penguin Books, 2006), p. 73.

[229] Chayes, *Punishment of Virtue*, p. 170; SIGAR, Corruption in Conflict, SIGAR 16-58-LL, pp. 16–17.

[230] SIGAR, Corruption in Conflict, SIGAR 16-58-LL, p. 19.

[231] McKinley, SIGAR interview, February 18, 2022; McKinley, email correspondence with SIGAR, September 21, 2022.

[232] Mohammad Qadam Shah, assistant professor of global development at Seattle Pacific University, SIGAR interview, December 23, 2021.

[233] Mohib, email correspondence with SIGAR, April 13, 2022 and September 20, 2022.

[234] SIGAR, *Reconstructing the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces: Lessons from the U.S. Experience in Afghanistan*, SIGAR-17-62-LL, September 21, 2017, pp. 102, 104, 125, 127.

[235] State, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, *Afghanistan 2015 Human Rights Report*, Spring 2016, p. 9.

[236] Barfield, *Afghanistan*, pp. 281–282.

to be treated with dignity and respect" instead of being subjected to corruption and predatory behavior. The Taliban picked up on this grievance "beautifully," she said, and used it to gain a foothold in communities.[237]

In the absence of a strong central government backed by a national army, Colin Jackson notes, loyalties engendered by financial patronage formed the fragile connective tissue uniting the country.[238] To overcome weakness in the central government, former President Karzai fell back on a patrimonial model of redistributing resources on a personal basis to consolidate control.[239] The state's high degree of centralization meant that the executive went largely unchecked by the judicial or legislative branches, facilitating systemic corruption, which went largely unaddressed. As Executive Director of Integrity Watch Afghanistan Ikram Afzali told SIGAR, rather than becoming a vehicle for service delivery, state institutions instead became "engines of facilitating corruption and ensuring elite interests."[240]

The erosion of state legitimacy in the eyes of the Afghan public weakened the government's ability to enlist popular support against the insurgency. In *Corruption in Conflict*, we reported that corruption was fueling the insurgency by financing insurgent groups and reinforcing grievances that led to greater popular support of the groups.[241] Former SRAP Richard Holbrooke noted in 2009 that corruption was undermining the government and serving as a "huge recruiting opportunity for the Taliban."[242] Corruption also undercut the viability of the state itself, as government officials not only exploited their positions to extract resources from the population and foreign presence, but repurposed state institutions to engage in organized crime.[243] As the population became disenfranchised with successive Afghan governments unable or unwilling to hold state actors accountable for corruption, the state lost support of the people, Afzali told SIGAR.[244] Similarly, Giustozzi described the Republic as "a state that lacked legitimacy, not a state you would want to die for—unless you were [someone] who was directly benefitting from it."[245]

THE UNITED STATES FAILED TO ACHIEVE ITS OVERARCHING GOVERNANCE OBJECTIVES IN AFGHANISTAN, BUT THERE WERE SOME SUCCESSES ALONG THE WAY AND RESIDUAL ELEMENTS OF THE REPUBLIC REMAIN

The United States failed to achieve its goal of building stable, democratic, representative, gender-sensitive, and accountable Afghan governance institutions. The Taliban's decisive political defeat of the Afghan government—even after approximately $145.0 billion in U.S. appropriations, including more than $36.2 billion to support governance and economic development—evidences this failure.[246]

Several significant shortcomings of the U.S. effort to establish viable governance institutions contributed to this overarching failure. The United States did not resolve the issue of corruption, in part because fighting corruption required the cooperation of Afghan elites whose power relied on the very structures that anticorruption efforts sought to dismantle. The United States also failed to establish a representative and legitimate Afghan government through the mechanism of democratic elections, which were consistently

[237] Murtazashvili, SIGAR interview, December 9, 2021.

[238] Jackson, "U.S. Strategy in Afghanistan," p. 81.

[239] Jackson, "U.S. Strategy in Afghanistan," p. 81; Barfield, *Afghanistan*, p. 272.

[240] Ikram Afzali, Executive Director of Integrity Watch Afghanistan, SIGAR interview, April 1, 2022.

[241] SIGAR, Corruption in Conflict, SIGAR 16-58-LL, pp. 10, 31, 36.

[242] White House, Office of the Press Secretary, "Press Briefing by Bruce Riedel, Ambassador Richard Holbrooke, and Michele Flournoy on the New Strategy for Afghanistan and Pakistan," March 27, 2009.

[243] SIGAR, Corruption in Conflict, SIGAR 16-58-LL, pp. 10, 31, 36.

[244] Afzali, SIGAR interview, April 1, 2022.

[245] Giustozzi, SIGAR interview, December 28, 2021.

[246] The appropriations figures presented here include funds otherwise made available for reconstruction and related activities in Afghanistan through June 30, 2021.

marred by allegations of fraud, or through economic and social development, such as education and health care service delivery. For a variety of reasons, including the fact that the Taliban themselves benefitted from or took credit for the latter, such services did not materially increase support for the government. Furthermore, the United States failed to adequately monitor and evaluate the outcomes and impacts of its efforts, and did not appreciate the complexity of Afghanistan's political economy.

However, the United States made at least some progress toward achieving U.S. governance objectives prior to the collapse of the Afghan government. For example, the United States and its international partners made concerted efforts to develop the human capital and institutional capacity of various Afghan government organizations. Capacity building was imperfect, but it yielded some positive results. Additionally, residual elements of the Afghan government still exist and are functioning, although their sustainability is uncertain. For example, although the Taliban have dissolved several ministries of the former government, the ministries of finance and health, as well as the country's central bank, have continued to execute some basic functions. Moreover, although the Taliban installed their own members in many leadership positions, they have largely kept lower-ranking civil servants in their jobs.

The United States Failed to Build Stable, Democratic, Representative, Gender-Sensitive, and Accountable Afghan Governance Institutions

The United States aspired to build stable, democratic, representative, gender-sensitive, and accountable Afghan governance institutions.[247] However, aspirations to realize this objective collapsed with the Afghan government on August 15, 2021. As former Acting Minister of Defense Masoom Stanekzai told SIGAR, "we are returning to square one."[248]

The 2002 Afghanistan Freedom Support Act Established the U.S. Overarching Governance Objective in Afghanistan; Over Two Decades, That Objective Did Not Materially Change

The 2002 Afghanistan Freedom Support Act called on the United States and the international community to support the establishment of a new democratic, "broad-based, multi-ethnic, gender-sensitive, and fully representative government."[249] The basic substance of this objective was repeated in subsequent U.S. strategic documents.[250] For example, the State/USAID Strategic Plan for 2004–2009 stated that the U.S. should create "a stable and democratic Afghanistan," in part by working "to establish a stable, effective, and broadly representative central government."[251] Similarly, the State/USAID Strategic Plan for 2007–2012 committed the United States to standing "with those courageous leaders and citizens who are striving to ensure that democracy, tolerance, and the rule of law succeed." In addition, core objectives, such as fostering democracy, "respect for women" and "tolerance" remained mostly constant. However, the language of the State/USAID Strategic Plan for 2007–2012 also emphasized extending the "reach of the elected government."[252]

In 2009, the Obama administration authorized a surge force of 30,000 U.S. troops to counter an increasingly resurgent Taliban and dramatically increased reconstruction funding levels. For example, from 2009 through 2014, USAID stabilization programming resources increased nearly 800 percent compared to the 6 years

[247] The U.S. overarching strategic objective in Afghanistan was to defeat al-Qaeda and prevent terrorists from using Afghan territory to facilitate future attacks against the United States. However, the congressional request initiating this report required SIGAR to examine the collapse of the government in Afghanistan. Therefore, in this section, we identify and assess U.S. objectives in Afghanistan only as they relate to governance.

[248] Stanekzai, SIGAR interview, April 18, 2022.

[249] Afghanistan Freedom Support Act of 2002, Pub. L. No. 107-327, 22 U.S.C. § 7501 (2002).

[250] SIGAR selected these U.S. strategic documents for analysis in order to achieve maximum time coverage of strategic governance goals over the 20-year intervention, with priority given to joint documents capturing the goals and objectives of multiple agencies.

[251] State and USAID, Publication 11084, *Strategic Plan Fiscal Years 2004–2009* (Washington, DC: August 2003), p. 3.

[252] State and USAID, *Strategic Plan Fiscal Years 2007–2012* (Washington, DC: May 7, 2007), pp. 5, 18, 52.

prior.[253] This large increase in spending over a short period of time without adequate oversight led to rampant corruption, with U.S. funding diverted to the Taliban and other insurgent groups. From 2008 to 2010, the United States formed a number of interagency anticorruption groups and issued new anticorruption strategies in a push for greater accountability.[254] In line with these efforts, the 2011 Civil-Military Strategic Framework for Afghanistan, which provided strategic guidance for all American civilian and military personnel, included sub-objectives for both countering corruption and electoral reform in order to create a more legitimate electoral process. However, the framework also generally conformed to the overarching governance goals articulated in previous strategies. For instance, it included a cross-cutting goal of "improving the status of women," including their access to "the political system," which is similar, if not identical to, creating a "gender-sensitive" government.[255]

The Civil-Military Strategic Framework was regularly revised to reflect policy updates and changing conditions on the ground. The 2013 iteration of the framework stated the governance goal was "to empower government and its institutions to be representative, accountable, responsive, constitutionally legitimate, and capable of performing key functions." The United States was to achieve this goal by "supporting an inclusive, credible, and transparent election in 2014." The framework contended that this was "an essential step of consolidating a viable and legitimate system of governance in Afghanistan that empowers both men and women."[256] These tenets continued to form the core of the United States' governance objectives until the end of U.S. military involvement in Afghanistan in 2021. State's 2020 Integrated Country Strategy articulated the goal of "an Afghan government that is more stable, democratic, responsive, and increasingly capable of performing key functions," and included a separate sub-objective that emphasized upholding "the rights of women and minorities."[257]

Our review of these strategic documents demonstrates that, overall, the U.S. goal of building stable, democratic, representative, gender-sensitive, and accountable Afghan governance institutions did not materially change over two decades.

The United States Did Not Achieve its Governance-Related Objectives in Afghanistan

When the United States and its allies invaded Afghanistan in late 2001, they embarked on an ambitious effort to encourage broad reforms that touched essentially all aspects of Afghan society, especially governance. Before the collapse of the Afghan government, progress was made in areas such as health care, maternal health, and education.[258] However, in the aggregate, Afghan governance institutions consistently failed to meet the standards established by U.S. objectives. For example, Afghan elections were regularly subject to fraud and manipulation through bribes and threats.[259] State's 2020 Integrated Country Strategy acknowledged that poor and ill-resourced governance and weak political institutions exacerbated Afghanistan's challenges, and also noted that the "Afghan public was increasingly skeptical of the government's commitment to respect the rule of law, address corruption, and appoint senior level officials based on merit rather than personal allegiance."[260]

In February 2020, the United States and the Taliban finalized an agreement that created a schedule for a complete U.S. withdrawal in exchange for counterterrorism assurances from the Taliban and their commitment

[253] SIGAR, Stabilization, SIGAR 18-48-LL, pp. 34, 56.

[254] SIGAR, The Risk of Doing the Wrong Thing Perfectly, SIGAR 21-41-LL, pp. 13-14.

[255] U.S. Embassy Kabul and USFOR-A, *United States Government Integrated Civilian-Military Campaign Plan for Support to Afghanistan* (Kabul, February 2011), p. 6.

[256] U.S. Embassy Kabul and USFOR-A, *United States Government Integrated Civilian-Military Campaign Plan for Support to Afghanistan* (Kabul: August 2013), p. 3.

[257] State, *Integrated Country Strategy* (Reviewed and Updated: November 15, 2020), p. 5.

[258] SIGAR, What We Need to Learn, SIGAR 21-46-LL, pp. vii, 79.

[259] SIGAR, Elections, SIGAR 21-16-LL, p. 166.

[260] State, *Integrated Country Strategy* (Reviewed and Updated: November 15, 2020), pp. 2–3.

to negotiate with the Afghan government on the future of the country.[261] In August 2021, the United States completed a withdrawal of all military and civilian personnel as the Taliban seized Kabul and the Afghan government collapsed. The resultant Taliban government was not inclusive, accountable, or democratic. After the takeover, the Taliban's original 33-person cabinet did not include any non-Taliban members, figures from the past government, or women. Some of the cabinet members were sanctioned by the UN, and others are wanted by the U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation for facilitating terrorist attacks.[262] Furthermore, the Taliban have made it known that they oppose democracy.[263]

Numerous Afghanistan experts agree that the Taliban's decisive political defeat of the Afghan government—after approximately $145 billion in U.S. appropriations, including $36.3 billion to support governance and economic development—reflects more than anything the failure of the United States to achieve its governance objectives in Afghanistan.[264] As Ben Connable, nonresident senior fellow at the Atlantic Council and former political scientist at the RAND Corporation, told SIGAR, "Given the complete strategic victory of the Taliban and the Haqqani Network, and the complete destruction of the U.S.-backed Afghan government, it is only possible to conclude that the United States failed to ensure that the government of Afghanistan is more stable, democratic, and accountable."[265] Chris Mason, associate professor of national security at the U.S. Army War College, asserted, "U.S. efforts to build and sustain Afghanistan's governing institutions were a total, epic, predestined failure on par with the same efforts and outcome in the Vietnam war, and for the same reasons."[266] Omar Sadr, a former assistant professor at the American University of Afghanistan, remarked, "The [United States] did not achieve any positive outcome towards creating a stable, democratic, and accountable government."[267] General Mark Milley echoed this sentiment, albeit more euphemistically, during his testimony to Congress following the collapse of the Afghan government, stating, "It is obvious to all of us that the war in Afghanistan did not end on the terms that we wanted, with the Taliban now in power in Kabul… The war was a strategic failure."[268] Former SRAP Dobbins put it simply when asked if he believed the United States achieved its goal to ensure the government in Afghanistan is more stable, democratic, and accountable: "The answer is clearly 'no' in light of history."[269]

The United States Failed to Resolve Corruption, to Create a Legitimate Democratic System, to Perform Adequate Monitoring and Evaluation, and to Understand the Operating Environment

Several significant shortcomings of the U.S. effort to establish viable governance institutions contributed to the overarching failure described in the previous section. The United States did not resolve corruption, in part because fighting corruption required the cooperation of Afghan elites whose power relied on the very structures that anticorruption efforts sought to dismantle. The United States also failed to establish a representative and legitimate Afghan government through the mechanism of democratic elections, which were consistently marred by fraud, or through economic and social development, such as education and health care service delivery. For a variety of reasons, including the fact that the Taliban themselves benefitted from or took credit for the latter, such services did not materially increase support for the government. Furthermore, the United

[261] SIGAR, What We Need to Learn, SIGAR 21-46-LL, p. 35.

