

# What Happened to the Afghan Air Force?

JAMES CUNNINGHAM

JOSEPH WINDREM

As the Taliban rolled into Kabul on 15 August 2021 on motorcycles and in stolen Humvees, they clearly did not fear the one thing that had kept them at bay for years: air strikes. US forces had withdrawn; even “over-the-horizon” US air support had ceased—and the Afghan Air Force (AAF), a crucial part of a security force that the United States had spent two decades and \$90 billion building and supporting, was nowhere in evidence.<sup>1</sup> In fact, nearly 25 percent of all Afghan military aircraft were hundreds of miles away in Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and Iran, where their AAF pilots fled to escape the Taliban.<sup>2</sup>

How did such a massive investment by the United States fail in such a key respect? And what lessons can be drawn from that failure?

## Introduction

Since 2014, the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) has had a program dedicated to identifying and preserving lessons from the US reconstruction experience in Afghanistan. The head of SIGAR, John F. Sopko, created the program in response to requests from the many generals, ambassadors, and Afghans he met with on his visits to Afghanistan who were looking for big-picture assessments of what had and had not worked. To date, SIGAR’s Lessons Learned Program has issued 13 reports covering a range of topics, from security-sector assistance to economic development to support for gender equality. These reports have identified more than 195 specific findings and lessons and made more than 146 recommendations to Congress, executive branch agencies, and the Afghan government. The following is based on SIGAR’s body of work on US security-sector reconstruction efforts, but primarily the work found in two lessons learned reports: *Reconstructing the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces* (2017) and *Divided Responsibility* (2019).

The absence of the AAF in the final days before the Taliban takeover was not some 11th-hour disaster. It was the last event in a long chain of causality that SIGAR has been sounding alarms about for years. In Afghanistan, the United States tried to create a military force that was a mirror image of America’s own—that is, ground forces that rely on overwhelming air superiority—without providing the Afghans with an air force that could maintain, train, and equip itself without US support.

The last straw came when US aircraft maintenance contractors left the country in May and June. Once that happened, “every aircraft that had battle damage or needed maintenance was grounded,” a former Afghan National Army (ANA) senior officer told SIGAR in a recent interview. “In a matter of months, 60 percent of [the US-provided UH-60 Black Hawk helicopters] were grounded, with no alternative plan by the Afghan government or U.S. government to bring them back to life.”<sup>3</sup> Given that reality, the decision by many AAF pilots to fly their planes to neighboring countries appears to have been a salvage effort: they took some fellow fighters and their families with them and kept their aircraft out of Taliban hands.

Although no one foresaw the speed with which the Afghan government collapsed, SIGAR has issued numerous reports—audits, inspections, special projects, quarterly reports to Congress, and lessons learned reports—pointing out problems that strongly suggested the collapse of the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF) was a foreseeable tragedy. The story of the United States’ unsuccessful attempt to create a self-sustaining air force in Afghanistan reflects the larger story of the US intervention in Afghanistan. Both were a complex mixture of calculated decisions, political pressure, bureaucratic inertia, and ad hoc decisions made by constantly changing military personnel who were never in the country long enough to build a lasting institutional memory. SIGAR was not the only agency noting problems: military observers and experts on Afghanistan did as well. In its regular reports to Congress, the Department of Defense (DOD) duly noted most of these problems, in detail. However, in keeping with the military’s “can-do” institutional culture, its top leaders kept their emphasis on progress and forward momentum. There was little incentive to weigh positive and negative information realistically—military careers are made by following orders, not demonstrating failure. To understand how the story unfolds, we begin with a brief history.

## **Background**

In the first years of the US involvement in Afghanistan, the United States took it for granted that American forces would provide the airpower the Afghan military needed; with the Taliban routed, the thinking was, US air support was only a temporary need. When it became clear the Taliban were regrouping, the development of an Afghan air capability became a key component of the US exit strategy. If the ANA could keep a motivated insurgency at bay with the help of US airpower and medevac capabilities, then—in theory—training Afghan pilots to do the same would get American troops home.

In 2005, then-Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld directed the US Army to formally rebuild an Afghan presidential airlift capability as part of the Afghan

National Army Air Corps. By 2007, that had morphed into plans for an Afghan Air Corps of 7,000 members, to be carved out of the ANA, and responsibility for training had shifted from the US Army to the US Air Force.<sup>4</sup> The goal: to “set the conditions for a fully independent and operationally capable” air corps to meet Afghanistan’s security needs.<sup>5</sup>

But what were those needs? From the beginning, US and Afghan views differed. “We are grateful for what America and the West are doing,” Afghan Colonel Khei Mohammad said in 2007, “but we need to rebuild our air corps faster. . . . We should have jets, helicopters, and cargo planes, so that we can defend our borders ourselves.” However, while Afghan military leaders seemed focused on air attack capabilities, Brig Gen Jay Lindell, USAF, was more interested in the mundane problem of logistics, citing “the immediate critical need . . . [for] air mobility capability.”<sup>6</sup>

