

THE SPECIAL INSPECTOR GENERAL
FOR AFGHANISTAN RECONSTRUCTION'S
2021 HIGH-RISK LIST

HEARING
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SUBCOMMITTEE ON NATIONAL SECURITY
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THE SPECIAL INSPECTOR GENERAL FOR AFGHANISTAN RECONSTRUCTION'S 2021 HIGH-RISK LIST

Tuesday, March 16, 2021

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
COMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND REFORM
SUBCOMMITTEE ON NATIONAL SECURITY
Washington, D.C.

The subcommittee met, pursuant to notice, at 11:08 a.m., via Webex, Hon. Stephen Lynch (chairman of the subcommittee) presiding.

Present: Representatives Lynch, Welch, Johnson, DeSaulnier, Wasserman Schultz, Speier, Grothman, Higgins, and Comer.

The committee will now come to order. Without objection, the chair is authorized to declare a recess of the committee at any time. I now recognize myself for a brief opening statement.

Good morning, everyone. I would like to thank Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction John Sopko to join us once again as we examine SIGAR's 2021 High-Risk List. This biennial report identifies key areas of Afghanistan reconstruction that are especially vulnerable to waste, fraud, abuse, and corruption.

As underscored by our recent hearings with U.S. Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation, Zalmay Khalilzad, and the co-chairs of the Afghan Study Group, the issue of U.S. military involvement in Afghanistan has reached a moment of great consequence.

More than a year after the Trump administration and the Taliban signed a putative agreement for bringing peace to Afghanistan, insurgent violence against Afghan forces and a campaign of terror, including assassinations against government leaders, teachers, prominent women leaders, and humanitarian workers has continued unrelenting to the present day.

Despite the lack of progress in deescalating Taliban violence, President Biden is now forced to decide whether to withdraw the remaining 2,500 U.S. troops and approximately 13,500 U.S. contractors, and third-country—excuse me, third-country contractors from Afghanistan by May 1 as envisioned by the Trump-Taliban agreement, we are in a very difficult position.

Alternatively, with less than six weeks before the May 1 deadline, the Biden administration can attempt to negotiate an extension of the February 2020 agreement or, as has been recently circulated, convene a coalition partner group of countries to engage with both the Afghan government and the Taliban with the goal of

initiating a detailed discussion for a peaceful transition and reconciliation between those two sides.

These talks are happening at a moment of great uncertainty for the people of Afghanistan. In his 2021 High-Risk List, Inspector General Sopko warns that a highly unstable security environment, coupled with the scheduled withdrawal of U.S. and international forces in the midst of a global pandemic, have all placed the U.S. reconstruction mission in Afghanistan, quote, “at a greater risk than ever before.”

Since 2002, the United States has spent over \$88 billion or an estimated 62 percent of total U.S. reconstruction assistance on training and equipment for the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces.

Yet, despite this expenditure and our best efforts to strengthen the Afghan government’s military and police forces, levels of violence in Afghanistan remain unacceptably high and the enduring presence of al-Qaeda, the Islamic State Khorasan, and other terrorist organizations all continue to threaten to overtake the already fragile negotiations between the Afghan government and the Taliban.

Nascent gains of Afghan women and girls, who have made historic progress in their ongoing struggle for gender equality throughout the past two decades, while there were zero women and girls attending school during the previous period of Taliban controlling Afghanistan, today it is estimated that approximately 3 million women and girls are able to safely do so.

With the support of at least \$787 million in U.S. direct assistance, Afghan women have gained expanded legal protections, increased access to social services, and they are now able to access—are now able to meaningfully participate in Afghan politics.

Unfortunately, as Special Inspector General Sopko reminds us in his latest report that, quote, “Afghanistan remains one of the most challenging places in the world to be a woman,” closed quote. And again, he identifies women’s rights as high risk, especially given the potential for Taliban’s reintegration into Afghan civil society and government.

So, let me be clear. The prospects for a sustainable and lasting peace in Afghanistan will inevitably depend on whether the Taliban and the Afghan government can reach a political agreement that respects the rights of all Afghans, including women and girls.

So, I was pleased to see the Biden administration prioritize the rights of Afghan women and girls in the guiding principles document that it reportedly provided to the Afghan government and the Taliban in recent weeks.

And to conclude, Inspector General Sopko writes, quote, “Whether or not the United States continues to withdraw its troops, the new administration and Congress will have to decide whether and to what extent reconstruction will continue,” closed quote.

So, as we work with the Biden administration to determine our best path forward in Afghanistan, we must inform—we must afford meaningful consideration to how their approach might impact the high-risk reconstruction areas that are identified in SIGAR’s report.

I look forward to today's discussion with Inspector General Sopko, and I now yield to the ranking member from the great state of Wisconsin, Mr. Grothman, for his opening statement.

Mr. GROTHMAN. A great state it is. Thank you very much.

I want to thank you for holding this hearing and for Mr. Sopko being with us today. Your continued efforts to oversee billions of U.S. taxpayer dollars are commendable and necessary.

This year will be the 20th anniversary of the United States being attacked by al-Qaeda on September 11, 2001. These unprecedented attacks took the lives of nearly 3,000 innocent Americans in New York, Pennsylvania, and at the Pentagon. Days later, on October 7, the United States launched Operation Enduring Freedom and invaded Afghanistan, leading to the toppling of the Taliban's regime.

The United States has had a presence in Afghanistan ever since. Unfortunately, every time we need to discuss ongoing efforts, the same—the same issues come up.

To date, the American taxpayer has sent \$1 trillion to Afghanistan through supporting combat or reconstruction. In America's longest war, we are just starting to see the light at the end of the tunnel.

President Trump reduced Americans—the American footprint in Afghanistan from over 100,000 during the Obama Administration to just a few thousand. On February 29 of last year, under a strong—under the strong leadership of President Trump, the United States signed a peace agreement to gradually withdraw remaining Americans from Afghanistan.

This agreement will help create a safe and prosperous Afghanistan by ensuring that it will not provide safe harbor to terrorists.