[262] SIGAR, Quarterly Report, SIGAR-2021-QR-4, pp. iv, 96.

[263] SIGAR, *Quarterly Report to the United States Congress*, SIGAR-2022-QR-1, January 30, 2022, p. 95.

[264] SIGAR, Quarterly Report SIGAR-2021-QR-3, p. 25.

[265] The Haqqani Network is a designated terrorist organization allied with the Taliban. Ben Connable, email correspondence with SIGAR, April 8, 2022.

[266] Chris Mason, email correspondence with SIGAR, April 8, 2022.

[267] Omar Sadr, email correspondence with SIGAR, April 9, 2022.

[268] SIGAR, Quarterly Report, SIGAR-2021-QR-4, p. 11.

[269] Dobbins, SIGAR interview, April 20, 2022.

States failed to adequately monitor and evaluate the outcomes and impacts of its efforts and did not appreciate the complexity of Afghanistan's political economy. Collectively, these failures made it less likely that overarching U.S. governance objectives would be achieved.

U.S. Actions Did Not Resolve Corruption

Corruption—the abuse of entrusted authority for private gain—undermined U.S. efforts from the start. In Afghanistan, corruption took many different forms, some more harmful than others. Small-scale, petty corruption, such as bribery for basic services plagued citizens at a personal level, while powerful individuals destabilized the state with large-scale acts of embezzlement, fraud, nepotism, and extortion that enriched their own patronage networks.[270] Part of the problem was that in pursuit of its counterterror objectives, the United States had empowered strongmen who were known human rights abusers.[271] Lt. General David Barno, the senior American commander of U.S. and coalition forces in Afghanistan from 2003 to 2005, told SIGAR he simply assumed that

> of the Afghans I was interacting with … a large number of them, typically those that would have been characterized as warlords, had dirty hands in some way, shape, or form. They were involved with [the] drug trade. They had been involved with atrocities in previous Afghan wars. They were doing things that were probably human rights violations in terms of how they were running their particular province.[272]

These strongmen, many of whom attained high-level government positions, gained significant political power in the nascent Afghan state.[273]

With awareness came the realization of the critical need to address this problem. Former U.S. Deputy Ambassador to Afghanistan Earl Anthony Wayne concluded by 2009 that "[unless] we somehow got a better hand on managing corruption, not eliminating it, but managing it, the government we were working with would not be seen as legitimate" over the long haul.[274] A U.S. Embassy Kabul cable reiterated this concern in early 2013, stating that "corruption remains arguably the most formidable obstacle to a stable Afghanistan, especially as the country moves past transition and into the post-2014 era."[275]

Yet, as we stated in our 2016 lessons-learned report *Corruption in Conflict*, the U.S. government did not view anticorruption as a top priority during the first 7 years of the reconstruction effort. Security, political stability, and immediate reconstruction needs took priority over the slow, iterative work of building good governance and establishing the rule of law. The latter goal consisted largely of building a functional court system and a trusted civilian police force, neither of which were ultimately willing or able to address any of the kinds of corruption that most affected ordinary Afghans.[276]

As stated in SIGAR's corruption report, the low priority given to addressing corruption was partly a function of the Bush administration's focus on counterterrorism and immediate humanitarian needs, as well as an aversion to nation-building. Instead, the Bush administration looked to the United Nations and other donors to take on the responsibility of shaping a new post-Taliban social order and public institutions.[277] In many ways, the initial years of reconstruction bore the resemblance of success. Malkasian writes, "In December 2001,

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[270] SIGAR, Corruption in Conflict, SIGAR 16-58-LL, p. 3.

[271] SIGAR, Corruption in Conflict, SIGAR 16-58-LL, pp. 16–17.

[272] Barno, SIGAR interview, January 11, 2022.

[273] SIGAR, Corruption in Conflict, SIGAR 16-58-LL, p. 17.

[274] Earl Anthony Wayne, former U.S. ambassador to Afghanistan, SIGAR interview, December 21, 2021.

[275] SIGAR, Corruption in Conflict, SIGAR 16-58-LL, pp. 49, 115.

[276] SIGAR, Corruption in Conflict, SIGAR 16-58-LL, p. 28; SIGAR, *Police in Conflict: Lessons from the U.S. Experience in Afghanistan*, SIGAR 22-13-LL, June 1, 2022, p. 1.

[277] SIGAR, Corruption in Conflict, SIGAR 16-58-LL, p. 21.

Afghanistan's two decades of civil war appeared to have been a passing nightmare."[278] When he left Afghanistan in the spring of 2005, after the first Afghan presidential election in 2004, Lt. General Barno said he felt

> This is on a success trajectory here. We've made great progress. We had an extremely successful presidential election, probably the most non-corrupt election they'd had in the last twenty years in Afghanistan. And the population is euphoric about this. They are very much onboard. We're seeing an economic rebound, we're seeing [a] very limited amount of Taliban activity. The warlords have been demobilized and many re-integrated into the government. So, there were a huge number of success factors.[279]

Other observers, however, described the early years less optimistically. "I was there in 2001, [and] the corruption was visible from day one, the private contractors paying off convoys," Scott Guggenheim, a development expert and former advisor to President Ghani, told us. "We knew within 6 months what was going on. The extent to which people were buying positions, that happened pretty quickly."[280]

U.S. policymakers did make some efforts at combating corruption in those early years. For example, the Afghanistan Freedom Support Act of 2002 authorized programs "designed to combat corruption and other programs for the promotion of good governance."[281] But actual implementation was slow. It was several years before USAID produced the Afghanistan Strategic Plan 2005–2010, which for the first time articulated the agency's approach to corruption. It identified ongoing measures to combat corruption, and noted these would "ultimately weaken warlords, leading to increased security in the regions." However, the plan did not contain any policies specifically addressing problems in procurement and contracting, and failed to address the need to improve oversight over those activities. It also failed to consider the extent to which technical anticorruption efforts could succeed if the Afghan government itself did not cooperate.[282]

The international donor community's anticorruption efforts in the early years centered on helping the Afghan government build a legal and institutional framework for anticorruption, but such efforts on the Afghan end usually had limited substantive impact. For instance, President Hamid Karzai established the General Independent Administration for Anticorruption in late 2003. But the agency had no clear mandate, political support, or institutional capacity. It dissolved in 2006, after Karzai appointed a director who had been convicted in the United States on drug charges, and international donors insisted on his removal.[283] By 2006, the Afghan government and donor community were locked into a cycle: Donors would pressure the Karzai administration to address the problem, the administration would respond by agreeing to reforms on paper, those reforms would not actually be put into effect or would fail to meet any meaningful benchmarks—and the cycle would then repeat.[284] Over the following decade, the percentage of Afghans who described corruption as a major problem in their daily life trended steadily upward, from 42.1% in 2006 to 61.1% in 2015.[285]

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[278] Malkasian, *The American War in Afghanistan*, ep. 14.

[279] Barno, SIGAR interview, January 11, 2022.

[280] Guggenheim, SIGAR interview, April 20, 2022.

[281] SIGAR, Corruption in Conflict, SIGAR 16-58-LL, p. 21.

[282] SIGAR, Corruption in Conflict, SIGAR 16-58-LL, p. 23-24.

[283] SIGAR, Corruption in Conflict, SIGAR 16-58-LL, p. 25.

[284] This cycle persisted through the Ghani administration, and can be observed in SIGAR's audits of Afghanistan's anti-Corruption efforts. In 2018, we reported, "The Afghan government has begun to implement an anti-corruption strategy, but significant problems must be addressed." Similarly, in 2019, we reported, "The Afghan government made progress in meeting its anti-corruption strategy benchmarks, but serious challenges remain to fighting corruption." SIGAR, *Afghanistan's Anti-Corruption Efforts: The Afghan Government has Begun to Implement an Anti-Corruption Strategy, but Significant Problems Must be Addressed*, SIGAR-18-51-AR, May 31, 2018, p. i; SIGAR, *Afghanistan's Anti-Corruption Efforts: The Afghan Government Made Progress in Meeting its Anti-Corruption Strategy Benchmarks, but Serious Challenges Remain to Fighting Corruption,* SIGAR-20-06-AR, November 1, 2019, ep. 2.

[285] This data is drawn from The Asia Foundation's annual Survey of the Afghan People. While some flaws have been identified regarding accuracy in insecure areas and social desirability bias, a data quality assessment conducted for the UK

In short, fighting corruption presented a conundrum: it required the cooperation of Afghan elites who had the most to lose by its elimination. The result was a government of elites intent on their own interests and survival, and a citizenry whose trust in that government was steadily eroding. These elites included warlords, returned members of the Afghan diaspora, and other power brokers whose cooperation was needed by the United States to achieve its security and stability goals.[286] A 2009 assessment by International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) Commander General Stanley McChrystal stated, "Widespread corruption and abuse of power exacerbate the popular crisis of confidence in the government and reinforce a culture of impunity." He added, "ISAF can no longer ignore or tacitly accept abuse of power, corruption, or marginalization." Such pronouncements had little effect. The next year, Afghan National Security Advisor Rangin Dadfar Spanta told senior U.S. officials, "Corruption is not just a problem for the system of governance in Afghanistan; it is the system of governance."[287]

The integration of former warlords into the Afghan government ultimately became a significant source of corruption. When the Karzai government appointed former warlords to positions of authority, those warlords began to consolidate their power bases by rewarding their followers with government positions, and gaining access to lucrative contracts connected to the military and international aid agencies. They dealt with enemies via illegal land grabs, economic marginalization, and outright human rights violations. Protected by their connections to the central government, warlords were further empowered by the risk that their removal would destabilize the regions they controlled.[288]

The United States thus found itself strengthening corrupt actors at the same time it sought to control them. Ambassador Wayne told us, "Part of the challenge was that a number of people that the U.S. government and NATO were relying on to fight the Taliban effectively were corrupt."[289] The violations committed by these actors were pervasive and diverse, ranging from financial fraud to credible allegations of rape, torture, and murder.[290] Several senior military and State officials expressed that working with known human rights abusers was problematic, but they felt they were locked into a structure with no other options.[291]

One example of this dilemma was the U.S. military's relationship with General Abdul Raziq, who emerged as a key regional opponent to the Taliban after 2002. Raziq commanded a tribal militia that had near total control of the Chaman-Spin Boldak border crossing in Kandahar, the lucrative gateway for all supplies coming into southern Afghanistan from Pakistan. Raziq's semiofficial title became chief of staff of the provincial border police. Then-President Karzai promoted him to Kandahar's chief of police in May 2011. U.S. military officials acknowledged that Raziq was deeply involved in the narcotics trade and took a significant cut of customs revenue at the border crossing. Systemic torture, forced disappearances, and summary executions of civilian detainees were well documented, and as Raziq gained more power, the U.S. military stopped transferring

Department for International Development concluded that trend-line information was valid. SIGAR, Corruption in Conflict, SIGAR 16-58-LL, p. 93; SIGAR, The Risk of Doing the Wrong Thing Perfectly, SIGAR 21-41-LL, p. 32.

[286] SIGAR, Corruption in Conflict, SIGAR 16-58-LL, p. 16.

[287] Commander of ISAF, Commander's Initial Assessment, August 30, 2009, pp. 2-9–2-10; SIGAR, Corruption in Conflict, SIGAR 16-58-LL, pp. 4, 36.

[288] SIGAR, Corruption in Conflict, SIGAR 16-58-LL, p. 11.

[289] Wayne, SIGAR interview, December 21, 2021.

[290] Ambassador McKinley listed Atta Noor, Ismail Khan, Asadullah Khalid, General Abdul Raziq, and Vice President Rashid Dostum as individuals deemed acceptable for the United States to work with, despite substantive allegations of significant human rights abuses. He was especially critical of Dostum, whom he described as violent and unbalanced, and unfit to be vice-president. McKinley, SIGAR interview, February 18, 2022; McKinley, email correspondence with SIGAR, September 21, 2022; SIGAR, Corruption in Conflict, SIGAR 16-58-LL, pp. 16–17.

[291] Barno, SIGAR interview, January 11, 2022; Hugo Llorens, SIGAR interview, April 29, 2022; Douglas Lute, former U.S. Ambassador to NATO, SIGAR interview, January 13, 2022; McKinley, SIGAR interview, February 18, 2022.

detainees to his custody.[292] Ambassador McKinley included Raziq in a list of abusive and corrupt individuals with whom the United States worked.[293]

On the other hand, Raziq's ruthlessness kept Kandahar Province relatively secure. As former Combined Security Transition Command–Afghanistan commander Lt. Gen. Dan Bolger noted, "Where Raziq was in charge, there was absolute security, because he killed anyone who crossed him. … That's the guy to get stuff done in Afghanistan."[294] Reflecting this, the Karzai administration blocked efforts to prosecute him for human rights abuses, and the U.S. military continued to fund his police force while acknowledging credible allegations of torture.[295] One Afghan interviewee who lived in Kandahar during Raziq's tenure acknowledged his reputation for violence and murder, but also admiringly described him as "the king of southern Afghanistan. He was ruling by his own rulebook."[296]

The immense scale of Afghan government enmeshment with corruption became clear in 2010 with the near collapse of Kabul Bank, Afghanistan's largest private bank. Bank Chairman Sherkhan Farnood admitted that the bank operated as a massive pyramid scheme: Hundreds of millions of dollars had been fraudulently lent to fictitious companies in transactions that benefitted politically connected Afghan shareholders who never paid back those loans. U.S. government funds for Afghan National Army and Afghan National Police salaries regularly moved through the bank, which used the money to cover customers' withdrawals, concealing the bank's steadily diminishing reserves. Meanwhile, deposits by ordinary Afghan citizens were used to fund the fraudulent loans. Two of the principal beneficiaries of the fraudulent loans were Mahmoud Karzai and Haseen Fahim—the brothers of President Karzai and Vice President Marshall Mohammed Fahim, respectively. Ultimately, the extent of the theft was estimated to be roughly $982 million.[297]

In 2013, Farnood and Khalilullah Ferozi, another senior officer of the bank, were sentenced to 5 years in prison for "breach of trust," but were not convicted of the more serious crimes of money laundering, embezzlement, and forgery, which would have carried sentences up to 20 years and provided a basis for orders to confiscate their assets. Farnood died in prison; Ferozi was resentenced to 10 years in prison, but was transferred to house arrest in 2019 and, as a condition of this arrangement, agreed to return $68.6 million within 6 months to the Kabul Bank Receivership (KBR). At the time of his transfer to house arrest, Ferozi had returned only $14.5 million in cash, and less than half of the nearly billion-dollar fraudulent loan portfolio had been recovered by the KBR from Ferozi and other politically connected Afghans. A SIGAR audit of Afghanistan's anti-corruption strategy published shortly after the Afghan government collapsed noted that as of March 2021, Ferozi had made no more cash repayments after his release from prison, in violation of his repayment agreement, and had been fined an additional $1.8 million.[298]

The pervasiveness of corruption in the Afghan government was also reflected in the phenomenon of "ghost soldiers," personnel invented by government officials, and military and police commanders in order to pocket their salaries.[299] Journalist Charlotte Bellis told us of one senior government official who was "astounded and confused and shocked" to learn shortly before the collapse that there were only 700 police officers defending

[292] SIGAR, Police in Conflict, SIGAR 22-13-LL, pp. 178–180.

