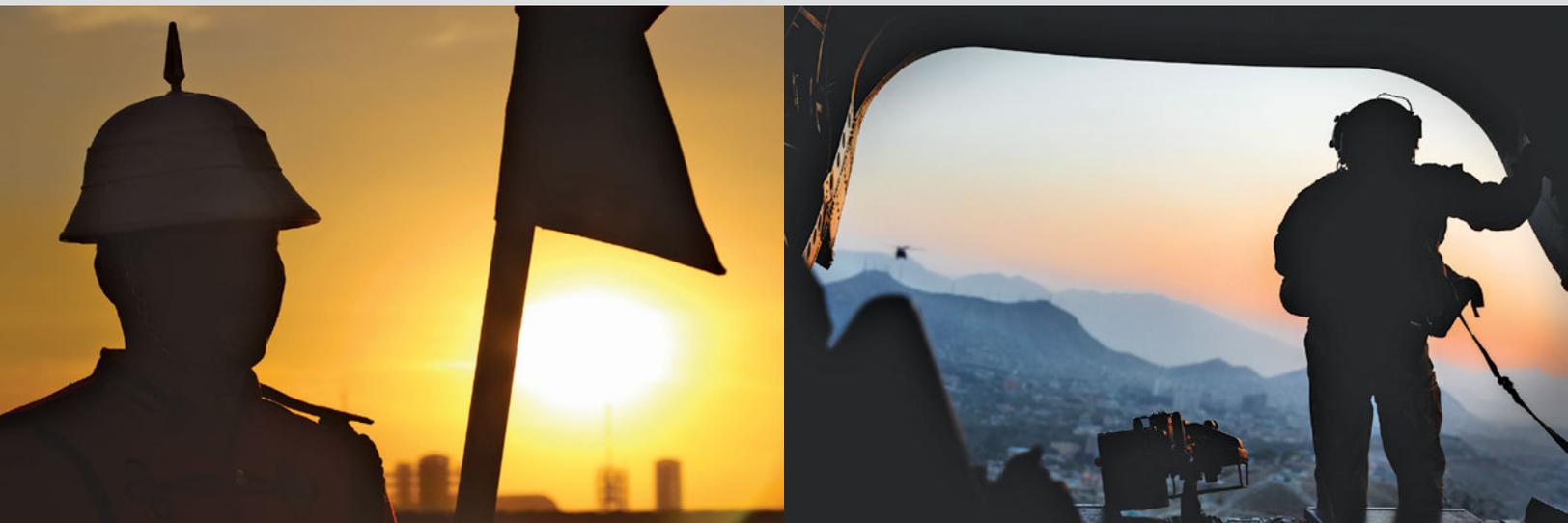


LEAD INSPECTOR GENERAL FOR OVERSEAS CONTINGENCY OPERATIONS

LEAD IG SPECIAL REPORT



OBSERVATIONS FROM TRAVEL TO IRAQ, AFGHANISTAN, AND QATAR

MARCH 2018

Cover Credits: (Top row) U.S. Army photo, DoD photo. (Bottom row) U.S. Air Force photo.

FOREWORD

This report describes our trip in January 2018 to Iraq, Afghanistan, and Qatar in support of our mandate to provide oversight of Operation Inherent Resolve (OIR) and Operation Freedom’s Sentinel (OFS). This was the second joint trip by the three Inspectors General (IGs) responsible for Lead IG oversight of overseas contingency operations—the Inspectors General of the Department of Defense, Department of State, and United States Agency for International Development. We previously visited Iraq and Afghanistan together in February 2017.

During this trip, we met with senior U.S. and Coalition officials, including the military leadership, the U.S. ambassadors, the U.S. country teams, and the U.S. mission directors for humanitarian assistance, in Iraq and Afghanistan. We also met with Iraqi and Afghan officials, including Afghan President Ashraf Ghani. We were briefed by them on the policies, strategies, and events on the ground related to each overseas contingency operation.