Now I understand it will be—and I will be the first to admit that just packing our bags and leaving is dangerous. That type of withdrawal will create a vacuum for terrorism and potentially set back the social and governmental gains in Afghanistan.

What I do believe is that it should be our goal to reduce our global military footprint and bring troops home.

Your report highlights numerous issues that we must take very seriously, including the corruption, the illegal narcotics, the increasing insecurity, and the inadequate oversight. Each of these issues hinders the ability to effectively track and manage American taxpayer funds in Afghanistan.

This is an issue at the heart of this committee's jurisdiction. We must continue to work together to ensure that we know where investments go and to make sure they are spent on legal activities.

I hope that will be a bipartisan goal. Once again, thank you, Mr. Sopko, for being here and I look forward to your testimony.

I yield back.

Mr. LYNCH. The gentleman yields back.

I will now introduce and swear in our witness.

Today, our witness is the Honorable John F. Sopko, who is the undaunted Special Inspector General for Afghanistan reconstruction and has been a frequent flyer to this committee and the subcommittee, and we deeply appreciate the wonderful work that he and his staff have done throughout a difficult period in Afghanistan, including in the midst of this pandemic.

So, Mr. Sopko, could you please raise your right hand?

Mr. Sopko, do you swear or affirm that the testimony you are about to give is the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help you God?

[Witness is sworn.]

Mr. LYNCH. Let the record show that the witness has answered in the affirmative. Thank you, and without objection, your written statement will be made part of the record as will your report—your High-Risk Report.

With that, Inspector General Sopko, you are now recognized to give an oral presentation of your testimony for five minutes.

STATEMENT OF THE HONORABLE JOHN F. SOPKO, SPECIAL INSPECTOR GENERAL FOR AFGHANISTAN RECONSTRUCTION

Mr. SOPKO. Thank you very much, and good morning, Chairman Lynch, Ranking Member Grothman, and Congressman Welch.

Thank you for inviting me to discuss SIGAR's new High-Risk List for Congress and the administration. This report identifies eight key threats to our \$143 billion reconstruction effort that, since 2002, has been an essential part of the U.S. strategy to return peace and stability to Afghanistan.

Today's report comes at an opportune time, as the Biden administration is deciding on the future of both our counter-terrorism and reconstruction missions in Afghanistan.

The May 1 deadline to withdraw U.S. forces and other personnel is a mere 46 days away. Whether or not the U.S. withdraws its troops, the new administration and Congress will need to decide and whether and to what extent reconstruction will continue.

It could be a very critical decision, for we must remember that it was not the withdrawal of Soviet troops in 1989 but the withdrawal of Soviet rubles that led to the collapse of the Afghan regime in 1992.

But let me be clear before we go any further. As an inspector general, neither I nor SIGAR nor this High-Risk List takes a position on the future presence of U.S. forces in Afghanistan.

That is beyond what an inspector general should discuss. That is policy and that is the purview of the policymakers in Congress and the Biden administration to determine.

However, I believe most would agree with our report that achieving our counter-terrorism and reconstruction objectives depends on a strong, stable, democratic, and self-reliant Afghanistan.

Unfortunately, as our report discusses in great detail, Afghanistan is far from that reality and may be fighting for its very survival.

Taliban attacks and assassinations increased since the U.S.-Taliban agreement was signed last February. Afghan security forces are nowhere near achieving self-sufficiency, as they cannot maintain their equipment, manage their supply chains, or train new soldiers, pilots, and policemen without the 13,000 DOD contractors that, under the terms of the same February agreement, may be obliged to leave Afghanistan on May 1 also.

Highlighting the critical nature of that support, DOD estimates that no Afghan airframe can maintain combat effectiveness for more than a few months if contractor support is withdrawn.

Likewise, Afghanistan is heavily dependent on foreign financial assistance. Roughly, 80 percent of Afghanistan's public expenditures have to be covered by international donors, including the U.S. taxpayer.

Yet, as we report, because international donors have, largely, lacked the will to impose and, more importantly, enforce concrete conditions on their assistance, the Afghan government that has made little if any progress in combating corruption or illicit narcotics production, both of which provide critical oxygen to the insurgency.

In that regard, we believe a key opportunity was missed at last November's international donor pledging conference for Afghanistan, where donor nations, including the United States, failed to outline specific financial and other consequences that the Afghan government would face if they failed to meet its anti-corruption and counter-narcotics commitments.

If, at that pivotal time, just a few months ago, donors did not have either the bureaucratic or political will to place hard concrete conditions on future Afghan assistance, we must ask the critical question, when will we, and this is particularly troubling now, as many believe we must use continued financial assistance for Afghanistan as leverage to ensure that the Afghan government does the right thing on a number of issues, including protecting the rights of Afghan women and girls.

So, in conclusion, as our report indicates, if conditionality isn't critical for future assistance, then we and other donors have to do better than we have done over the last 19 years in truly enforcing concrete conditions on any post-peace Afghan government, especially if it includes the Taliban.

Thank you very much, and I look forward to your questions.

Mr. LYNCH. Thank you very much, Inspector General Sopko, and again, my thanks to your staff for the great work that they continue to do every day in Afghanistan.

The chair now yields himself five minutes for questions. I guess, you know, the \$64,000 question is the administration, the Biden administration, is in a position now where they have to, because of the preexisting agreement between the Trump administration and the Taliban, they have got to decide whether they pull the plug on May 1.

So, let us talk about that. Based on your time in Afghanistan and the review of your incredible staff, what happens? What does it look like?

Tell me what to expect if the administration, indeed, pulled the remaining 2,500 troops out, but more importantly, as you pointed out, pulled the thousands and thousands of contractors out?

So, can I ask you about that? Can you tell me what the makeup of the contractor population is there? I know we have some home country nationals. There is a small percentage of those, I think, from Afghanistan. Then there are third-country nationals. Then there are U.S. contractors.

So, tell me about the makeup of that contractor force, and again, the main question is, what happens on May 1 if we pull the plug and come out?

Mr. SOPKO. Thank you, sir. It is a—that is an important question.