[293] McKinley, SIGAR interview, February 18, 2022.

[294] Bolger, SIGAR interview, September 8, 2021.

[295] SIGAR, Police in Conflict, SIGAR 22-13-LL, pp. 180–181.

[296] Pashtana Durrani, Afghan human rights activist, SIGAR interview, January 12, 2021.

[297] SIGAR, Corruption in Conflict, SIGAR 16-58-LL, pp. 44–45.

[298] SIGAR, Corruption in Conflict, SIGAR 16-58-LL, p. 54; SIGAR, *Quarterly Report to the United States Congress*, SIGAR-2019-QR-4, October 30, 2019, pp. 143–144; SIGAR, *Afghanistan's Anti-Corruption Efforts: Corruption Remained a Serious Problem in the Afghan Government and More Tangible Action was Required to Root It Out*, SIGAR-21-27-AR, August 31, 2021, p. 17.

[299] For example, *see*: SIGAR, Collapse of the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces, SIGAR 22-22-IP, p. 32; SIGAR, Quarterly Report, SIGAR-2021-QR-1, pp. 60, 98. 126; SIGAR, Quarterly Report, SIGAR-2021-QR-3, p. 62.

Kandahar City—not the 14,000 he had believed.[300] This phenomenon was not limited to military personnel; one former Afghan government official lamented to us, "The ghost soldiers, the ghost police … the ghost students, so many ghosts!"[301] In the final months of the Afghan government, mounting political instability created incentives for even honest government officials to line their own pockets, according to former acting Minister of Finance Khalid Payenda. Payenda told us that officials watching the Taliban's steady advance were likely to think, "If [the system collapses] there [are] no records, there is nothing, why not steal?"[302]

In our 2016 *Corruption in Conflict* report, we reported that corruption, if unchecked, could ultimately subvert U.S. reconstruction aims, not just by lining the pockets of those who were able to game the system, but by insidiously eroding the average Afghan citizen's trust in government. As former USFOR-A commander General David Petraeus told us, "We never, never did enough to reduce the corruption that made the lives of ordinary Afghans increasingly frustrating and challenging."[303]

The United States Failed to Legitimize the Afghan Government through Democratic Elections

U.S. strategy documents consistently linked democracy, elections, and popular representation to the overarching goal of a stable and legitimate Afghan government.[304] But the attempt to create a legitimate government through the mechanism of democratic elections was not successful. Up to the Taliban takeover on August 15, 2021, Afghanistan's electoral institutions, such as they were, tended to undermine both the country's nascent democratic process and the citizenry's belief that their voting had any impact on the government. As USAID summarized in 2018, "Elections are not yet perceived by the public as an effective way to influence public policy."[305] With the possible exception of the first presidential election in 2004, the U.S.-supported Afghan government did not experience a single election free of significant fraud and corruption.

The U.S. democracy project in Afghanistan began with great ambitions. One former U.S. government official and governance expert described significant excitement surrounding the 2004 Afghan presidential election, an event that brought roughly two-thirds of the country's eligible voters to the polls, and that former SRAP James Dobbins described as "the only presidential election that was completely unchallenged."[306] Afghanistan scholar Thomas Barfield described that election as "the high point of the constitutional process."[307] Former senior American commander of U.S. and coalition forces in Afghanistan Lt. Gen. David Barno described the period following the 2004 Afghan presidential election as the "high-water mark" of the U.S. goal to foster democratic

[300] Bellis, SIGAR interview, December 23, 2021.

[301] Sarabi, SIGAR interview, January 6, 2022.

[302] Payenda, SIGAR interview, April 19, 2022.

[303] Petraeus, SIGAR interview, January 14, 2022.

[304] The 2002 Afghanistan Freedom Support Act states, "The United States and the international community should support efforts that advance the development of democratic civil authorities and institutions in Afghanistan and the establishment of a new broad-based, multi-ethnic, gender-sensitive, and fully representative government in Afghanistan." The State/USAID Strategic Plan for 2004–2009 repeats this, setting "establish a stable, effective, and broadly representative central governance" as an objective subordinate to "helping Afghanistan to achieve peace and stability." The Civil Military strategic framework released in 2013 specifically identifies "an inclusive, credible and transparent election in 2014" as "an essential step of consolidating a viable and legitimate system of governance in Afghanistan." The following year's Integrated Country Strategy identifies "a democratic, sovereign Afghan government" and "legitimacy of the Government of Afghanistan improved," as goals. The 2020 Integrated Country Strategy remains consistent with this trend, phrasing the same goal as "Government in Afghanistan is more stable, democratic and accountable." Afghanistan Freedom Support Act of 2002, Pub. L. No. 107-327, 22 U.S.C. § 7511 (2002); State and USAID, Publication 11084, "Strategic Plan Fiscal Years 2004–2009," August 2003, p. 3; U.S. Embassy Kabul and USFOR-A, "United States Government Integrated Civilian-Military Campaign Plan for Support to Afghanistan," August 2013, p. 3; State, "Integrated Country Strategy" (2014), p. 7; State, "Integrated Country Strategy" (Reviewed and Updated: November 15, 2020), p. 5.

[305] SIGAR, Elections, SIGAR 21-16-LL, p. viii.

[306] SIGAR, Elections, SIGAR 21-16-LL, p. 24; Democracy and Governance Researcher, SIGAR interview, August 31, 2021; Dobbins, SIGAR interview, December 20, 2022.

[307] Barfield, *Afghanistan*, p. 300.

governance in Afghanistan.[308] A May 2005 joint declaration produced by the Bush administration and the Afghan government expressed the United States' commitment to a "democratic, free" Afghanistan, and declared triumphantly that the Afghan people had "established a moderate, representative government."[309]

But, as we stated in our 2021 lessons-learned report, *Elections: Lessons from the U.S. Experience in Afghanistan*, efforts to foster a credible democracy quickly faltered. As early as 2005, a report by the Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit, an independent research non-profit, suggested a widespread perception among Afghans that the parliamentary elections that year were "marred by weak candidate vetting, fraud, and intimidation," despite praise from the United States at the time for running a successful election and initial excitement from the Afghan citizenry. Massive fraud during 2009's presidential election resulted in the Electoral Complaints Commission tossing out nearly 25 percent of the votes. However, the international community generally supported Hamid Karzai's victory, despite his likely role in the fraud. This support made earlier U.S. commitments to a "democratic [and] free" Afghanistan seem hypocritical to many Afghans and international observers.[310]

The contested results in the 2014 election were also marred by credible allegations of malfeasance. The success of this election was identified in the 2013 Civil-Military Strategic Framework as "an essential step of consolidating a viable and legitimate system of governance in Afghanistan." However, then-Deputy U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan Michael McKinley told us that as he monitored shifts in polling data during that election, he "was instantly convinced that there had been major fraud."[311] The contested outcome necessitated a U.S.-brokered power-sharing arrangement between the eventual winner, Ashraf Ghani, and the runner-up, Abdullah Abdullah. Former acting SRAP Laurel Miller described this arrangement as "one of the key moments" marking the country's deteriorating political stability.[312] Ghani's inauguration in September 2014 may have been the first democratic transfer of power in Afghanistan's history, but it was a transfer made possible only by emergency interventions by high-ranking U.S. officials all the way up to the White House.[313]

Moreover, Miller added, the agreement "patched things together to limit the deterioration of political stability, but it didn't fully solve it."[314] The position of chief executive created for Abdullah had no basis in the Afghan constitution, and no real mechanism (apart from constant interventions by U.S. officials) to compel any actual cooperation between the roles of president and chief executive. Following the formation of the National Unity Government—the official name for the dual administration of Ghani and Abdullah—Ambassador McKinley reported that he spent "an inordinate amount of time commuting between the two palaces … because there was conflict after conflict after conflict."[315]

Afghans themselves expressed little faith in their democracy. Fawzia Koofi, a former deputy speaker of parliament, told us, "We all know … President Ghani was not the winner" of the 2014 election.[316] This perception—that Ghani's presidential power was *not* rooted in a sound electoral process—seems to have been widespread.[317] Several interviewees expressed the belief that Ghani had essentially been selected by the United States, with little regard for the will of Afghans.[318] Whether that view is justified is to some extent a

[308] Barno, SIGAR interview, May 2, 2022.

[309] George W. Bush and Hamid Karzai, "Joint Declaration of the United States-Afghanistan Strategic Partnership," May 23, 2005.

[310] SIGAR, Corruption in Conflict, SIGAR 16-58-LL, pp. 18, 34; SIGAR, Elections, SIGAR 21-16-LL, p. 10.

[311] McKinley, SIGAR interview, February 18, 2022.

[312] SIGAR, Quarterly Report, SIGAR-2014-QR-4, pp. 128–129; Miller, SIGAR interview, April 26, 2022.

[313] SIGAR, Quarterly Report, SIGAR-2014-QR-4, p. 65.

[314] Miller, SIGAR interview, April 26, 2022.

[315] SIGAR, Quarterly Report, SIGAR-2014-QR-4, p. 129; McKinley, SIGAR interview, February 18, 2022.

[316] Koofi, SIGAR interview, December 27, 2022.

[317] Sarabi, SIGAR interview, January 6, 2022; Koofi, SIGAR interview, December 27, 2021.

[318] Democracy and Governance Researcher, SIGAR interview, August 31, 2021; Sarabi, SIGAR interview, January 6, 2022; Murtazashvili, SIGAR interview, December 9, 2022.

matter of perspective. One researcher told us, "There's no doubt about that, the U.S. put Ghani into power … I mean, [Secretary of State John] Kerry brokered that agreement."[319] Former SRAP Dobbins disagreed, saying, "We could influence the system by which [Afghanistan's political leaders] were chosen, but we couldn't pick the leaders."[320] However, the extent of U.S. intervention required to resolve the fiasco may have dealt a fatal blow to any remaining faith Afghans had in democracy. Habiba Sarabi, a former Afghan government official and member of the Republic's negotiating team, told us, "Especially after 2014, [Afghan people] don't believe in democracy [or] elections."[321]

By the 2019 election, in which Ghani again faced Abdullah, only an estimated 10 percent of eligible citizens actually went to the polls, and allegations of fraud at all levels of the electoral process caused a 5-month delay in announcing who had won. On February 18, 2020, Afghanistan's Independent Electoral Commission declared Ghani the winner, prompting an assertion by Abdullah that he had won the largest number of "clean votes," as opposed to what he said were fraudulent or irregular votes. Despite U.S. efforts to negotiate another last-minute power-sharing deal, Kabul hosted the spectacle of two parallel presidential inaugurations on March 9, 2020. Senior U.S. officials, including Afghanistan envoy Zalmay Khalilzad and USFOR-A Commander General Austin Scott Miller, attended Ghani's inauguration and snubbed Abdullah's ceremony.[322] Andrew Watkins, an Afghanistan expert at the U.S. Institute of Peace, told us, "The factor that made Ghani's [inauguration] real and Abdullah's a sideshow only came down to which one the embassies in Kabul decided to attend or not."[323] Ambassador McKinley noted that the low voter turnout, substantial fraud, and months-long delay in announcing the winner "should have been the biggest red flag on earth that there was no legitimacy to the political system that was in place in Afghanistan."[324]

Even perfect elections may not have created a legitimate government. Chris Mason of the U.S. Army War College told SIGAR, "I want to emphasize … just how far-fetched the project in Afghanistan—to try to create a stable Jeffersonian democracy there—was. In Afghanistan's 2,000-year history, they had never before held a vote on anything." Across Afghan history, Mason said, its most successful form of legitimate governance was a hereditary monarchy established in the 1700s and overthrown in 1973.[325] "Even if there had been completely successful elections in Afghanistan, the results in the eyes of the people would have been an illegitimate leader because democracy is not a source of legitimacy of government in Afghanistan and it probably never will be," he added.[326] Thomas Barfield noted, "The U.S believes we're doing democracy, so who are we to determine Afghan leaders, [but] from the Afghan point of view, you are determining Afghan leaders. You put this government in place."[327] Ashley Jackson, a researcher specializing in civilian interaction with militant groups, including the Taliban, told us that Afghans she interviewed did not have the "luxury" of preference in who governed them: "Their voices do not matter, [and] that's what they've been told repeatedly for 40 years."[328]

The Taliban regime that took over on August 15, 2021, has stated that it has no intention of implementing any kind of elected government. In an interview with the *New York Times*, Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid

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[319] Murtazashvili, SIGAR interview, December 9, 2022.

[320] Dobbins, SIGAR interview, April 20, 2022.

[321] Sarabi, SIGAR interview, January 6, 2022.

[322] SIGAR, Elections, SIGAR 21-16-LL, p. 24; SIGAR, Quarterly Report, SIGAR-2020-QR-2, pp. 97, 100.

[323] Watkins, SIGAR interview, January 4, 2022.

[324] McKinley, SIGAR interview, February 18, 2022.

[325] Reflecting the strength of the monarchy, when asked what factors he thought contributed to the collapse of the Afghan government, Ambassador Hugo Llorens told us, "Things went very badly wrong beginning with the coup that overthrew King Mohammad Zahir Shah back in 1973." Llorens, SIGAR interview, February 2, 2022; Chris Mason, associate professor of national security at the U.S. Army War College, SIGAR interview, February 7, 2022; Malkasian, *The American War in Afghanistan*, epp. 27, 31.

[326] Mason, SIGAR interview, February 7, 2022.

[327] Barfield, SIGAR interview, February 9, 2022.