We want to thank the U.S. officials, as well as the Iraqi and Afghan officials, who met with us and provided their candid insights into their areas of responsibility. This trip allowed us to see first-hand challenges and progress in overseas contingency operations, and to hear about strategies for the future. The meetings and briefings will also help us better fulfill our role in providing coordinated oversight and regular quarterly reports on each overseas contingency operation.

Finally, during our trip, we met with our employees who are deployed to Iraq, Afghanistan, and Qatar to work on oversight activities. We thank them for their dedication to their important mission.



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INTRODUCTION

This report contains observations by the Inspectors General (IGs) for the Department of Defense (DoD), the Department of State (DoS), and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) regarding Operation Inherent Resolve (OIR) and Operation Freedom's Sentinel (OFS) based on their January 2018 visit to Iraq, Afghanistan, and Qatar. OIR is the United States and Coalition effort to defeat ISIS in Iraq and Syria, and OFS includes United States counterterrorism operations in Afghanistan and United States support of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) mission to train, advise, and assist Afghanistan's security forces.

LEAD INSPECTOR GENERAL OVERSIGHT RESPONSIBILITIES

The Lead IG agencies are responsible for providing oversight of these overseas contingency operations (OCO). Our agencies conduct audits, evaluations, and inspections of projects and programs implemented in each area of the operation, formulate joint oversight plans, and issue quarterly reports to the United States Congress on the status of each operation.

Congress established these Lead IG responsibilities in Section 8L of the Inspector General Act in 2013. This interagency structure is intended to take full advantage of the resources of existing IGs to achieve timely, efficient, and comprehensive oversight, without the need to incur the costs and delays of setting up and then disbanding new oversight organizations for each OCO. As the three of us collaborate to fulfill our Lead IG responsibilities, we also coordinate closely with the Government Accountability Office (GAO), the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR), other IGs with OCO-related responsibilities, and other DoD oversight entities. In addition, our collaborative oversight on each OCO supplements our individual responsibilities to oversee our respective departments and agencies.

The Lead IG model for OCO oversight has proven to be a flexible, effective, and cost-efficient way to bring whole-of-government oversight to complex OCO operations in which multiple Federal agencies are implementing interrelated programs in difficult environments. The Lead IG model has worked well for OIR and OFS since 2014, and the Lead IG model was especially helpful for oversight of the short-duration Operation United Assistance, related to the West African Ebola crisis in 2015. We anticipate that it will be similarly effective with respect to the recently declared OCO, Operation Pacific Eagle-Philippines, which is the United States effort to support the Philippine government's fight against ISIS and other extremist groups.

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OVERVIEW OF THE JANUARY 2018 VISIT

Our recent trip to Iraq, Afghanistan, and Qatar, which took place from January 13 through January 20, 2018, focused on OIR and OFS and was undertaken to obtain information so that we can perform our oversight and reporting responsibilities more fully and effectively. Just as each OCO requires a whole-of-government approach, we approached this trip collaboratively and traveled together as part of our effort to provide whole-of-government oversight. This was our second joint trip into Iraq and Afghanistan.

In Iraq, Afghanistan, and Qatar, we met with senior U.S. and Coalition officials (including the military commanders, ambassadors, and USAID mission directors) and Iraqi and Afghan government officials. We were briefed about significant changes in policy, strategy, events on the ground, and the air campaign involving OIR and OFS. In particular, these meetings highlighted the military, diplomatic, and humanitarian assistance challenges that remain in the fights against ISIS in Iraq and Syria and the Taliban and other extremist groups in Afghanistan.

We provide more detailed descriptions of our observations in separate sections on OIR and OFS below. Specifically, we identify the key developments in each OCO and the challenges that remain. This trip report does not purport to (and, indeed, cannot) provide a comprehensive assessment of the current status of each OCO. However, given that both OCOs are at significant inflection points, we believe this document can provide an important snapshot in time based on our meetings and other information obtained in the field and pertinent observations regarding the OCOs and our oversight.