As I indicated, it is about 18,000 contractors all together—DOD contractors. Thirteen thousand of them would, pursuant to the February agreement, have to leave with our troops, and that breaks down to about 6,000 U.S. citizens and about 7,000 or more who are non-Afghan but third-party nationals from other countries.

What would happen if—if the troops, our troops, leave that is going to hurt the Afghan government in its fight against—and, again, if there is no peace agreement. If there is a peace agreement, this changes.

But if there is no peace agreement on May 1, the Afghan government will probably lose the capability of flying any of its aircraft within months—few months, and to be quite blunt, it probably would face collapse, especially if we also withdraw the funding.

Remember, 80 percent of that government comes from the United States and our donors, including salaries for troops, money to buy fuel, money to buy bullets, et cetera. So, if that happens, if you combine those three, it is a disaster for Afghanistan.

Mr. LYNCH. OK. Let me ask you then, is there a—so thus far, there is—apart from this agreement, there is no transition agreement in terms of what the—what the level of participation or the nature of participation on the part of the Taliban will be post May 1. Is that—is that correct?

Mr. SOPKO. As far as we know, there is nothing in the—they still have to negotiate it. So, we don't know what the role of the Taliban will be, if any. That has to be agreed to by the Afghan government and the Taliban.

Mr. LYNCH. But based on the—based on the campaign of assassinations that we have seen, mainly, they have gone after a government officials, a lot of women in the press and women in government. We have seen attacks on humanitarian groups as well.

What is your—what is your assessment in terms of the stability of the government if there is an entree on the part of the Taliban coming into—coming into the government? They seem to expect a role that they will play after May 1.

Mr. SOPKO. I definitely think they expect a role to play in the new government, and while the negotiations have been going on, they have been attacking very aggressively Afghan soldiers and police, in particular, in certain geographical zones. They are trying to take back more of Afghanistan, probably for negotiating purposes. So, that will continue.

Mr. LYNCH. And if we unilaterally decide that we are going to extend this, do you have a sense of what the response of the Taliban might be, going forward?

Mr. SOPKO. Public statements that have been made have been diverse. On the one hand, the Taliban have indicated they are looking at this proposal. We don't know all the exact particulars of the proposal that the Biden administration has made.

But at the other hand, some of their spokesmen have talked about they want us out May 1 and the deal is off if we don't leave by May 1.

So, I can't give you a definite answer on that, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. LYNCH. OK. My time has expired.

The chair now recognizes the gentleman from Wisconsin, the ranking member, Mr. Grothman, for five minutes for his questions.

Mr. GROTHMAN. Sure, a few questions.

First of all, is the Taliban a monolith? Do you feel that when we negotiate them, they can even make an agreement stick, given what you have just told us about, you know, attacks on humanitarian groups, attacks on women, what have you?

Mr. SOPKO. That is a really good question, and it is mixed. There was some indication during the early part of the negotiation for withdrawal, that the Taliban issued an order not to fight and it kind of held all over the country.

But I—what we are told and what our experts say it is still not a monolithic organization and you got individual groups that will go off and frolic

[inaudible.] at will.

So I would say, again, we haven't done an audit, sir. But I would say it is not monolithic and I don't know if they can control all their troops.

Mr. GROTHMAN. OK. To what degree are Russia and Pakistan and Iran—I guess those are the big four poking around Afghanistan right now—if we would leave to what degree with those four kinds of put Afghanistan in their sphere of influence?

Mr. SOPKO. Well, again, we haven't done an audit, per se, but all of those countries you mentioned are playing a role and have played a role historically, either funding insurgents or funding warlords or, you know, corrupting officials in Afghanistan.

I would only assume that they would play a role, going forward, with a post-peace government. But I can't tell you for sure what that role will be.

They all have an interest in Afghanistan for their own—remember, they surround Afghanistan. So, they have that interest. And, particularly, Iran has a lot of influence to the west because of economic reasons.

Mr. GROTHMAN. OK.

Mr. SOPKO. The west part of Afghanistan.

Mr. GROTHMAN. Which country, economically or otherwise, is it Pakistan or Iran—I am assuming it is Pakistan, but I don't know—right now, economically and otherwise, kind of is more involved in Iran? And are those the two major countries? I am assuming they are. They have the biggest borders.

Mr. SOPKO. I am sorry, Mr. Grothman. I lost your beginning. Actually, I am losing connectivity right now.

Mr. GROTHMAN. OK. I am assuming—yes, I am assuming the two countries that have the biggest current influence in Afghanistan, because they have such long borders, are Iran and Pakistan.

And I wondered which one of those two right now has bigger influence, you know, more economic relationship, more cultural relationship, what have you. And if we would leave, therefore, which one of those would kind of be more predisposed to kind of put Afghanistan in their sphere of influence?

Mr. SOPKO. It is hard for me to say. I would think Pakistan. I would probably answer Pakistan because of the border, because of their long ties with Afghanistan.

But as I said before, Iran has a very strong influence, particularly in the area around Herat and to the west of the country. But it is a close call, sir. Those are the two major countries.

Mr. GROTHMAN. OK. Can you explain to us this ghost soldier problem and to what degree it still is a problem?

Mr. SOPKO. Again, I apologize, sir. You broke up on the——

Mr. GROTHMAN. I am sorry. Ghost soldiers, that phrase. We have heard it before. Is it still a problem? To what degree is it a problem?

Mr. SOPKO. We think it is still a major problem. That is the reporting we are getting from people we know in the Afghan government and Afghan civil society.

We haven't been able to document it because we haven't been able to get out and check on it. The U.S. Government, I think, considers this a problem because after spending millions of dollars to develop a personnel system which could track the soldiers, they, basically, said the Afghan government can't run it on their own.

So, it is still a problem. The officials steal salaries, they don't pay the salaries of soldiers and police, and it is pretty widespread.

Mr. GROTHMAN. OK. I will give you one more question because I am sure I am near my five minutes.

One of the things that bothers me about the ghost soldiers, in addition to the money you are spending, goes to the degree to which there is pride in such a thing as an Afghan government and whether their soldiers feel there is something worth fighting for there.

