



Prepared Remarks of
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“SIGAR: The Truly Independent Inspector General’s Office”

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Good afternoon. I want to thank the Geneva Centre for Security Sector Governance and the Parliamentary Military Commissioner of Bosnia and Herzegovina for inviting me to take part today.

The subject of this panel is near and dear to the hearts of everyone who works at my office – the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction – and is also critical to our work. Without independence – true independence – from politicians, government officials, bureaucrats, and other entities, we would not be able to do the work we have done over the past decade.

SIGAR’s mission is to protect the \$133 billion the U.S. taxpayer has spent on the reconstruction of Afghanistan from waste, fraud, and abuse. While the bulk of that \$133 billion has been spent on reconstructing the Afghan national security forces, namely the Afghan National Army and Afghan National Police, it has also gone to build schools, clinics, electrical infrastructure, counternarcotics programs, and a whole array of other efforts to improve governance and fight corruption in Afghanistan since October 2001.

SIGAR was created by the U.S. Congress in 2008 and to date, our staff of roughly 185 individuals has issued over 350 audit and inspection reports making over 980 recommendations to U.S. government agencies, resulting in dollar savings to the taxpayer and improvement of government operations.

In addition, SIGAR’s Investigations Directorate – which carries out criminal and civil investigations for fraud and other crimes – has conducted over 1,000 investigations, secured nearly 140 guilty pleas and convictions, and produced approximately \$1.6 billion in criminal fines, restitution, forfeitures, civil settlements, and other cost savings to the U.S. government. To date, SIGAR’s financial accomplishments are fast approaching \$3 billion.

We're also just about to issue our 45th Quarterly Report to Congress on the state of the reconstruction effort in Afghanistan, and have issued seven lessons learned reports on topics ranging from corruption in Afghanistan, to the struggles in rebuilding the Afghan security forces. Our most recent report evaluates past efforts to reintegrate Taliban fighters into Afghan society and makes recommendations for future reintegration programs that may be necessary should a peace agreement be reached.

But none of this work would have been possible had SIGAR not been established in such a way that enshrined our independence and if we had not remained eternally vigilant to ensure our independence is not encroached upon or undermined.

SIGAR's Unique Institutional Independence

Regarding institutional independence, SIGAR is the only one of the 74 statutory Offices of Inspector General in the U.S. federal government not housed within a single government agency. For example, while the Department of Defense has an independent Inspector General, the office is still housed within the Defense Department and reliant on the department for various services and other needs.

But, because the reconstruction effort in Afghanistan is a whole-of-government endeavor, Congress, in its wisdom, created SIGAR as a fully independent agency. While our reports go to the Secretaries of Defense and State, as well as Congress, we are not housed within any single government department or agency. In other words, we are independent from any federal agency.

This is critical because many U.S. federal agencies have played a role in Afghanistan's reconstruction and Congress provided us with jurisdiction over any reconstruction project or program, regardless of what government agency funded it. While much of our work obviously focuses on the Defense Department, State Department, and U.S. Agency for International Development, we've also looked at programs run by the Department of Labor and Department of Homeland Security, among many others.

This independence not only gives us the authority to look at programs individually, but also to look at how U.S. government agencies work together – or as has often been the case – how they have failed to work together to meet U.S. reconstruction objectives in Afghanistan.

SIGAR's Operational Independence

As I just mentioned, SIGAR has the authority to audit and investigate any U.S. government project or program that supports the reconstruction effort in Afghanistan.

Our authorizing statute, along with the Inspector General Act of 1978, ensures that we have operational independence, access to all relevant documents and that government agencies cooperate with us. Should a government agency elect not to cooperate with a SIGAR audit or investigation, we are required to notify Congress, which pressures government officials to cooperate. In the interest of fairness and accuracy, our draft reports are shared with the agencies in question, who may make both substantive and technical comments, but only SIGAR determines what changes are made in the final report that is issued to the agency in question, to Congress, and to the public.

Additionally, for criminal investigations, we have the power to issue subpoenas, which compels entities outside the U.S. government to provide evidentiary material so that our investigators, can gain access to the information they need to decide whether or not to suggest a case be prosecuted and to secure arrest warrants, if necessary.

SIGAR's Personal Independence

While SIGAR's statutory independence is critical, it is the personal integrity and independence of our staff that gives Congress and the public confidence in the quality and fidelity of our work.

While Inspectors General are appointed by the President, unlike the roughly 4,000 other presidential appointees in the executive branch, they are not removed from office at the beginning of each new administration.

The head of my agency, John Sopko, was appointed by President Obama in 2012, but kept his job when President Trump assumed office in January 2017. The Inspector General Act of 1978 also provides additional protection, because while the President can remove an Inspector General, he has to provide 30 days' notice – with an explanation – to Congress before the removal goes into effect. This is an extremely rare protection for executive branch appointees and is in place to help ensure that Inspectors General aren't fired simply because they issued a report the White House or a Department head dislikes.

In addition, while Inspectors General in the U.S. are appointed by the President, and most are confirmed by the Senate, they are considered non-partisan and are expected to execute their work accordingly. The same goes for our entire staff, to the point where at the beginning of any audit we may initiate, the staff working on that audit must certify that they have no conflicts of interest, and all SIGAR employees are required to disclose their sources of income each year to be reviewed by government ethics attorneys.

Publicity as Protection

Finally, SIGAR's practice of publishing, posting, tweeting, and otherwise publicizing virtually everything we do serves as another layer of protection for the agency against outside interference. We follow the basic principles that unless something is a security risk or classified, we publish it; and if it's worth publishing it's worth publicizing.

We welcome publicity because it has impact. When we issue a report on \$486 million wasted on twenty aircraft that couldn't fly or \$675 million spent on a task force to jump start Afghanistan's economy that didn't do any such thing, editorial writers, the public, congressional Members and staff, researchers, and other experts recognize the value of our work.

Issuing a report that doesn't garner any public attention virtually ensures that nothing will change, but when problems are exposed, those responsible find themselves under pressure from Congress and others to make necessary changes and respond to our findings. Demonstrating our value by publicizing our work creates champions for the agency and also makes it much more difficult for officials or agencies to interfere in our work.

Conclusion

I hope this brief overview provides some background and context to the work of my agency and the unique nature not only of our work and our independence. We are often not very popular amongst the government departments and officials we audit and investigate, but ensuring that we protect our independence and remain beyond reproach is critical to maintaining confidence of Congress and the public in our agency.

Thank you.