A U.S. Air Force C-17 lands at Kabul International Airport, Afghanistan. (U.S. Air Force photo)

As a result of the progress in Iraq, the United States military has begun shifting some military resources from OIR to support OFS in Afghanistan.

OPERATION INHERENT RESOLVE

During our visit to Iraq, we received interagency briefings on key aspects of the effort to defeat ISIS. We received a military campaign update from the commander, officers, and staff of Combined Joint Task Force–Operation Inherent Resolve (CJTF-OIR) and a series of interagency briefings at the United States Embassy in Baghdad regarding the current priorities and challenges in the whole-of-government effort to defeat ISIS. The U.S. Ambassador to Iraq, Douglas Silliman, his country team, and CJTF-OIR staff provided an overview of stabilization efforts, security sector reform, governance and political issues, and strategic messaging, and addressed management and security issues. Because of the key roles of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and other international organizations, the senior representatives in Iraq from those entities participated in one of our discussions on stabilization.

Based on these discussions and our own observations, the military progress against ISIS presents both opportunities and risks. Although the military campaign eliminated ISIS’ physical control of Iraqi territory and reduced its capabilities, ISIS itself has not been eliminated. If Iraq does not make progress in the effort to provide security, economic opportunity, and humanitarian relief to its citizens, ISIS or other extremist groups could easily reemerge.

MILITARY EFFORTS

The military offensive to defeat ISIS made dramatic progress since our previous visit to Iraq in February 2017. With the support of the United States-led Coalition, Iraqi Security Forces have retaken control of Iraq’s urban centers even more quickly than expected, and Coalition-supported forces in Syria have also made progress against ISIS in Syria. As a result of the progress in Iraq, the United States military has begun shifting some military resources from OIR to support OFS in Afghanistan. However, ISIS and other



Lead Inspector General Glenn A. Fine, meets with Lieutenant General Abdul Amir al-Shimmari, Iraq MoD Inspector General. (LIG photo)

extremists remain an insurgent threat in Iraq and Syria, and the primary challenge now is to transition effectively from offensive military operations to short- and long-term stabilization operations.

As part of this transition, the Coalition is working with the Iraqi government to identify, train, and equip Iraqi hold and counterterrorism forces that are acceptable to local populations and the Iraqi government. To ensure ISIS does not resurface in areas from which it has been removed, these Iraqi hold and counterterrorism forces must be able to counter insurgent activities without alienating local populations. Achieving this goal requires successfully integrating the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), an Iraqi government-sponsored umbrella group of militias and volunteer forces that were mobilized to fight ISIS, into the regular Iraqi Security Forces, and establishing a path for PMF members to join the civilian workforce. These steps are necessary because several of the most prominent PMF elements are mainly Shia and aligned with Iran, and are generally not accepted by local Sunni populations.

A new phase in Coalition support of Iraqi Security Forces, called “Reliable Partnership,” forms the security foundation for the ongoing and longer-term stabilization efforts, including Ambassador Silliman’s declared goal of making 2018 “a year of economic growth.”

IMMEDIATE STABILIZATION

Immediate stabilization of areas that ISIS previously controlled has been a critical challenge in Iraq, and the end of offensive military operations has amplified the importance of these efforts. More than 2.5 million Iraqi civilians remain displaced from their homes. The Iraqi government and the UNDP, working through local officials and with U.S. and Coalition assistance, are struggling to reestablish local security and restore basic services so that displaced civilians can safely return to their communities. These efforts are further complicated by the fact that ISIS extensively booby-trapped many communities. Explosives removal from key infrastructure sites and education on explosives hazards are significant hurdles to stabilizing many communities. While immediate stabilization to enable civilians to return to their homes is only a first step, it sets the foundation for potential economic development and longer-term stability in Iraq.

UNDP and United States Embassy officials expressed concern that delays in stabilizing West Mosul and other areas taken from ISIS may exacerbate Sunni discontent with Iraq’s Shia-led central government, which could again make these communities vulnerable to extremist ideologies. Efforts to stabilize these areas have been slow due to the catastrophic amount of damage wrought by ISIS and the military campaign to defeat it and because of limitations on funding of stabilization efforts.