And that is the problem we have all over the region because I am sure at one time the very borders of Afghanistan were probably drawn by the British or somebody that didn't—you know, didn't necessarily represent an ethnic group like, say, a France or a more traditional country.

Do you believe there is such a thing as a pride in an Afghan country, that they are capable of defending or securing their current borders?

Is there that pride in Afghanistan or is it just a bunch of people who have to—happened to grow up there and collect a paycheck there but, really, I guess, to what degree is there Afghan pride? Will they protect Afghanistan or protect those borders?

Mr. SOPKO. There is Afghan pride and I don't want to denigrate the Afghan fighting spirit. The Afghans have fought and will continue to fight.

The problem is pride in what we call the Afghanistan or the central government, and that is where you have got a morale issue and that is why your point about ghost soldiers and salaries.

If you don't pay the soldier, if you don't pay the widows and orphans that the soldiers and policemen killed, and if I am an Afghan soldier and I see my money going to some warlord or some captain or colonel or general who never shows up but gets part of my salary, or as bad as it was down south, where the Afghan general was, basically, stealing the food that was paid for by the government and forcing the soldiers to buy their own food, then you lose morale.

No, the Afghans will fight. The question is will they fight for a corrupt incompetent government, and that is the big question. But

there is a will to fight and there are a lot of honest brave Afghans who have fought for their country.

But you just—we don't know on morale. We don't know because we are not collecting the data. We don't have the people to collect the data on what regions are controlled by the Taliban or other terrorist groups, or what districts are controlled.

I think that is something that Chairman Lynch and a number of you inserted, finally, into, I think, last year's either defense bill or the appropriations bill that we are now going to start collecting that data so we at least know and you in Congress know where we stand in this fight against the terrorists.

Mr. LYNCH. The gentleman's time has now expired.

The chair now recognizes the gentleman from Vermont, Mr. Welch, for five minutes.

Mr. WELCH. Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman and Mr. Grothman.

And Mr.—John, Mr. Sopko—what am I doing calling you John at the hearing, but I will.

You know, I really appreciate—we all do—the work you have done over the years. It has been steady and really something we can rely on.

We are moving into this new phase where whether the Biden administration follows through on the date set by the Trump administration or tries to renegotiate, we are leaving in that is pretty clear. It is just a question of when.

And, Mr. Sopko, you have documented how corruption is endemic and according to your 2021 High-Risk Report, corruption threatens all U.S. and international efforts in Afghanistan.

And just succinctly, because I want to follow with other questions, can you describe that threat of corruption to the peace and stability of the future Afghan state post-U.S. occupation?

Mr. SOPKO. Well, I think corruption is the threat, just like I talked about before. It not only is a loss of our money—you know, the dollar we give for reconstruction, if it is diverted, it doesn't help the reconstruction. Doesn't buy the boots, doesn't help the government build the road.

But it also is fueling the insurgency, to some extent, because the Taliban and other terrorist groups point to it and point to the warlords and point to the corrupt officials and point to the fact that there is immunity.

We basically—there is, basically, immunity. If you are a high official in Afghanistan and you are corrupt, you ain't going to jail, and that is what our, basically, said.

Mr. WELCH. Let me followup on that. You know, you document how the Afghan government makes paper reforms such as drafting regulations, but they don't take tangible actions. You have been on this for a number of years. Has that changed up until this point?

Mr. SOPKO. Not really, and we will be issuing another report next month, pursuant to requests in Congress, and we document it. It is, basically, they are very good at attending meetings, writing legislation, or writing policies or creating organizations but not too good at actually catching crooks and sending them to jail if they are important Afghans.

Mr. WELCH. So, it just continues—it just continues the cycle of eroding trust and strengthening the Taliban. You have said and you have been saying this for all your time, Mr. Sopko, what conditions—you have said, A, that we need conditions.

But, B, now that we are moving in this new phase, can you specify the types of conditions you think would be essential to giving us confidence and, frankly, the Afghan people confidence that the money was being used for their benefit, not for the private profit of the government officials?

Mr. SOPKO. There are many conditions and it is really based upon understanding who you are dealing with in the Afghan government and what do they want. Right now, we know the current government wants elections in September.

I am not saying we should or shouldn't have elections in September. OK. What do we get in return for that? We know a lot of Afghan officials want to send their kids to school in the West. They need visas.

What are we getting for that? Those are the type of conditions. That is called smart conditionality. There was a general in Afghanistan who once talked to me about this, General Semonite, who was head of CSTCA.

It was only about five years ago. He was the first guy to talk about conditionality in Afghanistan. So, it is understanding. It is like if we build a new office. This was one of the examples I gave to you.

I mean, the head of MOD, I believe, wanted a fancy new office and we really rebuilt an entire office for him. What did we get out of it? Did we get a—it is a quid pro quo. So, it is understanding what the Afghan officials, corrupt or otherwise, want, and then condition on it.

You know, it is very interesting. You had a hearing last week, I believe, with the Afghan Study Group, and if you look at their testimony, what they are talking about they, basically, talk about smart conditionality.

Mr. WELCH. Right. Right.

Mr. SOPKO. And they talk about some examples. There are many things we can do but we haven't done it. I mean, it is so frustrating. I feel like it is Groundhog Day in that movie.

Mr. WELCH. Right.

Mr. SOPKO. I keep coming back and repeating the same thing, and all of our Ambassadors say, oh, it is horrible about corruption and narcotics. But they don't put any conditions.

Mr. WELCH. Right.

Mr. SOPKO. They talk about conditions.

Mr. WELCH. My time is—my time is up.

Mr. SOPKO. Do you realize from the donor—I am sorry. I apologize. You can see I am really upset about that. We don't follow through with smart conditionality.

Mr. WELCH. Well, I am upset too, because you have been providing the roadmap for years and we haven't followed it, to our peril.

Thank you very much, and I yield back, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. LYNCH. The gentleman yields back.

The chair now recognizes the gentleman from Louisiana, Mr. Higgins, for five minutes.

Mr. HIGGINS. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Thank you for having this hearing today.