[328] Ashley Jackson, Co-director, Centre for the Study of Armed Groups at the Overseas Development Institute, SIGAR interview, January 21, 2022.

declared, "Some of the principles of democracy are in contradiction with the principles of Islam. For example, in a democracy, the people are sovereign. But in Islam, God is sovereign. The Koran is sovereign."[329] One former Afghan government official and member of the Islamic Republic negotiating team described the Taliban's mockery in response to fruitless efforts to advocate for democratic processes during intra-Afghan negotiations: "As soon as we would say 'election,' [the Taliban would respond] 'Hahaha, that election that you're talking about, that corrupt election? That every person was for sale?'"[330]

Attempts to Bolster the Legitimacy of the Afghan Government through Economic and Social Development Failed

The United States believed that economic and social development programming would increase support for the Afghan government and reduce support for the Taliban insurgency. For example, according to USAID's "U.S. Foreign Assistance for Afghanistan Post Performance Management Plan (2010–2015)," security and stability goals were woven into initiatives as diverse as public health, governance, education, and agriculture. These goals included building active support for the government (health), supporting and reinforcing efforts to improve security (governance), increasing the legitimacy of the Afghan government (education), and increasing confidence in the Afghan government. Similarly, economic growth was seen as a key driver of security, based on the assumption that a robust economy would keep young men in the workforce and out of the insurgency, create confidence in the government, and generate revenues that would enable the Afghan government to deliver services and mitigate its dependency on foreign donors.[331]

However, the theory that economic and social development programing could produce such outcomes had weak empirical foundations. As far back as 2010, a report summarizing expert views concluded that there was "a surprisingly weak evidence base for the effectiveness of aid in promoting stabilization and security objectives."[332] Referring to this and several other studies, a 2011 Senate Foreign Relations Committee report echoed this conclusion. The Senate report stated, "The evidence that stabilization programs promote stability in Afghanistan is limited. Some research suggests the opposite, and development best practices question the efficacy of using aid as a stabilization tool over the long run."[333] Multiple subject matter experts and U.S. officials doubted the effectiveness of service delivery in the absence of good security and governance, based on their research or observations.[334] As Scott Guggenheim, former senior advisor to President Ghani, told SIGAR, "Building latrines does not make you love Ashraf Ghani."[335]

Attempts to use economic and social development to achieve security and stability effects faced several problems. First, the Taliban directly benefitted from the very development projects that were supposed to marginalize them. Diversion of U.S. funds to the insurgency was sometimes characterized as an "open secret" of the reconstruction and warfighting efforts in Afghanistan. Media reports in 2009 and 2010 alleged that the Taliban siphoned off a proportion of U.S. funds spent on contracts. One report described the existence of a Kabul-based Taliban "contracts officer" who negotiated with major Afghan contractors for a percentage of the

[329] Matthieu Aikins, "After Quick Victory, Taliban Find Governing Harder," *New York Times*, September 1, 2021.

[330] Gailani, SIGAR interview, January 15, 2022.

[331] SIGAR, The Risk of Doing the Wrong Thing Perfectly, SIGAR 21-41-LL, pp. 37–38.

[332] Wilton Park Conference Report, *Winning Hearts and Minds in Afghanistan: Assessing the Effectiveness of Development Aid in COIN Operations*, March, 2010, p. 1.

[333] Committee on Foreign Relations, S.Prt. 112-21, *Evaluating U.S. Foreign Assistance to Afghanistan* (2011), pp. 2, 8–10.

[334] S.Prt. 112-21, *Evaluating U.S. Foreign Assistance to Afghanistan*; Murtazashvili, "The Collapse of Afghanistan," pp. 40–54; Bing West, *The Wrong War: Grit, Strategy and the Way Out of Afghanistan* (New York: Random House, 2012), p. 250; Michael Martin, Visiting Research Fellow, King's College London, SIGAR interview, January 12, 2022; Omar Sadr, former assistant professor at the American University of Afghanistan, SIGAR interview, December 13, 2021; Guggenheim, SIGAR interview, November 23, 2021; Mason, SIGAR interview, February 7, 2022; Murtazashvili, SIGAR interview, December 9, 2021; McKinley, SIGAR interview, February 18, 2022; Neumann, SIGAR interview, February 1, 2022; Bolger, SIGAR interview, September 8, 2021; Patrick Fine, former USAID Mission Director for Afghanistan, SIGAR interview, February 3, 2022; Jackson, "U.S. Strategy in Afghanistan," p. 99.

[335] Guggenheim, SIGAR interview, November 23, 2021.

value of contracts funded by donors. A USAID Office of Inspector General review prompted by this and other allegations found that Afghan subcontractors working on USAID's $349 million Local Governance and Community Development project, which aimed to foster political, economic, and social development in communities in insecure areas, may have used USAID funds to pay Taliban insurgents up to 20 percent of the total value of subcontracts. In exchange, the Taliban promised not to attack subcontractor personnel. Interviews indicated that subcontractors often recouped the funds paid to insurgents by including the amount of anticipated protection payments in the total cost of subcontracts.[336] Then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton testified before Congress in 2009 that "one of the major sources of funding for the Taliban is the protection money."[337]

Benefits to the Taliban were not always so direct. Short-term stabilization projects aimed to help "legitimate" authorities "peaceably manage conflict and prevent a resurgence of violence."[338] But one perverse finding arising from a study examining the effects of several USAID stabilization programs was that in some areas, support for the Taliban actually increased. USAID viewed education and health service delivery as a way to generate "increased confidence in the legitimacy and effectiveness of the [Afghan] government" that, in turn, would "foster stability." But the moral imperative to deliver education and health care also applied in Taliban-controlled areas—where the Taliban took credit for outcomes funded by U.S. dollars. A 2017 World Bank report found that some Taliban were simply co-opting Afghan government schools, rather than attacking or closing them as they had done in the past. The Bank also described instances where insurgents actually protected health services. In the words of one of the Bank's informants, "Ambulances can easily travel around [in Wardak Province], because the Taliban and militants [also] need health services." Ashley Jackson summarized the key dynamic: "The Taliban leadership realized that instead of attacking government schools and aid projects, it could gain much more by co-opting them. In doing so, it could take credit for providing services and win over the local population."[339] Unlike the coalition-assisted Afghan government, which promised everything but did a poor job of delivering anything, the Taliban strategically managed expectations according to what they knew they could deliver (or would allow others to deliver).[340] As one former State official told us, Taliban governance competed with the Afghan government only in limited dimensions and "therefore [was] able to be more focused and arguably … more effective in doing what they said they were going to do."[341]

Even where projects did not inadvertently increase support for the Taliban, unintended consequences could exacerbate local conflict. Standard U.S. counterinsurgency doctrine reflected the belief that "political, social, and economic programs are usually more valuable than conventional military operations in addressing the root causes of conflict."[342] But some programs risked exacerbating local conflicts. Even a "successful" project could inadvertently benefit one powerbroker or interest group at the expense of another, stoking local conflicts and creating an opportunity for insurgents to form an alliance with the disaffected party. As Mike Martin, a former British Army officer and fluent Pashto speaker, told us in colorful but no uncertain terms, running a successful project in one community could create a situation in which "you've got another village over there now that's thinking, 'Well, why the f— didn't we get that?' … You're creating jealousy and possibly increasing levels of conflict."[343]

Still another issue involved incentives. Many projects lacked mechanisms that would induce support for the Afghan government: The benefits of a public infrastructure project, such as a road or electricity, could not be

[336] SIGAR, The Risk of Doing the Wrong Thing Perfectly, SIGAR 21-41-LL, p. 57.

[337] *Afghanistan: Assessing the Road Ahead*, Before the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, 111th Cong., p. 48 (December 3, 2009) (testimony of Hillary Clinton, U.S. Secretary of State).

[338] SIGAR, Stabilization, SIGAR 18-48-LL, p. 6.

[339] SIGAR, The Risk of Doing the Wrong Thing Perfectly, SIGAR 21-41-LL, pp. 57–58; 245–246.

[340] SIGAR, Stabilization, SIGAR 18-48-LL, p. 180.

[341] Miller, SIGAR interview, January 21, 2022.

[342] SIGAR, The Risk of Doing the Wrong Thing Perfectly, SIGAR 21-41-LL, p. 124.

[343] Martin, SIGAR interview, January 12, 2022.

limited only to those who supported the government. A Taliban-supporting Afghan civilian had no motivation to change his or her allegiance because using a USAID-funded clinic or a U.S. military-funded road was not restricted by one's loyalty.[344] But although coalition-aligned forces did not limit access, the Taliban did. In contested territory, the Taliban attacked projects or the people using them, rendering them useless; in Taliban-controlled areas, the local population could negotiate—albeit in a very limited capacity—with the Taliban to access such services. As described above, the Taliban could then claim credit for allowing services to function.[345]

Both U.S. officials and non-government-affiliated researchers have observed that although a service delivery project might have given a local population a better quality of life, it had little impact on their propensity to approve of—or, more critically, actively support—the government.[346] As former Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Central Asia, Colin Jackson, observed in 2017,

> In theory, the provision of public goods and services and jobs should have decreased incentives for resistance and increased incentives for collaboration. In practice, small projects and cash outlays bought information and rented short-term cooperation. Over the longer run, the reciprocity norm seldom held.[347]

Former Ambassador McKinley noted, "It wasn't that everyone, including conservative rural populations, didn't appreciate services …. But that didn't seem to change their views."[348] As Chris Mason, of the U.S. Army War College told us, "This idea … that if you build a road or a hospital or a school, people will then come on board and support the government—there's no evidence of that occurring anywhere since 1945, in any internal conflict. It doesn't work."[349]

Monitoring and Evaluation Were Poor

U.S. goals for Afghanistan were anything but modest. The Afghanistan Freedom Support Act of 2002 declared U.S. support for a democratic, "broad-based, multi-ethnic, gender-sensitive, and fully representative government in Afghanistan." That formulation, or something like it, would be repeated by various U.S. strategy documents over the next two decades. As recently as November 2020, only 9 months before the collapse of the Afghan government, State's Integrated Country Strategy (ICS) said that a key goal was moving Afghanistan closer to a "stable, democratic, and accountable" ideal. But while the 2020 ICS sought to bring Afghanistan more in line with the end state that was initially imagined, it also painted a bleak picture: the Afghan public was "increasingly skeptical of the government's commitment to respect the rule of law, address corruption, and appoint senior-level officials based on merit rather than personal allegiance."[350]

Although State's ICS may have articulated an ideal, in reality, these goals were not always achievable or realistic. Yet over the years, as we reported in our July 2021 lessons-learned report on monitoring and

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[344] West, *The Wrong War*, p. 250.

[345] Fine, SIGAR interview, February 3, 2022; Malkasian, SIGAR interview, December 14, 2021; SIGAR, The Risk of Doing the Wrong Thing Perfectly, SIGAR 21-41-LL, pp. 57–58.

[346] S.Prt. 112-21, *Evaluating U.S. Foreign Assistance to Afghanistan*; Murtazashvili, "The Collapse of Afghanistan," pp. 40–54; West, *The Wrong War*, p. 250; Martin, SIGAR interview, January 12, 2022; Sadr, SIGAR interview, December 13, 2021; Guggenheim, SIGAR interview, November 23, 2021; Mason, SIGAR interview, February 7, 2022; Murtazashvili, SIGAR interview, December 9, 2021; McKinley, SIGAR interview, February 18, 2022; Neumann, SIGAR interview, February 1, 2022; Bolger, SIGAR interview, September 8, 2021; Fine, SIGAR interview, February 3, 2022; Jackson, "U.S. Strategy in Afghanistan," p. 99.

[347] Jackson, "U.S. Strategy in Afghanistan," p. 99.

[348] McKinley, SIGAR interview, February 18, 2022.

[349] Mason, SIGAR interview, February 7, 2022.

[350] Afghanistan Freedom Support Act of 2002, Pub. L. No. 107-327, 22 U.S.C. § 7511 (2002); State, "Integrated Country Strategy" (Reviewed and Updated November 15, 2020), pp. 3, 5.

evaluation, assertions of success were a recurring theme.[351] A prison system program was contributing to Afghanistan's stability. Power-sector projects were contributing to the counterinsurgency effort. The Commander's Emergency Response Program was a vital tool; trade shows were increasing Afghanistan's exports.[352]

That claims could be advanced so often without sufficient evidence was indicative of the overwhelming political hunger for quick successes in a country that could not, or would not, be easily or quickly transformed. Serious efforts to monitor and evaluate how well U.S. programs actually helped achieve strategic goals in Afghanistan were an inevitable casualty of this flood of optimism. At times, the problem extended from the implementation level all the way up reporting chains to the Congress, where, as the SIGAR, John Sopko, expressed, "We have incentivized lying to Congress and by that, I mean the whole incentive is to show success and to ignore the failure and when there's too much failure, classify it, or don't report it."[353]

In some cases, inaccurate and incomplete information was published for public and official use. For example, seemingly unprecedented improvements to life expectancy and maternal mortality turned out to be based on faulty data. Similarly, school enrollment figures were misleading given that enrollments were not equivalent to actual attendance.[354] More importantly, metrics used to gauge the effectiveness of health and education programs were not always relevant to the broader political goal. Even if school attendance rates for girls increased or maternal mortality rates dropped, it was unclear whether those metrics were an accurate proxy for measuring the legitimacy of the Afghan government.[355]

Another problem was the use of overly simple metrics that actually obscured reality. The conceptually useful metric of district control became one first-order measure of how U.S. reconstruction efforts were proceeding. But presenting this data in simplistic color-coded maps masked considerable nuance, such as the presence of a single ANDSF compound in the middle of a district otherwise controlled by the Taliban.[356] Data experts have questioned whether district stability assessments were ever methodologically sound, with one expert we interviewed dismissing the assessments as "just the opinion of an analyst, and then commanders would often change the colors based on their personal sentiments."[357] Another analyst discovered at one point that there was a significant discrepancy between ANDSF and U.S. territorial assessments—because, while the Afghans generally had a better understanding of a given territory, the red-amber-green color coding held no particular meaning in a country with no traffic lights.[358]

In many cases, numbers mattered even more than colors. The attractiveness of health and education metrics can be explained, in part, by their quantifiability. For example, counting children enrolled in school and assessing changes in life expectancy and maternal mortality boiled progress down to numbers. A common assumption in U.S. monitoring and evaluation was that quantitative indicators were inherently more rigorous

[351] "Monitoring and evaluation" is the attempt to objectively determine whether a reconstruction program achieved its intended outcomes. SIGAR, The Risk of Doing the Wrong Thing Perfectly, SIGAR 21-41-LL, p. 7.

[352] The Commander's Emergency Response Program (CERP) provided field commanders with funding to implement urgent reconstruction projects to reduce violence and improve the legitimacy of the Afghan government. SIGAR, The Risk of Doing the Wrong Thing Perfectly, SIGAR 21-41-LL, pp. 113, 177.