ECONOMIC REFORMS

As immediate stabilization efforts continue, national economic reforms and economic progress are also critical to the long-term stability and reconstruction of Iraq. The U.S. Government and other traditional donors are not funding significant reconstruction

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of areas devastated by ISIS and the military campaign to defeat it. Furthermore, we were informed that the Iraqi economy is heavily dependent on government spending, which accounts for 50 percent of its GDP. Moreover, oil revenue, which accounts for 90 percent of government revenue, is less reliable than in the past and cannot sustain the economy indefinitely. As a result, according to the briefings we received, to achieve longer-term stability, the Iraqi government needs to institute economic reforms to create an environment that will attract and protect diversified private enterprise and business operations. Ensuring security, as discussed above, is critical to this effort and is an essential first step. However, inefficient government processes and corruption can also impact private business activity and limit financial returns.

Recognizing the importance of these efforts, the United States Embassy in Baghdad and the international community have made Iraq's economic reform and private investment efforts a top priority for 2018. The Kuwait International Conference for the Reconstruction of Iraq, held shortly after our visit and attended by then Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, is one example of that prioritization. We were briefed by the U.S. interagency team about these reforms. They expressed some optimism for increased private investment but reported that Iraqi reform efforts continue to face significant challenges. Most notably and notwithstanding some progress, corruption remains widespread with 28 percent of Iraqis polled in a recent survey citing corruption as the country's biggest challenge.

INFORMATION CAMPAIGN

In addition, promoting public perceptions that match reality on the ground continues to be a critical challenge in Iraq. As highlighted in the original strategy underlying OIR, strategic messaging remains important to permanently defeating ISIS and promoting government legitimacy and long-term stability in Iraq. However, adversaries ranging from extremist groups to other nations have robust messaging and disinformation campaigns intended to mischaracterize Coalition efforts, stoke sectarian divisions, and foment instability. Although the interagency teams we met with acknowledged and described some coordinated efforts to meet this challenge, we did not hear about an overall, coordinated strategy that would counter disinformation campaigns and support key initiatives.

ELECTIONS

Secure and credible elections in May 2018 are an essential next step in bolstering the legitimacy of the Iraqi government, a prerequisite for continuing stability. However, the Iraqi government faces a daunting challenge in providing the security and infrastructure necessary to conduct upcoming elections: over 2.5 million Iraqis are still displaced, security is still questionable in many areas, and longstanding sectarian disputes and differences are reemerging, as highlighted by the Kurdish referendum and the reaction to it from the Iraqi government. The Coalition, the UN, and other international partners view secure and credible elections as critical for government legitimacy and reconciliation, and they are supporting Iraqi efforts to hold the elections on schedule.

PERSONNEL TURNOVER AND SECURITY RESTRICTIONS

We also learned that U.S. contributions to efforts in all of these areas are challenged by limited resources, short military and civilian tours, and the security restrictions that prevent most civilians from leaving Baghdad's international zone and allow only a handful of civilians to enter Syria. Two Embassy Baghdad initiatives have helped mitigate the turnover problem. The Embassy has enhanced the quality of life for most key leadership positions to entice voluntary tour extensions from one to two years, primarily by adhering to rest and recuperation schedules and managing staff numbers to minimize double occupancy of quarters. In addition, the Embassy has added continuity to contract management for Embassy operations, including the Embassy-managed support contract of the DoD-occupied Union III compound, by creating a 5-year term position in which a trained contracting officer serves on-site to oversee key contracts and task orders implemented in Iraq.

SYRIA

Although we did not travel to Syria, and our trip was not mainly focused on United States efforts in Syria, our CJTF-OIR briefings and discussions addressed some issues in Syria, particularly the military conflict there. We were briefed about U.S. and Coalition air operations during our trip. Deconfliction of air operations and avoiding engagement with other forces was described as an ongoing challenge, as Syrian and Russian forces continued operations throughout Syria.