Since 2008, Congress has appropriated about \$110 billion for humanitarian, security, and reconstruction assistance to Afghanistan. Yet, over the last 20 years, from my perspective and most of my constituents, little progress has been made and the Nation is still heavily dependent on donor and foreign aid.

We have had meetings and discussions about this for four years now, my office with boots on the ground in Afghanistan, and men and women of just distinguished accomplishment that have their background of expertise in the region.

And, personally, I am of the opinion that we have—we have done enough. I mean, if we—if we haven't taught the Afghan people how to care for themselves in 20 years, you know, what makes us think we are going to do it in two more.

And I asked—I asked a troop commander last week, why would we have boots on the ground out there? We have naval response, rapid deployment forces in the region. Why would we need boots on the ground?

He said, well, you need to be able to respond very, very quickly to what is happening. Well, what about the guys that we trained for 20 years? They live there. They are on the ground. They can respond immediately.

And, again, if we haven't trained them in 20 years, what makes us think we are going to train them in two?

As the Biden administration moves forward with peace talks with the Taliban and the Afghan government, I think we should be focused on terrorist activity.

True success in Afghanistan will only be achieved if we build upon the progress by the Trump administration, promote a free and self-sustaining direction for the region and protection for our allies like Israel.

Mr. Sopko, as stated in your report and supported by DOD, pervasive corruption throughout the Afghan government undermines its own legitimacy.

Please, based upon—my opening remarks was, granted, that is my opinion. That is not the opinion of this committee. That is my personal observation.

But many, many Americans feel the same way. With pervasive corruption in the Afghan government and we have been there for 20 years, we have invested billions upon billions of dollars of American treasure, seems we have gotten nothing out of it, please explain to the American people why we should remain in Afghanistan and what our focus should be.

I will give you my remaining time so you have over two minutes. Tell us why we need to be there.

Mr. SOPKO. Well, sir, I appreciate your question and I appreciate your concerns, and that is something that I think that every administration has faced.

I don't argue either which way. I am really agnostic on this as an inspector general. I don't do—you got the tough decision, Congressman—

Mr. HIGGINS. Right.

Mr. SOPKO [continuing]. and the administration. Whether it was the Trump administration, Biden administration, Obama Administration, it is a tough decision because these are the issues you face.

Let me just throw out some things that you may want to consider. Again, I am not a proponent for staying or going. I am just telling you what is going to happen, you know, and what has happened and what we can learn from that.

Mr. HIGGINS. Fair enough.

Mr. SOPKO. There are some diplomatic reasons we should be there, and I think somebody from State Department can explain that better than me. But, you know, are we going to look like we cut and run?

Now, people can say, hey, you have been there 20 years. You didn't cut and run for 20 years. Why would you now? But that is something to consider.

Do some of our allies in the region think that if you leave, it is destabilized? Another question that can be raised—and again, you need to talk to the counter-terrorism experts, not me.

We don't do counter-terrorism. We do reconstruction. But it could be that having boots on the ground actually is helpful and being able to work with them is helpful.

The other thing is we have invested a lot of money in reconstruction and rebuilding. If we leave immediately, we lose everything. Not only are women and girls but a lot of people who have supported us in jeopardy.

The other thing is we have brought NATO with us and we have NATO troops working with us. Did they buy a bill of goods with us? Do they feel like they have been cheated out of this? Why did they spend their time?

So, those are some of the things you have to consider. A destabilized Afghanistan could be a problem for us in the future. But again, I don't—these are arguments that can be made probably by better people than me. Again, I just do process. I tell you what have we gotten so far.

So, I don't know if that answers the question, but I am not a good advocate. You need to talk to somebody at state or AID or DOD on answering those questions.

Mr. HIGGINS. Yes, sir, and I do speak to those gentlemen consistently. Thank you for your answer. We appreciate your opinion as a solid, a wise man with a great deal of experience in the region.

Mr. Chairman, my time has expired and I yield.

Mr. LYNCH. The gentleman yields back.

The chair now recognizes the gentleman from California by way of Massachusetts, Mr. DeSaulnier, for five minutes.

Mr. DESAULNIER. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for recognizing that I was from the correct western state. I appreciate the hearing.

Mr. Sopko, it is hard not to watch you and feel very sensitive to your frustration, as others have said. So, our options are we spent a lot of time with the study group talking about what leverage we had vis-&-vis the Taliban and the May deadline.

My question is what kind of leverage, given our history and the history of the British and Russians and other countries in Afghanistan in history with the—with the Afghan government?

If we do say—if we make it conditional that this funding continues, doesn't seem, based on history, that is at least a good faith last effort.

But do you expect that they would actually perform if we had the right conditionality if we stayed—the Afghan government, or will they continue to be corrupt?

Mr. SOPKO. That is the \$60,000—probably \$6 million or \$6 billion question. I don't know. We do know right now it is an opportune time.

As pessimistic as I sound, the opportune time is everybody who is a player in Afghanistan realizes they need foreign assistance. OK. You may want to say we got them over the barrel. You know, 80 percent of that government is paid for by the American taxpayer, British taxpayer, et cetera, et cetera.

So, if not now, when can we try real conditionality? So, we got that out. We know the Taliban want foreign assistance.

Now, the Taliban wants some other things, too. They want to be recognized independent—as a—internationally. They want to be removed from all the terrorist designations.

So, there is a number of things that they want, and they also want a piece of the government. If we can come up with proper conditions and if we enforce them and if we are willing to say, we lead, I mean, all of us have dealt with conditions on employment or even with our kids. You have to be willing to say no, and up to now we have failed to do that time and time again.

So, the answer is, I don't know. But this is a great opportunity to try true conditionality. But you need people who really want to enforce it.

Mr. DESAULNIER. So, we are playing with people who played this diplomatic poker with the West for multiple generations, centuries. So, let us go to plan B. We try. They fail. Still corruption.

We leave, and as to who has got who over the barrel, I guess I would respectfully, maybe skeptically, disagree. They know it is going to be destabilizing. They know there is potential al-Qaeda starting again.

Is that in our best interest? We have stayed in Europe—I know, a different situation—since World War II. Is our plan B being we have got to stay there in some form or function in terms of our best calculus on what protects the American public and the international order?