[353] John F. Sopko, "U.S. Lessons Learned in Afghanistan," testimony before the Committee on Foreign Affairs, 116th Congress, January 15, 2020, ep. 42.

[354] SIGAR, The Risk of Doing the Wrong Thing Perfectly, SIGAR 21-41-LL, pp. 46–47, 66, 174, 177–178, 281.

[355] SIGAR, The Risk of Doing the Wrong Thing Perfectly, SIGAR 21-41-LL, p. 178.

[356] Mason, SIGAR interview, February 7, 2022; SIGAR, The Risk of Doing the Wrong Thing Perfectly, SIGAR 21-41-LL, pp. 151–152, 280.

[357] Connable, SIGAR interview, December 28, 2021.

[358] While the exact terminology shifted over the years, the color scheme for territorial assessment maps used red for areas of insurgent control, influence, or activity; amber for contested areas; and green for areas that were secure or under government control. This reflects the red-amber-green color scheme used in traffic lights. Kyle Pizzey, former ISAF civilian branch chief for data, SIGAR interview, January 14, 2022; SIGAR, The Risk of Doing the Wrong Thing Perfectly, SIGAR 21-41-LL, pp. 153, 282.

and desirable than qualitative ones. [359] However, quantitative data was not always employed in informed ways. Several experts familiar with the ways in which quantitative data was used in Afghanistan critiqued an overreliance on such data and the dismissal of qualitative reporting.[360] For example, military decision makers relied heavily on significant activity (SIGACT) data, a metric meant to capture all incidents of violence against U.S. and coalition forces. But the databases recording SIGACTs were significantly flawed or incomplete, and lacked explanations of who had carried out a violent act or what their motivation might be.[361] A drop in SIGACTs in a given territory could indicate that U.S. forces had full control of the area—or it could indicate that they had left. Without qualitative information to interpret the data, quantitative data could easily be misconstrued.[362] One expert, describing increasingly byzantine assessments, told SIGAR, "We quantified our way to defeat."[363]

Moreover, measurability was not always synonymous with efficacy. Easily measured inputs and outputs were often substituted for harder-to-define measures of actual impact. Although there were some exceptions, inputs and outputs were emphasized at the expense of impact. The most infamous example was the use of the burn rate—the rate at which money was being spent—as an indicator of effectiveness. The term was often used to describe a phenomenon in which agencies and implementing partners focused more on spending money than on delivering results. But equating burn rate to success resulted in projects that poured money into a fragile environment with no concept of whether those projects achieved any actual goals or even necessarily where the money was going.[364] As a World Bank report on Afghanistan's post-2014 economic and political transition observed, pouring aid dollars into Afghanistan actually contributed to waste and corruption.[365]

None of these criticisms should be read as a glib attempt to diminish the difficulty of assessing effectiveness in a complex environment like Afghanistan, where numerous confounding variables can present significant obstacles to effective monitoring and evaluation. Nevertheless, it was crucial to exert reasonable efforts to measure progress. Unfortunately, as implemented, monitoring and evaluation too often created the risk of doing the wrong thing perfectly, creating a situation in which projects that met contracted deliverables and performance-indicator targets could be considered "successful," whether or not they had achieved or contributed to broader, more important strategic goals. In the end, pressure to demonstrate gains discouraged a candid assessment of progress towards outcomes and impacts, and led to overly positive reporting.

The United States Adhered to a Simplistic Conflict Narrative That Failed to Appreciate the Complexity of Afghanistan's Political Economy

Ignorance of prevailing social, cultural, and political contexts in Afghanistan was a significant contributing factor to failures at the strategic, operational, and tactical levels. As a consequence of incomplete information, planners sometimes made bold assumptions about the country, many of which turned out to be incorrect. For example, an emphasis on counterinsurgency accompanied by a significant troop surge in Afghanistan in 2009 was based on a similar approach in Iraq, which policymakers had concluded led to significant improvement there. The U.S. military's advocacy of the surge was part of a broader pattern of assertions that success was achievable if only resources and strategies were adjusted.[366] But whatever successes that resulted were

[359] SIGAR, The Risk of Doing the Wrong Thing Perfectly, SIGAR 21-41-LL, pp. 177, 280.

[360] Connable, SIGAR interview, December 28, 2021; Daniel Egel, senior economist at RAND Corporation, SIGAR interview, December 20, 2021; Pizzey, SIGAR interview, January 14, 2022; Jonathan Schroden, Director of the Countering Threats and Challenges Program at CNA, SIGAR interview, November 16, 2021.

[361] Egel, SIGAR interview, December 20, 2021; Connable, SIGAR interview, December 28, 2021; SIGAR, The Risk of Doing the Wrong Thing Perfectly, SIGAR 21-41-LL, pp. 134, 280.

[362] One data expert told SIGAR that measuring kinetic events like SIGACTs without context led to joking that the solution was, "I'll go home. There will be no events." Pizzey, SIGAR interview, January 14, 2022.

[363] Connable, SIGAR interview, December 28. 2021.

[364] SIGAR, The Risk of Doing the Wrong Thing Perfectly, SIGAR 21-41-LL, p. 68.

[365] World Bank, *Afghanistan in Transition: Looking Beyond 2014*, May 2012, pp. 47, 109.

[366] SIGAR, Stabilization, SIGAR 18-48-LL, p. 21, 26; SIGAR, What We Need to Learn, SIGAR 21-46-LL, p. 71.

"washed away," in the words of Afghanistan expert Carter Malkasian, who concluded that it would have been better "never to have surged at all."[367]

One explanation for the surge's failure was its compressed timeline. A deeper problem, as articulated by counterinsurgency expert Christian Tripodi, was the failure of U.S. counterinsurgency doctrine, which conceptualized the conflict as a binary contest between insurgent and counterinsurgent for the support of the people. Slotting Afghanistan's many local political economies into roles of either "good" allies supporting the nascent state, or "bad" enemies opposing it, ignored the complex power dynamics and conflicts foundational to those political structures. Tripodi writes,

> What emerged as a consequence was a theory of victory that not only accorded with the requirement for a light-footprint and time-limited commitment, but also aligned with a set of core liberal beliefs relating to the curative effects of democracy, the enhancement of human rights, and the pacifying effects of social, economic and governmental reform.[368]

There was also the clear desire of President Bush's administration "to get rid of the Taliban very quickly," said Afghanistan scholar Kate Clark of the Afghanistan Analysts Network. Clark described the resulting post 9/11 framework as "this sort of strange idea that you could split Afghans into good and bad, black and white, Taliban and anti-Taliban, and the anti-Taliban were good guys and the Taliban were bad guys." This was, Clark said, "such a misreading of a very complex country that it was bound to cause problems," not the least of those being alliances of convenience with "men and factions with really severe war crimes allegations against them."[369] Early U.S. support for warlords helped to empower a class of strongmen at the local and national levels whose anti-Taliban sentiments by no means translated into support for democratic ideals, in general, or the U.S.-supported Afghan government, in particular. As we noted in our August 2021 report, *What We Need to Learn*, some of these strongmen had been deposed by the Taliban to widespread applause.[370]

Another cognitive mistake was U.S. policymakers' view of the Taliban as a monolithic entity, inextricably linked to terrorism against American civilians solely because of its refusal to turn over Osama bin Laden in the aftermath of 9/11.[371] As former President Bush wrote in his memoir, "radical mullahs offered sanctuary to Osama bin Laden …. In return, bin Laden drew on his personal fortune to fund the Taliban. By 9/11, Afghanistan was not only a state sponsor of terror, but a state sponsored by terror."[372] Yet even before 9/11, the Taliban were a global pariah due to their harsh disregard for human rights. After 9/11 and their removal from power, they were excluded from the Bonn Conference and barred from any legitimate participation in Afghan politics. Malkasian writes, "A conference for a political settlement without one of the most important parties seems to have struck no one as odd."[373] In hindsight, several U.S. officials now agree that this exclusion was a mistake: the Taliban, though militarily defeated and removed from power, maintained politically significant popular support in some regions of the country.[374] Former deputy national security advisor for Iraq and Afghanistan Douglas Lute told SIGAR that this exclusion "set the fuse … that essentially slowly burned towards the fall of Kabul in August 2021."[375]

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[367] Malkasian, *The American War in Afghanistan*, ep. 548.

[368] Christian Tripodi, *The Unknown Enemy: Counterinsurgency and the Illusion of Control* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2021), p. 172.

[369] Clark, SIGAR interview, January 7, 2022.

[370] SIGAR, What We Need to Learn, SIGAR 21-46-LL, p. 73.

[371] Malkasian, *The American War in Afghanistan*, epp. 74–75; Lute, SIGAR interview, January 13, 2022.

[372] Bush, *Decision Points*, p. 187.

[373] Malkasian, *The American War in Afghanistan*, epp. 66, 87.

[374] Barno, SIGAR interview, January 11, 2022; Lute, SIGAR interview, January 13, 2022; McKinley, SIGAR interview, February 18, 2022.

[375] Lute, SIGAR interview, January 13, 2022.

But at the time, any hint of association with the Taliban would have been politically impossible. As former President Bush writes, "We had liberated the country from a primitive dictatorship, and we had a moral obligation to leave behind something better."[376] Malkasian notes, "After October 2001, there are no known U.S. attempts to talk with Taliban leaders until the Obama administration." Even then, negotiations were unceremoniously derailed by the Taliban's decision to fly its flag over a newly-established "office" in Doha, Qatar, which looked more like an embassy and was conspicuously marked by a sign identifying the "Islamic Emirate," rather than the "Taliban movement" terminology preferred by Afghan and American officials. An eventual U.S.-Taliban agreement was not signed until nearly two decades into the war.[377]

In the meantime, the United States was busy trying to outcompete the insurgency by employing the theory that it could increase trust in the legitimacy of the Afghan government by helping it provide more services to Afghan citizens—or, as Tripodi puts it, "that more government is better government."[378] One of the ways the United States aimed to extend governance was through the provision of services. The primary services the Taliban had occasionally provided since 2001 were physical security and dispute resolution. Yet, it was widely assumed that to compete with the Taliban for the allegiance of the population, Afghans would need access to high-quality government services pushed down from centralized ministries. Instead of using the Taliban offerings as a baseline for the government's own value proposition, the coalition tried to build soaring institutions that the Afghan government was unprepared to manage or sustain. "We did what we know how to do, not what needed to be done," said former senior State advisor Barnett Rubin. "We build bureaucracies, so that's what we did."[379]

Even within dispute resolution, the United States chose to focus on formal, rather than informal, rule of law. The outcomes of the more informal Taliban-run processes may not have always delivered what the United States would consider to be just and equitable outcomes, but the path to those outcomes was much quicker and more familiar to many Afghans than the U.S.-sponsored system. In contrast, the formal court system established through foreign intervention was slow, corrupt, and foreign to Afghans used to traditional community-level dispute resolution mechanisms. But advocating for traditional dispute resolution to compete with the Taliban would have put the United States dangerously close to endorsing outcomes that would have violated Western norms of human rights, and that would have been politically untenable to Americans. U.S. officials chose to pursue a vision for Afghanistan's justice system that reflected American values and preferences, without sufficient regard for what was practical or possible. As Rubin observed, "Trying to compete with the Taliban's successful dispute resolution would have meant allowing *sharia*, and that's not something we could do politically."[380]

As the Afghan state solidified, formalized, and expanded into more and more territory, it met apathy and opposition in the most remote, rural areas. Barfield told us that rural Afghans had their own value system to maintain and "they're actually willing to let you do what you want, but keep it out of their backyard."[381] Many rural Afghans did not want the reach of formal government to be extended because it was traditionally foreign to them, and it rapidly became unpredictable and predatory. American advisors, practitioners, and coalition partners inadvertently contributed to the predatory behaviors their local allies committed because, confronted by a social and political environment they did not understand, they relied on these same allies for information and insights. In the rush to establish and extend a government allied to the United States, these abuses—which included torture, summary execution, and child sexual abuse—were often missed or ignored. Instead, Afghans

[376] Bush, *Decision Points*, p. 205.

[377] Malkasian, *The American War in Afghanistan*, epp. 124, 378, 537.

[378] Tripodi, *The Unknown Enemy*, p. 172.

[379] SIGAR, Stabilization, SIGAR 18-48-LL, pp. 156.

[380] SIGAR, Stabilization, SIGAR 18-48-LL, p. 157; SIGAR, What We Need to Learn, SIGAR 21-46-LL, pp. 74–75.

[381] Barfield, SIGAR interview, February 9, 2022.

who opposed the government were often assumed to be supporters of the Taliban, rather than citizens attempting to raise legitimate grievances.[382]

The journalist Wesley Morgan describes one example of government opposition that did not begin as support for the Taliban, but which ended up there. The people of the Pech Valley in Kunar Province had little connection to the Taliban before 9/11, and held some early positive interactions with U.S. troops. But when then-President Karzai outlawed logging in 2002 (due to unsubstantiated environmental concerns raised by international environmental organizations and then-finance minister Ashraf Ghani), and U.S. forces maintained a presence in the area which enforced this ban, the decision destroyed the only significant industry in the region. At the same time, the United States and Afghan government co-opted several local strongmen as allies in the fight against al-Qaeda—unaware that these individuals had historically been involved in buying, transporting, and selling felled timber (which was still technically legal), and were extorting the now-criminalized local loggers. The insurgency that arose in Kunar's minor valleys was initially rooted in this grievance, compounded by a general suspicion of outsiders. Unaware of this economic context, American military officers assumed that anyone attacking them must be Taliban, and responded accordingly. Within a few years, a group of locals trying to protect their economic interests had battled with American troops several times, asked the Taliban for help, worked out an arrangement with them, and were ultimately absorbed into them. To a population victimized by edicts from a far-off government, extortionary strongmen, and U.S. soldiers, the Taliban were the only ally willing to protect their interests.[383]

Mike Martin, a former British Army officer described briefing a general on disentangling similar situations in Helmand:

> I told him, this is a total f--- up. Everyone thinks it's government [versus] Taliban, but actually, here's what's driving the conflict, it's land and water [that] always comes up. And we went on and on …. [I said] look here, we got manipulated because we didn't understand it. And over here, it's about drugs …. By the end of it, he had his head in his hands … and he said, "Oh God. … I had a suspicion that this was what was going on, but every day, I read documents about Afghanistan and it's about the official narratives of the conflict, right? It's about how we're making progress in these metrics, and girls in schools, and it's government [versus] Taliban.[384]

In the end, official narratives framed state-based progress against an anti-state regression, with little understanding of cultural and social nuance. Expanding the state into previously remote and autonomous areas was a driving force behind 20 years of conflict—without any critical examination of what harm some policy might be doing to a local population, if specific projects were actually wanted, or how some initiatives, such as high school education for girls, might in some areas violate established traditions. One interviewee, discussing the narrative framework of progress, stated that she now "reject[s] the progress-regression thing," noting that people progress towards what they value, and many Afghans valued different things than Americans.[385] American policymakers, as well as many urban and expatriate Afghans, simply could not conceive of a situation where the Taliban were preferable to the Western promise of a liberal democracy.