In addition, it remains unclear precisely what role the United States and the Coalition will ultimately play in Syria, but the Administration stated it is committed to maintaining an American military presence in Syria to advance certain objectives. This military presence is intended to support United States goals, including the enduring defeat of ISIS, a political settlement of the civil war, diminished Iranian influence in Syria, the safe and voluntary return of Syrian internally displaced persons and refugees, and a Syria free from weapons of mass destruction.

Although discussions of Syria on our trip focused primarily on military issues, the military commanders praised the USAID- and DoS-led stabilization and humanitarian efforts in the Middle Euphrates River Valley, and in particular the efforts in Raqqah, as a prime example of the value and success of DoD, DoS, and USAID cooperation on the ground.

SUMMARY

The briefings we received in Iraq reinforced the importance of a whole-of-government approach to the United States effort to defeat ISIS. A successful military campaign is necessary but not sufficient to ensure ISIS's lasting defeat. Rather, long-term success against ISIS depends on the interagency follow-on efforts. Because United States and international resources are limited, effective and efficient collaboration with the Iraqi government and our partners in Syria is essential to ensure ISIS's elimination.



The Inspectors General responsible for Lead IG oversight meet with Afghan President Ashraf Ghani and his cabinet ministers in Kabul. (LIG photo)

OPERATION FREEDOM'S SENTINEL

United States efforts in Afghanistan have evolved substantially since our last visit in February 2017. In August, the United States launched a new South Asia strategy and in anticipation of the new strategy, President Ashraf Ghani committed Afghanistan to a new Compact on reforms. U.S. personnel with whom we met expressed cautious optimism regarding the potential effects of these new initiatives. However, the terror threat in Afghanistan remains high and deadly, and it is uncertain whether these new initiatives will make a lasting difference.

The new United States strategy emphasizes a “conditions-based” approach in Afghanistan and has given military commanders additional resources and broader authority to target the Taliban and its narcotics-based finances.

During our trip, we received updates on current initiatives and challenges from senior U.S. officials and met with U.S. and NATO Resolute Support commanders and staff for updates and discussion of the counterterrorism and train, advise, and assist missions. We also received a tour of Afghan Air Force (AAF) training operations. The U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan, John Bass, his country team, and the Combined Security Transition Command—Afghanistan commander provided a high-level overview that included the new South Asia strategy and the Compact, in which the Afghan government holds itself accountable for meeting specified security sector, economic policy, and governance reforms, and for pursuing peace and reconciliation with the Taliban.

We met with President Ghani and his cabinet ministers to discuss Afghan reform efforts under the Compact and the Compact’s benchmarks and milestones for achieving reform. We also received a series of focused briefings from senior U.S. members of the Compact’s working groups. These discussions provided substantive updates and gave us an opportunity to assess whole-of-government collaboration as well as the progress and challenges of these efforts.

MILITARY EFFORTS

The new United States strategy emphasizes a “conditions-based” approach in Afghanistan and has given military commanders additional resources and broader authority to target the Taliban and its narcotics-based finances. Some of the additional resources, including key air assets, are being made available sooner than expected due to the progress of OIR in Iraq and Syria. The military commanders expressed optimism that the more aggressive and persistent military strikes enabled by these changes can help force at least some Taliban factions into negotiations and reconciliation.

The commanders told us that the Afghan Special Security Forces (ASSF) and the AAF are major contributors to this more aggressive campaign. They stated that developing these two forces has been the most successful aspect of the NATO Resolute Support train, advise, and assist mission. The Afghan government and Resolute Support mission have made it a top priority to increase the size and capabilities of the ASSF and AAF.

The Resolute Support training mission has also emphasized building a more effective national police force and local hold forces, efforts that, if successful, would relieve the ASSF of the need to act as a hold force in areas cleared of the Taliban, ISIS-Khorasan (ISIS-K), or al Qaeda remnants. More effective police and hold forces are also critical to the Afghan focus on securing government control of population centers and, more specifically, to its goal to bring 80 percent of Afghanistan’s population under government control by 2020. Senior U.S. military officials stated that rather than focusing on control of land, the Afghan and NATO strategy to achieve this goal involves maintaining supporting capabilities near the villages and cities where a large percentage of the population resides.