So we try. If we fail, are we stuck with, basically—and should we—maybe we should pay the—give the extortion or support directly to the warlords, which we have tried in the past, rather to just bypass the government.

So, I am sort of looking at give it the best shot, but most likely, given history, we are going to be stuck with this other situation.

And then last, there was some hope in our discussion with the study group that, demographically, younger people, because of the effects of globalization and our influence for the last 20 years, might be more open to asserting themselves to really establish a government that is functional.

So as I look at it, that sort of seems like the probable playing out, based on the study group and your great work.

Mr. SOPKO. You may be right, sir. I don't know. I mean, the—I do agree with you about the youth of Afghanistan. The young have been exposed to us, good or bad. Particularly in the cities, a lot of them have been exposed to democracy, to an attempt at rule of law, to a free and open press. A lot of women and girls have been removed from the shackles of the 4th century and have tasted freedom.

I don't know if that is going to be enough. I don't have an answer on that. We haven't done work on it. And again, just let me apologize if I defer.

I mean, as an inspector general, I like to speak for either an audit or an inspection or a report. You are asking—a lot of these are personal questions. One member has asked me to, basically become diplomatic and make an argument on behalf of the State Department or USAID. I am not the witness for that.

But this is the kind of discussion that I assume is happening right now in the embassy and in the White House, and this is the kind of discussion I think is necessary for Congress to have.

Mr. DESAULNIER. Thank you. I appreciate it.

I will yield back to the pride of South Boston, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. LYNCH. You are very kind. Very kind.

The chair now recognizes the full committee ranking member, the gentleman from Kentucky, Mr. Comer, for five minutes.

Mr. COMER. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

And I want to try to get as many questions in as I can in a brief amount of time.

Let us start with corruption. Does Afghanistan still have serious issues with corruption?

Mr. SOPKO. Yes.

Mr. COMER. Does this corruption threaten U.S. construction efforts—reconstruction efforts?

Mr. SOPKO. Yes. Yes.

Mr. COMER. Congress directed you to evaluate the Afghan anti-corruption strategy. Was this strategy sufficient?

Mr. SOPKO. No.

Mr. COMER. Your report also says that current oversight mechanisms are inadequate. How much U.S. money has already spent on Afghan reconstruction?

Mr. SOPKO. The total amount on reconstruction is \$143.27 billion.

Mr. COMER. Do we know for certain that all the money of that \$143 billion actually made it to where it was intended to go in Afghanistan?

Mr. SOPKO. Oh, we know quite a bit of it didn't end up there. We actually did a report for a number of Congressmen, including Congressman Welch, who asked us to look at how much was wasted, stolen, and whatever, and I think we reported back in July 2018 just looking at what we looked at, and that was about one-third of the money that we looked at that our agency did was wasted, stolen, or didn't accomplish anything.

Mr. COMER. Is it possible that some of this money made it into terror groups?

Mr. SOPKO. Of course. Yes, of course.

Mr. COMER. What about the illicit drug trade?

Mr. SOPKO. Oh, that supports the Taliban and supports corruption. That is what I said. Corruption and narcotics is the oxygen that keeps the terrorist groups alive in Afghanistan, and many Taliban are working in the narcotics fields.

Mr. COMER. So, do you share my concern that U.S. taxpayer dollars are fronting billions of dollars to a corrupt country with no truly effective means of tracking it?

Mr. SOPKO. Yes, we are very concerned about that, and if you continue, that is why we say one of the risks is oversight. You got to have some oversight. Otherwise, you may as well just burn the money in Massoud Circle.

Mr. COMER. Well, I understand the difficulty of tracking money in a foreign country. The purpose of this committee, the Oversight Committee, is to ensure that taxpayer funds are spent efficiently and effectively.

To do this, we have to know where the money is going. I appreciate your work on the issue. But just for the record, and I have said this each of the four years I have been in Congress, I really don't see a viable long-term strategy for the United States in Afghanistan and I strongly support withdrawing the troops.

And I understand the problems that that country is going to have when the—when troops are gone. But, you know, the American taxpayers don't want to spend any more money in Afghanistan. This has been the sentiment from a majority of my constituents and I think a majority of Americans for many, many, many years now.

But I appreciate your work. Look forward to working with you in the future, and please let us know what we can do on this committee to be of assistance to you in tracking our U.S. taxpayer dollars.

Mr. SOPKO. Thank you.

Mr. LYNCH. The gentleman yields.

The chair now recognizes the gentlewoman from Florida, Ms. Wasserman Schultz, for five minutes.

Ms. WASSERMAN SCHULTZ. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

In addition to reports like the biennial High-Risk List and the Lessons Learned program, SIGAR regularly sheds light on areas where our reconstruction efforts in Afghanistan have, unfortunately, come up short.

For instance, Mr. Sopko, in September 2019, Chairman Lynch asked you to review facilities in Afghanistan that were constructed or financed by American taxpayers. Earlier this month, you released the final results of that review and you reported that billions of dollars that Congress had appropriated for reconstruction programs in Afghanistan went to facilities that have been underutilized and, in some cases, went completely unused or have deteriorated beyond repair.

For example, during followup inspections, SIGAR found that vehicle scanners at two border crossing points, purchased by DOD for \$2.8 million, was sitting unused. One scanner was, quote, "riddled with bullet holes" and a rocket had rendered it inoperable.

According to Afghan government officials, no one has been made responsible for fixing the scanners or even knew how to do that.

Mr. Sopko, as a senior member of the House Appropriations Committee, these reports of wasteful spending cause me great concern, and we have several other members on Appropriations on this—on this committee.

Can you provide some other examples of assets that SIGAR recently inspected that have gone unused or underutilized?

Mr. SOPKO. Well, I mean, one example is I believe we identified a number of dormitories for Afghan female soldiers or police that are empty, basically, because the Afghan government has not recruited nor are they interested in recruiting the women.

One example which I highlighted just less than a month ago was that we gave money-counting machines and bought them for the Afghan Ministry of Interior to put at the Karzai International Airport to count money, and they still haven't even been plugged in.