Some Progress was Made before the Collapse of the Afghan Government

The rapid disintegration of Afghan security forces and the Ghani administration in August 2021 represented the dramatic conclusion of a two-decade, U.S.-led effort to develop and westernize Afghan society. That ambitious endeavor included not only strengthening the capacity of the Afghan government directly, but also

[382] SIGAR, Stabilization, SIGAR 18-48-LL, p. 154.

[383] Wesley Morgan, *The Hardest Place: The American Military Adrift in Afghanistan's Pech Valley* (New York: Random House, 2021), pp. 76–82.

[384] Martin, SIGAR interview, January 12, 2022.

[385] Murtazashvili, SIGAR interview, December 9, 2021.

improving Afghanistan's economy, constructing infrastructure, supporting Afghan media, bolstering the health and education sectors, and even altering gender relations. The constellation of programs that U.S. government agencies aimed at these sectors would—according to their designers' thinking—foster legitimacy and popular support for the Afghan government, and, thereby, stabilize the country.[386]

Although the ultimate failure of those efforts is undeniable, it is also clear that the time and money the international community committed to Afghanistan over the course of a generation achieved some semblance of change. Certain aspects of those changes were fleeting, but others may endure, at least in the short term. Reflecting on the changes of the last 20 years, former Afghanistan Minister of Interior Ali Jalali told us that the Taliban government "is running on inertia" that will continue for some unknown period of time.[387]

Health, Education, and Human Capital Were Among the Most Durable Gains

Perhaps the best-known areas of progress in Afghanistan were in the health and education sectors.[388] In 2013, in response to our request to provide a list of their 10 most successful reconstruction projects, State and USAID cited advances in public health, including the increased availability of basic health services and primary healthcare facilities, more trained healthcare workers, improved life expectancy, and reduced childhood and maternal mortality.[389] USAID pointed out that these gains were achieved by focusing on the main causes of morbidity and mortality in a country that had some of the worst baseline health indicators in the world.[390] However, even after achieving those notable improvements, Afghanistan still struggled to contain outbreaks of treatable diseases due to relatively poor access to healthcare services by international standards.[391] Furthermore, as we have highlighted in the past, the accuracy of health data in Afghanistan is subject to significant limitations, particularly benchmark data from the early years of the reconstruction effort.[392] These limitations notwithstanding, it still appears that Afghanistan has made significant progress in key health indicators since 2001.[393]

As in the health sector, education in Afghanistan showed rapid and dramatic improvements over the last two decades, although, again, progress was measured from a low benchmark and data limitations obscure the exact magnitude of the gains.[394] According to USAID, in 2002, an estimated 900,000 boys attended school in Afghanistan, and practically no girls.[395] As we noted in 2021, a quality education for Afghanistan's young people—more than 40 percent of the country's population are below age 14—represents a long-term investment in the country's human capital.[396] Indeed, the exponential increase in the number of young people attending school over the last generation translated into what appears to be dramatic increases in literacy

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386 SIGAR, The Risk of Doing the Wrong Thing Perfectly, SIGAR 21-41-LL, pp. 38, 137.

387 Jalali, SIGAR interview, April 15, 2022.

388 SIGAR, Support for Gender Equality, SIGAR-21-18-LL, p. i; *Afghanistan in Review: Oversight of U.S. Spending in Afghanistan*, Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Government Affairs, Subcommittee on Federal Spending Oversight and Emergency Management, 115th Cong., p. 3 (May 9, 2018) (Statement of Laurel E. Miller, The RAND Corporation); Justin Sandefur, "Here's the Best Thing the U.S. Has Done in Afghanistan," *The Atlantic*, October 10, 2013.

389 USAID and State, correspondence with SIGAR, May 9, 2013, pp. 2–3.

390 SIGAR, Quarterly Report, SIGAR-2021-QR-1, p. 149.

391 SIGAR, Quarterly Report, SIGAR-2021-QR-1, p. 149.

392 SIGAR, The Risk of Doing the Wrong Thing Perfectly, SIGAR 21-41-LL, pp. 46–47.

393 SIGAR, Quarterly Report, SIGAR-2019-QR-4, p. 155.

394 For example, as we have previously reported, figures for the number of children and youth in school varied widely. Afghan government enrollment data could not be used to determine attendance rates directly because Afghanistan's Ministry of Education counted students who had been absent for up to 3 years as enrolled under the premise that they may return to school. USAID and State, correspondence with SIGAR, May 9, 2013, pp. 1–2; SIGAR, Quarterly Report, SIGAR-2017-QR-4, p. 209; SIGAR, Quarterly Report, SIGAR-2019-QR-4, p. 152.

395 USAID and State, correspondence with SIGAR, May 9, 2013, p. 1.

396 SIGAR, Quarterly Report, SIGAR-2021-QR-1, p. 144.

rates, including 28.3 points for males ages 15–24, and 19.1 points for females of the same age.[397] Improved literacy rates may be one of the most enduring and impactful achievements of the last 20 years.

Beyond public education and literacy, the United States and its international partners made concerted efforts to develop the human capital and institutional capacity of various Afghan government organizations. In both the public and private sectors, the combination of available opportunities and the training and educational opportunities provided by the United States and its international partners led to increased human capital and institutional capacity. Capacity building was imperfect but yielded some positive results.[398] Within the Ministry of Mines and Petroleum (MOMP), for example, USAID's efforts to build capacity had mixed results and were hindered by structural barriers and a lack of commitment from Afghan counterparts.[399] On the other hand, the Ministry for Rural Rehabilitation and Development (MRRD) has been cited as a model of successful capacity-building in Afghanistan.[400] Another bright spot in the capacity building effort appears to have been the Ministry of Finance, where USAID and the U.S. Department of the Treasury provided substantial financial, technical, and political support.[401]

Yet, despite some success in building Ministry of Finance capacity, Afghanistan's recent history of revenue collection and financial management is mixed. One year after State and USAID characterized public financial management and revenue collection as a success story of U.S. programming in Afghanistan, the country experienced a sudden and dramatic budgetary shortfall that required a bailout from donors, including the U.S. government.[402] The 2014 bailout should be considered in context, though. As previously noted, even under normal circumstances, the Afghan government's operating budget was largely derived from donors: According to the World Bank, donor grants were equivalent to 52.06 percent of the country's 2020 expenditures, while domestic revenues were equivalent to 39.79 percent.[403] Including off-budget (that is, U.S.-managed) assistance, the proportion of donor financing climbed to almost 80 percent, as we reported in our *2021 High-Risk List*.[404]

Women's Rights, Foreign Investment, and Economic Growth Were Fleeting Achievements

Another perceived success in Afghanistan was the suite of programs designed to alter the role of women in Afghan society. In 2021, before the collapse of the Afghan government, we documented the significant gains women experienced in Afghanistan under the U.S.-supported government, including educational attainment, reduced maternal mortality, participation in the workforce and civil society, and occupying public office.[405] However, unlike the more durable gains in literacy, many of the new roles for women in Afghan society have been reversed easily by the Taliban, who have imposed new restrictions on women's ability to participate in public life.[406] In March 2022, the Taliban declined to open schools for girls beyond the sixth grade, and in May 2022, they ordered women to cover themselves from head-to-toe while in public.[407]

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[397] SIGAR, Support for Gender Equality, SIGAR-21-18-LL, p. 64.

[398] SIGAR, *Private Sector Development and Economic Growth: Lessons from the U.S. Experience in Afghanistan*, SIGAR 18-38-LL, April 19, 2018, p. 179.

[399] SIGAR, *Afghanistan's Oil, Gas, and Minerals Industries: $488 Million in U.S. Efforts Show Limited Progress, and Challenges Prevent Further Investment and Growth*, SIGAR -16-11-AR, January 11, 2016, pp. i, 7, 11.

[400] Frauke de Weijer, "Capacity Building in MRRD: A Success Story," Afghanistan Analysts Network, July 2012, p. 1.

[401] SIGAR, Private Sector Development and Economic Growth, SIGAR 18-38-LL, p. 74.

[402] SIGAR, Quarterly Report, SIGAR-2017-QR-4, p. 186.

[403] World Bank, *Afghanistan Development Update: Setting Course to Recovery*, April 2021, p. 35.

[404] SIGAR, 2021 High-Risk List, SIGAR 21-22-HRL, p. 2.

[405] SIGAR, Support for Gender Equality, SIGAR-21-18-LL, p. xi.

[406] SIGAR, *Quarterly Report to the United States Congress,* SIGAR-2022-QR-2, April 30, 2022, pp. 63, 79–80; Margherita Stancati and Esmatullah Kohsar, "Taliban Orders Women to Cover Their Faces," *Wall Street Journal*, May 7, 2022.

[407] SIGAR, Quarterly Report, SIGAR-2022-QR-2, p. i; Stancati and Kohsar, "Taliban Orders Women to Cover Their Faces."

Another fleeting achievement was the increase in private sector investment and economic activity, which was meant to generate government revenue and enable the Afghan government to become self-sustaining.[408] Between 2001 and 2012, per capita income increased more than fivefold, from $117 in 2001 to a peak of $669 in 2012.[409] However, these economic gains were driven by a post-conflict recovery and lavish spending by the international community, and were therefore unsustainable.[410] Meanwhile, the country confronted a range of forces that undermined organic economic growth. These included poor roads that limited farmers' access to markets, inconsistent trade practices of neighboring countries, high transportation costs, land ownership disputes, and a notable lack of reliable and cheap power.[411]

But even though the dearth of reliable power in Afghanistan undermined economic activity, the country made significant advances in electrification (even if misleading data and the lack of performance indicators meant the extent of progress was unclear, as SIGAR has pointed out in past reports).[412] For example, USAID said that its assistance for hydroelectric and solar power development, along with support to the Afghan national power company, helped increase the share of Afghans with access to reliable electricity.[413] We reported in July 2021 that that figure was approximately 30 percent.[414]

Like advances in electrification, the Afghan media blossomed under the Western-backed government.[415] Ambassador Hugo Llorens, who served in Afghanistan from 2012–2013 and again from 2016–2017, observed that Afghanistan had perhaps the freest press in Central Asia during those periods.[416] However, the current Taliban government has already curtailed, though not eliminated, free press operations.[417]

For two decades, the international community, led by the United States, tried not only to reform wide-ranging aspects of Afghan society, but to develop formal institutions where none had existed before. The seeds of change that the United States sowed in Afghanistan may have generated some benefits in the areas of public health, education, human capital, and communications, but the effort to cultivate viable government institutions failed. As Ambassador Dobbins told SIGAR, "If you look at longevity, if you look at infant mortality, maternal mortality, and literacy, you all see that it has left an impact. Now, this impact may be swept away because all these people starve to death, but … Afghanistan has a more educated population [who are] more literate, more knowledgeable about the world."[418]

Residual Elements of the Afghan Government Still Exist and Are Functioning, Although Sustainability is Uncertain

The Islamic Republic of Afghanistan no longer exists but many of its government institutions still function under the Taliban. Running on "inertia" due to some amount of carryover from the prior government, the ministries of finance, health, economy, and education, among others, and the country's central bank, have continued to execute some basic functions.[419] At the same time, the Taliban have dissolved several ministries of the former

[408] SIGAR, Private Sector Development and Economic Growth, SIGAR 18-38-LL, p. 6.

[409] SIGAR, Private Sector Development and Economic Growth, SIGAR 18-38-LL, p. IX.

[410] SIGAR, Private Sector Development and Economic Growth, SIGAR 18-38-LL, p. 2.

[411] SIGAR, Private Sector Development and Economic Growth, SIGAR 18-38-LL, pp. XIII, 6, 163–164.

[412] SIGAR, The Risk of Doing the Wrong Thing Perfectly, SIGAR 21-41-LL, p. 3.

[413] USAID and State, correspondence with SIGAR, May 9, 2013, p. 4.

[414] SIGAR, Quarterly Report, SIGAR-2021-QR-3, p. 137.

[415] John F. Sopko, Remarks Prepared for Delivery, Atlantic Council, March 20, 2014.

[416] Llorens, SIGAR interview, April 29, 2022.

[417] Dobbins, SIGAR interview, April 20, 2022; Fereshta Abbasi, "Afghanistan's Taliban Crack Down on Vloggers," Human Rights Watch, June 14, 2022.

[418] Dobbins, SIGAR interview, April 20, 2022.

[419] SIGAR, Quarterly Report, SIGAR-2022-QR-1, pp. 110, 112, 121; SIGAR, Quarterly Report, SIGAR-2022-QR-2, pp. 81, 110–111; SIGAR, Quarterly Report, SIGAR-2021-QR-4, p. 136.

government, such as the Ministries for Peace and Parliamentary Affairs, and have replaced others, such as the Ministry of Women's Affairs, which has been supplanted by the Ministry for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice.[420] The Taliban face several administrative and technical challenges to keeping government institutions running. These include staffing shortfalls as former civil servants are either in hiding, have fled the country, or are prevented from returning to work due to the Taliban's restrictive policies regarding women; capacity challenges, in that many technocrats in leadership positions have been replaced by Taliban loyalists and some lower-level individuals have been moved up to work in positions beyond their level of competence; and uncertainties about the Taliban's ability to pay civil servants.