However, it is too early to tell whether this current focus on population centers coupled with the aggressive campaign against Taliban finances will overcome the resiliency and adaptability demonstrated by the Taliban over the last 17 years.

United States commanders view Afghanistan’s recent initiation of mandatory retirements under the new Afghan law, known as the “Inherent Law,” as one of the most positive developments in the long struggle to improve Afghan security forces. This law, which reduces the mandatory retirement age from 70 to 62, is prompting the retirement of ensconced senior military leaders, many of whom reportedly rose to power through patronage, and replacing them with younger, combat-experienced, NATO-trained military leaders promoted by merit. Even with these military leadership changes, many institutional obstacles remain in the overall effort to reform Afghan security forces and the Ministries of Defense and Interior that manage those forces.

PAKISTAN

A key component of the United States’ South Asia strategy is pressuring Pakistan and other regional actors to stop actions that compromise Afghanistan’s stability and instead to make positive contributions toward strengthening and stabilizing the

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Afghan National Policemen unload confiscated drugs onto a pile of wood and tires during a controlled drug burn at Bost Airfield, Afghanistan. This periodic burn included opium, heroin, hashish, various chemicals, alcohol and morphine. (U.S. Marine Corps photo)

Afghan government. As has been widely discussed, the Taliban and other extremist organizations obtain safe haven and support in Pakistan. United States officials with whom we met stated that Afghanistan's ability to achieve peace or reconcile with the Taliban will be diminished if this continues. In addition to high-level diplomatic pressure on Pakistan, the United States recently withheld military aid to Pakistan, as it has previously. However, it remains unclear whether United States efforts under the new South Asia strategy will meaningfully alter Pakistan's behavior.

NARCOTICS PRODUCTION

Narcotics production and trafficking remain primary sources of revenue for the Taliban. A primary goal in increasing the aggressiveness of the ongoing military campaign is to have a greater effect on Taliban financing obtained from narcotics. The United States has invested significantly in counter-narcotics efforts in Afghanistan for many years, but Afghanistan nonetheless remains the world's leading supplier of opium. Moreover, Afghan poppy production was at an all-time high in 2017, and an estimated 60 percent of Taliban finances—likely exceeding \$100 million a year—comes from narcotics. U.S. officials are optimistic that the ongoing military campaign that includes a focus on counter-narcotics will be productive, but commanders also stated that on-the-ground effectiveness would be improved if more civilian agency expertise, such as Drug Enforcement Administration resources, were available to support those operations. The DoS and Drug Enforcement Administration programs provide training, advice, and assistance to Afghan officials, but the limited number of civilian agency personnel and the restrictions on their movements due to security concerns prevent them from fully participating in counter-narcotics efforts.

THE AFGHAN COMPACT

The Afghan Compact describes a roadmap for reform. In our meeting with President Ghani and his ministers, they expressed a strong commitment to the Compact and described progress on some reforms. Ambassador Bass, his country team, and senior military officials also expressed commitment to the Compact roadmap and process

to drive Afghan reforms. The Afghan government has met preliminary milestones under many elements of the Compact. However, many of those milestones were the more easily achieved “low hanging fruit,” and it remains unclear how effectively the Compact will measure meaningful outcomes and actual reform. Moreover, it remains to be seen whether the Afghan government will sustain its commitment to the Compact and its underlying reforms. During the last 17 years of United States involvement in Afghanistan, such commitment has been inconsistent. The Compact has potential as a management tool to spur and measure reform activity, but there is still a long way to go before widespread and effective government reform takes hold.

ELECTIONS

Progress in meeting Compact milestones has lagged with respect to preparation for elections. This is a critical issue, since holding secure and credible elections (both parliamentary in 2018 and presidential in 2019) is important for the legitimacy of the Afghan government and its acceptance by the Afghan population. Significant resources from the U.S. and international partners are focused on supporting the Afghan government’s planning, administration, and security for these elections.