So this is years ago. This is the second time we reported on it. So, we do no checking of cash going—we, I mean, the Afghan government doesn't at the VIP and VVIP lounges at the airport.

So, there are a number of examples like that, ma'am, that just stuff is not being used.

Ms. WASSERMAN SCHULTZ. OK. Well, that is pretty troubling, and your report indicates that the most common reason these facilities and assets were not used or maintained was that the beneficiary, quote, "lacked the resources or capabilities to do so."

What does that tell you about the reconstruction projects the U.S. Government has funded and then turned over to the Afghan government?

Does it suggest that U.S. agencies didn't plan appropriately for what the Afghan government needed or could effectively use? And what can Congress do to help ensure that any future funding appropriated for reconstruction projects is spent efficiently and effectively?

Mr. SOPKO. I think you hit it on the nail. We are the problem in those situations because we don't require our agencies to look at sustainability.

You know, this is something we also raised—I think I raised within a year of coming on the job about a decade ago, that we should require, before any capital asset is provided, that the Afghan government even knows it, wants it, says they will use it, and they have the resources to keep using it. And those are the types of things we need to push and I think Congress needs to push.

And not just in Afghanistan. I would think the problem we have identified is a problem worldwide, and if we want to get a bigger bang for development budget we should require that outside of Afghanistan, too.

Ms. WASSERMAN SCHULTZ. Mr. Chairman, it feels like we are lighting money on fire. This is the classic definition of insanity.

We are appropriating funds for things that no one is checking to see whether the Afghan government will actually need or use them, has the ability to sustain them, or maintain their upkeep, and, like, it just feels like a black hole.

And I appreciate the opportunity to ask this question because that is what the Oversight Committee is for. Hopefully, we are going to be able to see our colleagues, and I can certainly followup as an appropriator, to make sure that we don't continue this vi-

cious cycle of appropriating funds for things that go unused or break and are never fixed, or never wanted.

So, I appreciate the opportunity to ask those questions and really, Mr. Sopko, thanks to—thanks to you and your staff for doing the important work you are doing.

I yield.

Mr. SOPKO. Congresswoman, could I just add one thing that you may be interested in and the appropriators should?

Mr. LYNCH. Very briefly. Very briefly. Very briefly.

Mr. SOPKO. I know, right. It is a problem with me. I talk too much. We are releasing a Lessons Learned report in another two months on monitoring and evaluation and what lessons have we learned, and I think you, as an appropriator, and, I think, authorizers would be very interested when that report comes out. We are happy to brief you when that report comes out.

Ms. WASSERMAN SCHULTZ. Thank you. I look forward to that.

Thank you so much, Mr. Chairman. I yield back.

Mr. LYNCH. The gentlelady yields, and we do appreciate the direction and the spirit of your questions. And I think that the new administration, as did the previous administration, struggles with that, that whole problem.

So, that is the heart of this hearing.

The chair now recognizes the gentlelady from California, Ms. Speier, for five minutes.

Ms. SPEIER. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Inspector General Sopko, once again, I would just like to sing your praises. You have been, really, an important voice for us to evaluate how our money is being spent and how it has been spent poorly.

Let me ask you a couple of questions on the outset. You said there are 18,000 contractors from the United States in Afghanistan, correct?

Mr. SOPKO. Well, 18,000 defense contractors. Only about 7,000—excuse me, 13,000 are U.S.

Ms. SPEIER. Thirteen thousand are U.S.?

Mr. SOPKO. Yes, ma'am.

Ms. SPEIER. And is it your expectation that if our service members leave, we are still going to have 13,000 contractors there?

Mr. SOPKO. Pursuant to the agreement, as far as we know, they have to leave on May 1 also. So, the only ones left would be Afghan nationals. So, the 13,000 U.S. would leave as well as the—I am sorry, 6,000 U.S. and 7,000 third-country nationals, so 13,000 total.

Ms. SPEIER. My concern is, in the end, we may be funding contractors in Afghanistan once we take our troops out. But that is probably a separate question.

Your report talks about the fact that we have spent about \$800 million on women and girls in 18 years. There are a third of the girls now in school in Afghanistan, which wasn't the case before.

There are 86 women in parliament. Ten thousand women are now doctors, medical professionals. The midwives have gone from 400 to 4,000, so now 60 percent of the women in Afghanistan have a medical professional present when they deliver.

But I fear that all of that is going to come to an end. A letter we just received from the Afghan women suggests that the Taliban

has increased threats against NGO's, informing them in writing that no program can be run in which it involves women leaving the home.

The Taliban has also required the removal of community development councils to which people's views and needs are represented.

As a result of direct threats and attacks on those working in girls' education, hundreds of schools have been closed. Since the signing of the agreement in February 2020, civic leaders and their families have been targeted and murdered. Two women judges were killed on the way to work.

So, it sounds like no matter what happens, women and girls are at grave risk. Can you speak more about that, please?

Mr. SOPKO. Of course.

The issues and the numbers you raise are scary and it kind of tells you a little bit about the country we are in. Despite everything we have done, it is one of the worst places to be a woman in Afghanistan, particularly a rural—living in a rural environment.

It is only in the cities where we have seen some real good improvement and we—and the Taliban have not indicated much that makes you feel comfortable that if they are in the government they are going to support women and girls.

But the one thing to keep in mind is even the Afghan government, the current Afghan government, hasn't really done a lot. I mean, there just was an announcement—I don't know if you saw it, ma'am—that the Ministry of Education banned Afghan girls singing the national anthem with Afghan boys. No explanation. That came out of the blue. But that sort of tells you about a cultural divide between the views of many Afghans, including Afghans in the government.

Ms. SPEIER. You know, for the longest time, Walter Jones was the only Republican that wanted to see us out of Afghanistan. But it is interesting to see Ranking Member Comer speak about the importance of getting out.

I, obviously, have been interested in seeing us leave Afghanistan, but I have also come to believe that if we don't have ears on the ground, al-Qaeda will be able to blossom. Blossom is the wrong word. Will be able to grow again and we will be at grave risk.

So, I have come to believe we need some, you know, boots on the ground to just protect ourselves and that that requires committing some money to Afghanistan. I am willing to do it.