The Taliban are using systems and processes developed under the previous government to conduct some government functions. For example, former acting Minister of Finance Payenda told SIGAR that the Taliban's Ministry of Finance continues to use several information management systems carried over from the former government that international donors helped develop, including the Afghanistan Financial Management Information System, the Automated System for Customs Data, the State Budget Planning System, and the Standard Integrated Government Tax Administration System.[421] Payenda stated that the Taliban have used these systems to develop a quarterly budget and to collect taxes and customs revenue, and have taken measures to reduce instances of misdeclaration or miscalculations in weight, practices that occurred frequently under the customs systems used by the previous government.[422] Fieldwork conducted by Dr. David Mansfield, an independent consultant and expert on Afghanistan's drug trade, and Alcis, a UK-based Geographical Information Services company, suggests that since taking power, the Taliban have moved quickly to regulate and centralize revenue generation on cross-border trade. They have cracked down on corruption at the border by implementing rules established but "routinely ignored" under the Ghani administration, and disassembled the patronage system where powerbrokers siphoned off hundreds of millions of dollars in bribes each year on undeclared goods at border crossings and checkpoints.[423]

The Taliban have also maintained some functionality in the health and education sectors, despite significant funding and staffing shortfalls following the collapse. In our July 2022 quarterly report to Congress, we reported that a World Bank survey conducted in fall 2021 (October–December) found that improvements in the security situation had allowed access to health services to remain high, and overall school attendance was found to be at its highest point since at least 2014 for both boys and girls.[424] However, the Taliban's subsequent introduction of varying restrictions and barriers on women's access to secondary and tertiary education, health care, and freedom of movement may counteract improvements due to the security situation.[425]

The Taliban have even launched a major development project that was initially intended to be implemented under the previous government: construction began in March 2022 on the Qushtipa Water Canal, which aims to irrigate 500,000 hectares of land in three northern provinces.[426] That a development project of this scale could be launched by the current administration shows how much capacity remains in the government, said Ikram Afzali of Integrity Watch Afghanistan. Such a project would have taken the current Taliban government "5 to 10 years" to come up with, "even if they had all the right people in the right places," Afzali said. "That's a

[420] SIGAR, Quarterly Report, SIGAR-2022-QR-1, p. 95.

[421] Payenda, SIGAR interviews, March 22, 2022 and April 19, 2022.

[422] Payenda, SIGAR interview, April 19, 2022.

[423] David Mansfield and Alcis, "Changing the Rules of the Game: How the Taliban Regulated Cross-Border Trade and Upended Afghanistan's Political Economy," Cross-Border Conflict Evidence, Policy and Trends (XCEPT), July 13, 2022, p. 5.

[424] World Bank Group, "Afghanistan Welfare Monitoring Survey: Round 1," March 2022, pp. 2, 12–13; SIGAR, Quarterly Report, SIGAR-2022-QR-2, pp. 63–64.

[425] SIGAR, *Quarterly Report to the United States Congress*, SIGAR-2022-QR-3, July 30, 2022, pp. 6, 8; SIGAR, Quarterly Report, SIGAR-2022-QR-2, p. 80.

[426] USAID, press release, "Feasibility Study for Khush Tepa Irrigation Canal Ceremony Held," December 10, 2018; "Canal Project to Employ 200,000 People," TOLONews, March 30, 2022.

huge example of the capacity that has been created within the state, within the state institutions, to be able to launch such mega projects even under some very difficult circumstances."[427]

Some interviewees told SIGAR that the continued functioning of government ministries is due to the fact that many civil servants from the prior regime remain in their posts. The Taliban have installed their own members in many leadership positions, but have largely kept the lower-ranking civil servants in their jobs. Speaking to us in January 2022, journalist Charlotte Bellis recounted her experience engaging with government ministries since the collapse. "If you go to the government ministries now, yes, the head guy is so and so Haqqani, but the guy … who signs the paperwork is the same guy as was doing it in May [2021]. All those people are the same."[428] According to former Afghanistan Minister of Interior Ali Jalali, the Taliban "do not have the technical know-how to run government, so they left those government people there in the ministries. But they appointed their own mullahs at the top of every office."[429] Interviewees have pointed out that institutions such as the Ministry of Mines and Petroleum, Da Afghanistan Bank, and the Ministry of Finance are still functioning because of the technical or subject matter expertise that remains at lower levels—evidence, some observers say, that U.S. efforts to build governance capacity were successful to some extent. Patrick Fine, who served as USAID mission director for Afghanistan from 2004–2005, told SIGAR, "The continued functioning and resilience of most government institutions since the Taliban took control provides strong evidence that our efforts were more effective than even we believed."[430]

The sustainability of these residual elements of the Afghan government may depend, in part, on the Taliban's access to resources and outside support. Afzali contends that the Taliban's ability to sustain its current level of governmental operation may rely on continuation of some sort of support to these institutions. "I don't see [how] this would be possible without support from the U.S. agencies, USAID or others," he said in an interview with SIGAR. "Not just because of [U.S. donors'] financial resources, but also because of the knowledge of state building and institution building."[431] While many international donors have taken a wait-and-see approach to working with the Taliban on matters of foreign assistance, the UN has affirmed its commitment to engaging with the Taliban to provide life-saving assistance, sustain essential services, and preserve social investments and community-level systems.[432] It remains to be seen whether this level and type of assistance will be sufficient to keep government institutions afloat.

Decisions that the Taliban make about staffing may also affect the long-term sustainability of their governance efforts. If the Taliban continue to appoint political figures with little technical experience to leadership positions without investing in training, they may not be able to sustain even basic government functions. Some interviewees noted that Taliban officials have reached out to former Afghan ministers and asked them to join the Taliban government—in part, to retain their skills, and in part to establish legitimacy in the eyes of the international community.[433] To date, the Taliban have allowed some women to remain in government positions, particularly those in which they are expected to interact exclusively with women and girls, such as in health care and primary education. However, local Taliban authorities have reportedly required women to have a male guardian escort them to the office and during other work activities, to work in a separate room from their male colleagues, and to fully cover their faces or risk being fired from their posts.[434]

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[427] Afzali, SIGAR interview, April 1, 2022.

[428] Bellis, SIGAR interview, December 23, 2021.

[429] Jalali, SIGAR interview, April 15, 2022.

[430] Fine, email correspondence with SIGAR, April 11, 2022.

[431] Afzali, SIGAR interview, April 1, 2022.

[432] United Nations Development Programme, *Afghanistan: Socio-Economic Outlook 2001–2022: Averting a basic needs crisis*, December 1, 2021, p. 12; United Nations Afghanistan, "United Nations Transitional Engagement Framework (TEF) for Afghanistan," January 26, 2022, p. 3.

[433] Nateqi, SIGAR interview, April 26, 2022; Bellis, SIGAR interview, December 23, 2021.

[434] SIGAR, Quarterly Report, SIGAR-2022-QR-2, p. 79; David Zucchino and Safiullah Padshah, "Taliban Impose Head-to-Toe Coverings for Women," *New York Times*, May 7, 2022; SIGAR, Quarterly Report, SIGAR-2022-QR-3, pp. 7, 78.

The Taliban's ability to pay salaries may also factor into their longevity. Some government workers have remained in their posts despite months of missed salary payments in order to avoid replacement by unqualified Taliban personnel, but this may change.[435] The UN reported in December 2021 that many current government employees—as well as thousands of soldiers, police, and security personnel—were not being paid their salaries, and warned that, with 70 percent of teachers going unpaid, Afghanistan's education system could collapse.[436] In November 2021, the Ministry of Finance announced that it had collected approximately $300 million in revenue, from which it planned to pay the salaries of government employees. The UN reported that by the end of December, "staff in 61 out of 63 budget units, including 23 ministries and some line departments in all 34 provinces, reportedly received salary arrears for September and October; however, challenges persisted in the actual processing of salary payments."[437]

The Taliban, for now, have found it useful to maintain elements of the former Republic's bureaucracy. A functioning state serves their interest, especially as they seek recognition from the international community. As Ali Jalali told SIGAR, "[The Taliban] came, they did not have a government, but they are using the government that was there before in order to look like a government."[438] For the time being, the structures, processes, and norms that were introduced and built up over the last 20 years have not completely disappeared with the collapse of the Republic, even with "the extraordinary political, resource and management challenges now facing these systems," said Patrick Fine.[439] It may be too soon to tell how sustainable the Taliban's approach will be. As former SRAP Dobbins told SIGAR, "It could reverse, it could begin to get worse, it could stay at a constant level, or it could improve. They've got more to work with than they had last time, that's for sure."[440]

CONCLUSION

The United States sought to build stable, democratic, representative, gender-sensitive, and accountable Afghan governance institutions. It failed. The Taliban dealt a decisive political defeat to the Afghan government, despite approximately $145.0 billion in U.S. appropriations, including more than $36.2 billion to support governance and economic development. On August 15, 2021, former President Ghani boarded a helicopter and fled the country. With that, the two-decade long U.S. effort to transform Afghanistan came to a close.

Some gains were achieved before the Republic's collapse, and residual elements of the Afghan government remain. These circumstances, however, offer little consolation. The situation in Afghanistan following the government's dissolution reflects a significant deviation from what the United States aimed to help create. On September 7, 2021, the Taliban announced a 33-person "caretaker" government cabinet. According to the Afghanistan Analysts Network, the all-male government signaled "to the outside world and other Afghans that the [Taliban] movement currently sees no reason to compromise with anyone but their own."[441] Noting that the de facto Taliban government was a disappointment for any who had hoped or advocated for inclusivity, the UN stated that there were "no non-Taliban members, no figures from the past government, nor leaders of minority

[435] SIGAR, Quarterly Report, SIGAR-2022-QR-1, p. 107.

[436] United Nations Development Programme, *Afghanistan…*, December 1, 2021, p. 13; United Nations Afghanistan, "United Nations Transitional Engagement Framework (TEF) for Afghanistan," January 26, 2022, p. 5.

[437] UN, *Report of the Secretary-General: The situation in Afghanistan and its implications for international peace and security,* A/76/667–S/2022/64, February 2, 2022, p. 3.

[438] Jalali, SIGAR interview, April 15, 2022.

[439] Fine, email correspondence with SIGAR, April 11, 2022.

[440] Dobbins, SIGAR interview, April 20, 2022.

[441] Martine van Bijlert, "The Focus of the Taleban's New Government: Internal cohesion, external dominance," Afghanistan Analysts Network, September 12, 2021.

groups."[442] Sirajuddin Haqqani, a U.S. Specially Designated Global Terrorist, was appointed as Afghanistan's interim interior minister.[443]

Whether a different outcome could have been achieved is a question for history. For now, what stands out most is the significance of the tragedy that unfolded over 20 years. Before the Republic's collapse, SIGAR had identified approximately $19 billion of waste, fraud, and abuse in our published reports and closed investigations.[444] But lives lost were the far greater cost. Overall, the U.S. effort in Afghanistan—one goal of which was to help the Afghan government become sufficiently legitimate and capable—resulted in the deaths of 2,456 American and 1,144 allied service members. An additional 20,666 U.S. troops were wounded. Afghans, meanwhile, faced an even heavier toll. At least 66,000 Afghan troops were killed. More than 48,000 Afghan civilians were killed and at least 75,000 were injured—both likely significant underestimations.[445] If there is one overarching lesson to be learned from the totality of this tragedy, it is that any future U.S. reconstruction mission similar in scale and ambition to that in Afghanistan is likely to be difficult, costly, and defined by the real possibility of an unfavorable governance outcome.

AGENCY COMMENTS

We provided State, USAID, and DOD a draft of this report, which allowed them an opportunity to share their institutional perspectives with the readership of this evaluation. We received formal written comments from State, which are reproduced in appendix II. We incorporated these comments, as appropriate. USAID and DOD declined to provide comments.

State said it appreciated "the opportunity to work closely with SIGAR to ensure transparency and accountability to the American people regarding U.S. reconstruction efforts in Afghanistan." However, State noted it had raised jurisdictional questions about certain aspects of this evaluation. We respond to this comment, as well as to two others, in appendix II.

[442] UN, "Briefing to the United Nations Security Council by the Secretary-General's Special Representative for Afghanistan, Ms. Deborah Lyons," September 9, 2021.

[443] SIGAR, Quarterly Report, SIGAR-2021-QR-4, p. 97.

[444] *See*, SIGAR, *Update on the Amount of Waste, Fraud, and Abuse Uncovered through SIGAR's Oversight Work between January 1, 2018 and December 31, 2019*, SIGAR-21-05-SP, October 15, 2020.

[445] John F. Sopko, "Development Assistance During Conflict: Lessons from Afghanistan," testimony before the Subcommittee on International Development, International Organizations, and Global Corporate Social Impact, Committee on Foreign Affairs, U.S. House of Representatives, 117th Cong., October 6, 2021, SIGAR 22-01-TY, p. 3.

APPENDIX I - SCOPE AND METHODOLOGY

This report presents the results of our evaluation of why the Afghan government collapsed in August 2021. It responds to a September 10, 2021, request from the Chair and Ranking Member of the House Committee on Oversight and Reform, and the Chair and Ranking Member of its Subcommittee on National Security. The request asked us to examine (1) the factors that contributed to the collapse of the government of Afghanistan, and any chronic weaknesses that undermined the government's authority or legitimacy since 2002, and (2) the relative success or failure of U.S. reconstruction efforts to build and sustain Afghan governing institutions since 2002.

The corresponding objectives of this evaluation were to determine (1) the factors that contributed to the dissolution of the Government of Afghanistan in August 2021, and (2) the extent to which U.S. reconstruction efforts achieved their stated goals and objectives to build and sustain Afghan governing institutions. In addressing these objectives, we focused primarily on events, U.S. policy decisions, and reconstruction efforts that took place from the beginning of fiscal year 2002 (October 1, 2001), until the withdrawal of U.S. personnel in August 2021. Where we determined they were relevant to the evaluation objectives, we also considered, to the extent possible, events following the collapse of the Afghan government as the Taliban took control of key governance functions.

For the purposes of this report, we focused mostly on the collapse of the Afghan government rather than on the related dissolution of the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces. SIGAR addressed the collapse of the ANDSF in a separate evaluation, *Collapse of the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces: An Assessment of the Factors That Led to Its Demise*. An interim version of this evaluation was published on May 12, 2022, under report code SIGAR 22-22-IP.

To accomplish the evaluation's objectives, we began by identifying the U.S. government's strategic governance goals in Afghanistan. To do so, we used judgmental sampling to select eight U.S. strategic documents that articulated interagency goals. Those were the following:

- Afghanistan Freedom Support Act of 2002, Pub. L. No. 107-327, 22 U.S.C. § 7501 (2002).
- U.S. Department of State (State) and U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), Publication 11084, "Strategic Plan Fiscal Years 2004–2009," August 2003.
- State and USAID, "Strategic Plan Fiscal Years 2007–2012," May 7, 2007.
- U.S. Embassy Kabul and U.S. Forces–Afghanistan (USFOR-A), "United States Government Integrated Civilian-Military Campaign Plan for Support to Afghanistan," February 2011.
- U.S. Embassy Kabul and USFOR-A, "Civil-Military Strategic Framework," March 2012.
- U.S. Embassy Kabul and USFOR-A, "United States Government Integrated Civilian-Military Campaign Plan for Support to Afghanistan," August 2013.
- State, "Integrated Country Strategy," 2014.
- State, "Integrated Country Strategy," Reviewed and Updated November 15, 2020.