CORRUPTION

Corruption remains a fundamental challenge in Afghanistan, despite years of United States and international support for anticorruption efforts. Corruption is pervasive and deep rooted throughout Afghanistan, and it is hard to see how other objectives can be met if the Afghans are unable to address this issue.

The Compact incorporates anticorruption efforts throughout its security, governance, and economic benchmarks. The benchmarks recognize both the need to reduce the opportunity for corruption (including increasing transparency, instituting anti-corruption plans within the ministries, and drafting whistle-blower protection legislation) and to hold accountable those who engage in corruption by removing corrupt officials and improving Afghan investigative, prosecutorial, and judicial institutions.

U.S. officials expressed optimism regarding some recent efforts to reduce the opportunity for corruption, including passage of the Inherent Law, which, in addition to focusing on patronage, is removing corrupt military leaders. U.S. officials also noted ongoing efforts to simplify and increase the transparency of various business processes. However, U.S. officials expressed some continuing frustration with the Afghan judicial system’s inability to hold many corrupt officials accountable.

INFORMATION CAMPAIGN

Public perceptions of the Afghan government are integral to the success of reform efforts in each of the areas described above. The Afghan government and the United States must provide accurate information to the Afghan people about their efforts and

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Afghan President Ashraf Ghani visits the Afghan National Army Special Operations Command at Camp Commando, Kabul. (NSOCC-A photo)

actions and counter disinformation campaigns from other state and non-state actors that mislead the Afghan people and may undermine Afghan government progress and key initiatives.

PERSONNEL TURNOVER AND SECURITY RESTRICTIONS

Regular turnover of United States personnel continues to hinder United States efforts in Afghanistan. Short tours make it more difficult for key personnel to build the relationships, knowledge, ability, and focus needed to make progress on critical challenges before their tour ends. Some changes have been made in this area: several key United States leaders remain in Afghanistan longer, and more United States personnel have completed multiple tours in Afghanistan. Nonetheless, officials with whom we spoke stated that the constant “churn” of personnel remains an obstacle.

In addition, progress is hampered by the inability of U.S. personnel to regularly interact face-to-face with the Afghan people or personally observe projects because of security concerns and cumbersome requirements for traveling outside of the Embassy compound.

SUMMARY

The briefings we received in Afghanistan highlighted significant new initiatives in both the military campaign and government reform efforts. As in Iraq, we were informed of the importance of a whole-of-government and international approach, both to combat terrorism and to help the host nation’s people and government reform and stabilize

their country. The U.S. South Asia strategy expressly recognizes the importance of integrating all instruments of American power—diplomatic, economic, and military—and the Compact provides a roadmap for reform initiatives across the entire Afghan government. Nonetheless, it remains unclear how all of the initiatives fit together or how meaningful outcomes or “success” are measured. Our meetings in Afghanistan also highlighted that United States whole-of government contributions to these critical efforts are still impacted by limited resources, short military and civilian tours, and security restrictions that prevent most civilians from leaving Embassy Kabul.

CONCLUSION

We returned from our second joint trip to Iraq, Afghanistan, and Qatar with renewed appreciation for the complexities involved in executing these challenging OCOs and a better understanding of the critical areas to pursue in our oversight work. Our meetings with military leadership, U.S. Ambassadors, and interagency officials in both countries were open, candid, and comprehensive, and we appreciated the access and information we received. This trip provided us the opportunity to gain real-time insight into the challenges and successes in both OCOs. It will also be invaluable to us as we plan for audits, evaluations, inspections, and other oversight projects. We look forward to incorporating these insights in our joint and individual oversight efforts as we continue to report on the key developments and challenges of these OCOs, both in our oversight products and our quarterly reports to Congress.

A C-17 Globemaster III prepares to land in Baghdad, Iraq. (U.S. Air Force photo)



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