Would you comment on that and what your take is on what happens to us, in 28 seconds?

Mr. SOPKO. If there are no boots on the ground, we lose a leverage for all of these issues—women, girls, and all that. And if there is no oversight, you can just forget about any of that money that we appropriate for women and girls ending up helping women and girls. I agree totally with you, ma'am. We need it.

Ms. SPEIER. My time has expired. I yield back.

Mr. LYNCH. The gentlewoman yields.

The chair now recognizes the gentleman from Georgia. Mr. Johnson, for five minutes.

Mr. Johnson of Georgia. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. And, Mr. Sopko, thank you for being here today to speak about your report

and the role that the United States must play in the reconstruction of Afghanistan.

Though our goal is to remove U.S. civilian and military presence from Afghanistan, I do agree with Congresswoman Jackie Speier. I have evolved on that issue, and we cannot create a vacuum of power in the wake of our absence that would destabilize the region and our rebuilding efforts.

This committee will play a crucial role in ensuring that U.S. tax dollars overseas, which currently number at more than a billion dollars, are being used effectively to assist in the pathway to democracy, a task that will be more difficult without a presence on the ground.

Mr. Sopko, in your 2021 High-Risk List, you write, quote, “A reduced U.S. civilian and military presence in Afghanistan, amid a deteriorating security environment, could create new challenges for conducting effective oversight of U.S.-funded programs, grants, and contracts for reconstruction work,” end quote.

Sir, can you briefly describe the role that the U.S. military plays in overseeing reconstruction work in Afghanistan, and also, how has COVID-19 created barriers to the performance of this important work?

Mr. SOPKO. The U.S. military delivers. Now, when we talk about reconstruction, it is not just building roads and paying for clinics and education. We are talking about the training and supporting the Afghan military and police.

So, the military role there is important in doing the training and advising and then helping the Afghans actually use the weapons and use the material we give them. So, they play an important role.

COVID has been detrimental to that because we don’t want our soldiers to get hurt with COVID and a lot of them have come down. So, that has limited their capability getting out.

Likewise, it has limited our ability, being SIGAR, as well as state and AID employees from getting out. So, COVID has been very detrimental, and also detrimental to the Afghan economy.

Mr. Johnson of Georgia. Thank you.

What partnerships in the region do we have that will play key roles in assisting our continued oversight of reconstruction if all U.S. troops should be withdrawn from Afghanistan, and how could we conduct oversight if the remaining troops currently on the ground are withdrawn?

Mr. SOPKO. It would be very difficult to keep conducting oversight although, you know, we can do it, we being the U.S. Government, if we have the support of security officials at the State Department regional security office.

When you asked the question about regional governments helping us to do oversight, I would personally say none of them can help us. I don’t think we want an Iranian inspector inspecting to see whether our funds are being performed, or a Pakistani inspector and definitely not a Russian inspector, or Chinese.

So, if we can’t—I, personally, as an inspector general would not recommend turning over our oversight function to either the Russians, the Iranians, the Pakistanis, or the Chinese.

Mr. Johnson of Georgia. Yes. How are you planning to carry out your oversight responsibilities if U.S. forces do, ultimately, leave Afghanistan as planned on May 1?

Mr. SOPKO. It is going to be extremely difficult. We have reached out and have in the past utilized certain technologies—drone satellite technology. That helps a bit.

We have also had a very strong relationship and done a lot of training with some Afghan civil society organizations, and they help us get out to places we are not permitted to go to.

But we would probably continue doing that, but we would be seeking your help and the help of Congress to get additional security funding and security support from the U.S. State Department, which has regional security officers to help us if we need to get out.

You need to get out there and kick the boots—get boots on the ground and kick the tires, and it is extremely difficult. The best we got is some Afghan civil society organizations we have trained and we monitor who have done that for us.

Mr. Johnson of Georgia. Thank you. My time has expired and I yield back.

Mr. LYNCH. I thank the gentleman. The gentleman yields back.

First of all, I want to thank all the members who participated in today's hearing. I realize that today is the travel day for Congress. That was not the case when we originally scheduled this hearing.

I want to give great credit to Inspector General Sopko for his work and for the work of his staff. We really do appreciate you and the way you have handled this under very, very difficult circumstances.

So, in closing, I want to thank our panelist.

Mr. GROTHMAN. I would like to say something.

Mr. LYNCH. It is a travel day so we are all running for flights.

Mr. Grothman, if I go back to you, I am going to have to go back to every other member. You know what I mean?

So, I want to thank our panelists for their remarks. I want to commend my colleagues for participating in this important conversation.

Mr. GROTHMAN. I am going to object.

Mr. LYNCH. Without objection, all members will have five legislative days within which to submit additional questions for the witnesses to the chair, which will be forwarded to the witnesses for their response, and I ask our witness to please respond as promptly as you are able.

This hearing is adjourned and, again, I thank the gentleman for his attendance and for all his incredibly hard work. Thank you.

This hearing is now adjourned.

Mr. GROTHMAN. Congressman Lynch?

Mr. LYNCH. Yes?

Mr. GROTHMAN. Can I just say something to you?

Mr. LYNCH. Oh, sure.

Mr. GROTHMAN. I was cutting you off.

I didn't say—I did want to say something that was relative important and the reason I want to say it is I do believe that if the Biden administration stays, I will not be critical of them.

OK. I certainly understand we have an obligation to our allies. We have an obligation to our friends in the Afghan government, and we don't want to strengthen our opponents.

And I think it is an important thing for me to say. I wish I could have said it when the other people were listening because they think some Republicans were—you know, kind of trying to put Biden in a box there. But I wanted to make clear, as the ranking member of the subcommittee, that that was my opinion.

Mr. LYNCH. And I appreciate—I appreciate the spirit in which the gentleman makes those remarks and they are welcome. They are welcome, and I think the gentleman fully understands the difficulty of the administration. And we certainly appreciate the courtesy and the spirit in which the gentleman states his position.

Thank you.

[Whereupon, at 12:17 p.m., the subcommittee was adjourned.]