We selected these criteria documents to achieve maximum time coverage of strategic governance goals over the 20-year U.S. intervention in Afghanistan, with priority given to joint documents capturing the goals and objectives of multiple agencies. In our selection, we sought to minimize the amount of time overlap between documents and focused on those pertaining solely to U.S. agencies instead of agreements, declarations, or plans between the United States and international partners.

We then analyzed these documents to identify overarching U.S. governance objectives that served as the evaluation's criteria. We determined that, overall, the U.S. sought to build stable, democratic, representative, gender-sensitive, and accountable governance institutions in Afghanistan. We assessed that this overarching goal did not materially change from 2002 to 2021. To answer the evaluation's second objective, we used this goal as a benchmark to assess U.S. successes and failures in building Afghan governing institutions.

Using our professional judgement and accumulated institutional knowledge, we then identified SIGAR reports that synthesized data and information relevant to governance in Afghanistan. We based our assessment of whether individual reports were relevant on the extent to which they examined the aggregate effects of U.S. efforts, dating back to 2002, to develop Afghan governing institutions. We considered reports published by SIGAR from October 30, 2008 (the date of our first quarterly report to Congress), to July 30, 2022 (the date of our most recent quarterly report prior to the completion of this evaluation). We determined that all four of SIGAR's *High-Risk List* reports, ten of its lessons-learned reports, and ten of its audit reports synthesized data and information relevant to governance. We excluded some SIGAR reports from our analysis on the basis of their narrow scope, redundancy with other products in our evidence base, or because their subject was insufficiently directly relevant to governance. We also identified those SIGAR quarterly reports that documented the specific series of events leading up to, and following, the Republic's collapse. With a few exceptions, we determined that quarterly reports published from October 30, 2017, through July 30, 2022, described those events. We included additional quarterly reports in our evidence base if they presented historical information about Afghanistan reconstruction that we determined was relevant to the evaluation objectives.

Much of our documentary evidence consisted of previous SIGAR reports. However, these reports rely on data and information from numerous other entities and individuals, including reporting and responses to SIGAR requests for information from U.S. government agencies involved in reconstruction, nonprofit, nongovernmental, and international organizations, various publications that provide insight into the U.S. war in Afghanistan, other U.S. government research and oversight institutions such as the Government Accountability Office and the Congressional Research Service, Afghan government reporting, and previous SIGAR interviews with U.S. and Afghan officials. Information on the scope and methodology for our prior work summarized in this evaluation can be found in the reports cited. Our analysis also included various other works published from 2006 through 2021, that we determined could provide insight into the dynamics of the Afghan government, the U.S. war in Afghanistan, and, more broadly, Afghanistan's history. In selecting these works, we relied on the professional judgement of the report team, which consisted of analysts with considerable collective experience working on Afghanistan and conducting research related to it.

The reports and other publications we assembled helped us answer both evaluation objectives. To answer the first objective, we used these documents to analyze and summarize those factors that consistently undermined the Afghan government's authority and legitimacy over a multi-year period, from 2002 to 2021. We considered these factors to be potential contributors to the Afghan government's eventual collapse. We then compared the results of our documentary evidence analysis against the testimonial evidence we gathered from interviews to determine the major factors contributing to the Republic's demise. To help answer the evaluation's second objective, we determined whether the assembled literature consistently reported on any successes or failures in meeting U.S. governance goals and objectives.

In addition to reviewing the reports and other publications described above, we conducted over 80 interviews with more than 60 current and former U.S. officials, former Afghan government officials, and experts on Afghanistan's history and social structures. Related to the evaluation's first objective, we obtained the interviewees' assessments of the factors contributing to the Afghan government's collapse, including those factors that undermined the Republic's authority and legitimacy over the course of the two-decade reconstruction effort. Related to the evaluation's second objective, we elicited interviewee assessments of U.S. successes and failures in achieving governance objectives in Afghanistan, including whether any Afghan government institutions still existed and were functional. We judgmentally selected interviewees based on the expertise of various agency stakeholders, including SIGAR's senior subject matter expert (also the agency's governance subject matter expert), SIGAR's special advisor for Afghanistan affairs, the evaluation team, the director and deputy director of SIGAR's Research and Analysis Directorate, and SIGAR senior management.

Our criteria for selecting interviewees varied depending on the nature of the information we were seeking. We selected some interviewees based on their proximity to events surrounding the collapse of the Afghan government—for example, the negotiations between the United States and the Taliban, and between the

Afghan government and the Taliban. We selected others—for example, former high-level U.S. government officials—based on our assessment of their ability to provide unique insights into the U.S. approach to building and sustaining governance institutions in Afghanistan, or into the dynamics within the Afghan government. Other interviewees—for example, scholars of Afghanistan—we selected because we assessed that their expertise was relevant to the evaluation's objectives. In some cases, interviewees were also the authors of published works we included in the evaluation's evidence base. We interviewed these individuals to further understand their views and determine if they had any more recent observations on the situation in Afghanistan. To broaden the pool of prospective interviewees beyond those known to the stakeholders above, we sent calls for interview volunteers to the American Foreign Service Association, American Academy of Diplomacy, and the Army Heritage Center Foundation, who forwarded our invitations to their member lists. Working with our public affairs team, we also used Twitter to solicit potential interviewees.

We implemented a process for interviewee selection that involved both nomination and supervisory review. This process varied, depending on the nominator. Nominations submitted by SIGAR's senior subject matter expert were subject to supervisory review and approval by our Research and Analysis Directorate's deputy director. Nominations submitted by evaluation team members and SIGAR's special advisor for Afghanistan affairs, as well as "self-nominations" emerging from our professional association and social media announcements were first vetted by SIGAR's senior subject matter expert.[446] In some cases, SIGAR senior management used their professional judgement to recommend interviewees to the evaluation team. In practice, the majority of interviewees were nominated by SIGAR's senior subject matter expert. To coordinate our interviews with other ongoing reports, including those responsive to additional congressional requests related to the Republic's collapse, we established a shared calendar that we populated with the dates of our interviews and the names of our interviewees. This calendar was accessible to agency stakeholders, including SIGAR's senior management team. We conducted our interviews in a semi-structured format that allowed us to seek interviewee responses to predetermined questions while giving us the opportunity to flexibly ask follow-up questions.

We used the results of our interviews to answer the evaluation's first objective by comparing the results of our documentary analysis against the information we gathered from these interviews to expand our understanding of longer-term factors that contributed to the Afghan government's collapse since 2002. We also analyzed and summarized interviewees' views and observations regarding those factors that may have contributed to the Republic's collapse in the years and months prior to its dissolution. For example, we interviewed five members of the Republic's negotiating team to understand the dynamics of intra-Afghan negotiations, as well as officials close to negotiations between the U.S. government and the Taliban. For the evaluation's second objective, we used the results of our interviews to both supplement and illustrate the documentary evidence we examined, as well as to understand whether any Afghan government institutions still existed and were functional. In order to clarify interviewees' views and seek further information, we also sent follow-up questions to some individuals and received written responses.

To structure our analysis, we constructed extensive evidence maps that aggregated much of our documentary and testimonial evidence, and tied them to each of our findings in order to establish that those findings were sufficiently supported. Where we determined it was appropriate, we selectively included media reports in these evidence maps. In order to maximize transparency surrounding our evidence base, our report makes extensive use of endnotes. Our evidence maps make use of additional sources that are not directly cited in these notes.

The research and analysis presented in this report has several limitations. First, the U.S. government no longer has a diplomatic or military presence in Afghanistan. To some degree, this limited our analysis of events occurring after the Republic's dissolution. For example, we were unable to conduct on the ground research in Afghanistan, as we have in the past. To address this limitation, we interviewed former Afghan government officials and other individuals who we determined had information regarding developments in Afghanistan since the government's collapse. We also relied on SIGAR's quarterly reports, which synthesize data and information

[446] Beginning in March 2022, interviewee nominations were vetted by a supervisory research analyst in SIGAR's Lessons Learned Program.

related to recent events, including open-source reporting and responses to requests for information from U.S. agencies. These quarterly reports also helped us corroborate information provided to us by interviewees.

Additionally, we relied exclusively on non-sensitive, unclassified information. Given that the costs of reconstruction have been borne by U.S. taxpayers, our goal was to produce a report that required no redactions and was fully publicly accessible. Moreover, we assessed that the Afghan government's collapse was a significant historical event that warranted maximal transparency surrounding its causes. However, it is possible that some classified or otherwise not publicly available information could shed additional light on the reasons underlying the Republic's demise.

We gave State, USAID, and the Department of Defense (DOD) an opportunity to provide information relevant to the causes of the Afghan government's collapse, and to make officials available for interviews. However, we received very few documents from the agencies, and determined that what we did receive was not materially relevant to our objectives. Additionally, we were able to interview only one current official, from USAID, who was made available by the agencies. To address these limitations, we interviewed former U.S. and Afghan officials, and consulted SIGAR's substantial body of work on reconstruction to understand the dynamics that culminated in the events of August 2021. We also provided State, USAID, and DOD a draft of this report, which allowed them an opportunity to share their institutional perspectives with the readership of this evaluation. State provided official written comments. USAID and DOD did not provide any comments.

Moreover, we sent 13 questions relating to the collapse of the Afghan government to President Ashraf Ghani. President Ghani declined to answer these questions, choosing instead to respond to allegations of theft that we assessed in a separate evaluation.[447]

Two additional factors limited our work. First, the U.S. government does not recognize the de facto Taliban regime. Therefore, we did not interview Taliban officials or seek records from them. While unavoidable at this time, this is a significant gap that should be addressed in future research. Second, as a general matter, determining with precision the underlying causes of the Afghan government's collapse is a difficult undertaking, particularly with limited historical distance from the events. Our hope and expectation is that over time, many other institutions and historians will seek to address the questions we begin to answer here.

This evaluation should therefore be considered in context, as a report that is limited in its evidence base to information that is available now, and also subject to the additional limitations described above.

We conducted our work for this report in Arlington, Virginia, and via virtual telecommunication methods from October 2021 through September 2022, in accordance with the Quality Standards for Inspection and Evaluation, published by the Council of the Inspectors General on Integrity and Efficiency. Those standards require that we plan and perform the evaluation to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our evaluation objectives. SIGAR performed this evaluation under the authority of Public Law No. 110-181, as amended, and the Inspector General Act of 1978, as amended.

[447] *See*, SIGAR, *Theft of Funds from Afghanistan: An Assessment of Allegations Concerning President Ghani and Former Senior Afghan Officials*, SIGAR 22-35-IP, August 9, 2022.

United States Department of State

Washington, D.C. 20520

August 24, 2022

Mr. John M. Sopko
Special Inspector General
Office of the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR)
2530 Crystal Drive
Arlington, VA 22202

Dear Special Inspector General Sopko:

The Department of State appreciates the opportunity to work closely with SIGAR to ensure transparency and accountability to the American people regarding U.S. reconstruction efforts in Afghanistan.

As you are aware, the Department has raised jurisdictional questions about certain aspects of this and other evaluations in two letters to SIGAR's legal counsel, the most recent of which is also addressed to you (dated July 8, 2022). It remains unclear how certain aspects of this report relate to SIGAR's mandate to conduct oversight of reconstruction activities in Afghanistan.

SIGAR Comment 1

The Department wishes to provide comments regarding certain key conclusions of this report:

First, SIGAR's report notes that American officials delivered mixed messages regarding U.S. intentions. President Biden is the third American President in succession to express a clear interest in bringing American forces home from Afghanistan. In communications with the government of then-Afghan President Ghani, high-level officials in the Biden administration made clear that the United States was preparing for a full withdrawal of forces from Afghanistan.

SIGAR Comment 2

Second, the report comments on America's efforts to build "stable, democratic, representative, gender-sensitive, and accountable institutions." Around the world, the United States aids in combatting corruption, advocates for representative government, and supports accountability mechanisms among the various initiatives

based on democratic values and human rights. Whether a country is successful or not in making progress in these areas is ultimately a reflection of its own efforts.

With this in mind, the standard by which the U.S. government succeeded or failed in its political objectives in Afghanistan needs to be wholly reconsidered in this report.

SIGAR Comment 3

Thank you for this opportunity to review and comment on SIGAR's E-11 report on the "collapse of the Afghan government."

Sincerely,

Erik Schnotala
Acting Director
Office of Afghanistan Affairs
Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs

SIGAR Response to State Comments

SIGAR Comment 1: In a letter to State and USAID on May 6, 2022, SIGAR explained its oversight jurisdiction in detail. State's assertion now that "it remains unclear how certain aspects of this report relate to SIGAR's mandate" is vague and does not address our analysis.

State has previously admitted that Congress's grant of jurisdiction to SIGAR "is not limited to financial audits of the expenditure of [these] funds, but rather authorizes SIGAR to conduct oversight of the programs and activities that utilize such funds."[448] SIGAR also has the authority to evaluate the effectiveness, sustainability, and outcome of those same programs and activities, which is something that we have emphasized in our work from the very beginning. Success is measured not merely by how many schools are built or how many medical supplies were delivered, but also by the outcome of those and other reconstruction activities taken as a whole. Congress and the American people want to know why the Afghan government collapsed after $145.0 billion was appropriated for reconstruction.

SIGAR Comment 2: In the report, we acknowledge that multiple, consecutive U.S. presidents expressed an interest in exiting Afghanistan. However, we also note that each of these presidents made decisions that conflicted with this preference. We accurately characterize this as a history of U.S. vacillation on the issue of withdrawal and, notably, do not state that President Biden also vacillated. Nevertheless, in response to State's comment, we made revisions to this section of the report. These revisions acknowledge that President Biden's April 2021 announcement, in which the President declared that all U.S. troops would exit Afghanistan by September 2021, made U.S. intentions clearer.

SIGAR Comment 3: We disagree. As we detail in the report, U.S. strategies for Afghanistan consistently outlined governance goals that ultimately went unachieved. However, we note that this report, as well as SIGAR's broader body of work, provides ample evidence of the Republic's dysfunction.

[448] Letter from Richard C. Visek, Acting Legal Advisor, Department of State, and Margaret L. Taylor, General Counsel, USAID, to John G. Arlington, General Counsel, SIGAR (April 25, 2022), p. 1.

APPENDIX III - ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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SIGAR 23-05-IP

Cover photo credit:
Taliban fighters take control of the presidential palace in Kabul, Afghanistan, on August 15, 2021.
(AP photo by Zabi Karimi)

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