### **Training Efforts and Acquisitions**

With those fundamental differences unresolved, the United States began work on training the fledgling air corps with around two dozen aircraft. By 2011, more than 30 coalition partners were participating in the AAF train-and-advise mission, and Afghan pilots hit several training milestones. Even so, the DOD noted the still-fledgling nature of the AAF, whose entire force was rated as “established but not operational.” Only 59 of 145 planned aircraft had been delivered, and the training mission lacked 65 promised trainers. Afghans renewed their requests for fighter jets and attack helicopters, which the Bush administration denied.<sup>7</sup>

That was to become a pattern: the United States provided equipment the US military *wanted* to give, not necessarily what the Afghans asked for. However justifiable any given equipping decision may have been, this policy had a long-term ramification: it kept the Afghan government from mastering the essential managerial role of learning how to equip its own military.

Several SIGAR reports focused on questionable equipping decisions, and a 2019 SIGAR report said, “After 18 years . . . the Afghans do not have a formal, consistent role in the equipping process.”<sup>8</sup> As a result, the report found, “the Afghans currently have limited ownership and understanding of the equipping process.” To develop that understanding, the report added, “the Afghans will need be able to play a larger role in the direction, execution, and tracking of their own equipment procurement, training contracts, and sustainment.”<sup>9</sup>

In retrospect, it seems clear that acquisition decisions by the US military might have benefited from more Afghan input. The grounded UH-60 Black Hawk helicopters mentioned previously by the former senior ANA officer are one example. At the start of the United States’ involvement with the AAF, the force was using

Mi-17 helicopters, the Russian-made workhorse used by the Afghan military since the Soviet occupation. Afghans were familiar with its repair and maintenance. In 2014, Russian forces invaded the Crimean Peninsula, to widespread international condemnations—and those tensions, combined with the increasing difficulty of getting spare parts for the Mi-17s, prompted the DOD's decision in 2016 to stop using Mi-17s and give the AAF something else.

That “something else” proved to be the UH-60 Black Hawk helicopter, made by Connecticut-based Sikorsky Aircraft. The control panel of the Mi-17 has dials and buttons; the UH-60 control panel is a wall-to-wall array of electronic readouts. The decision to supply state-of-the-art UH-60s instead of a simpler model meant a steep new learning curve for Afghan pilots, at a time when the number of US trainers was minimal. By the DOD's own estimates, the AAF would have been able to completely maintain a fleet of Mi-17 helicopters by 2019. With the introduction of the UH-60s, that best-case-scenario target date became 2030.<sup>10</sup>

Yet two years before Congress approved the purchase of the UH-60s helicopters, SIGAR had warned in an audit that the AAF was not capable of even maintaining the aging aircraft it had. “The Afghans lacked the capacity—in both personnel numbers and expertise—to operate and maintain both the SMW's [Special Mission Wing] existing fleet of 30 aging aircraft and a planned fleet of 48 new aircraft costing a total of \$771.8 million,” the audit said.<sup>11</sup> It was the first of many times over the ensuing years that SIGAR pointed out the Afghans' inability to maintain their own aircraft.<sup>12</sup>

As a result, the AAF relied largely on contractors for its aircraft maintenance. This in itself was unremarkable; the US Air Force uses contractors for a significant amount of maintenance work, too. The problems with the AAF's near-total reliance included the fact that the overwhelming majority of contractors were from the United States, the increased need for maintenance caused by a small air force taxed with meeting the needs of large, scattered ground forces, and the scanty pool of Afghans who could even be trained in a country where two-thirds of the population are illiterate in their own language, much less English.

Another problem emerged when young, literate pilots with English language skills proved to be more competent than older pilots, causing significant generational friction—especially when AAF leadership, respecting Afghan cultural norms, bypassed younger pilots to give older pilots flying assignments.<sup>13</sup> Corruption also played a role. In theory, Afghan trainees were selected based on merit and test scores, but—as SIGAR noted in a 2019 lessons-learned report—US military officials acknowledged that Afghan officials often awarded coveted training slots based on patronage and family connections.<sup>14</sup>

Other training issues originated within the US military bureaucracy. In 2013, the US Air Force authorized the purchase of four C-130s to supplement two the AAF already had. SIGAR raised questions the following year about the purchase, pointing out that the AAF was unable to maintain the C-130s it already had.<sup>15</sup> The DOD's solution was to hire more contractors—who would, in theory, help train more Afghan maintenance crews. However, the contract did not spell out any training goals. Additional problems arose because of a separate DOD policy that said US air advisors could fly only in aircraft that had been assessed as airworthy by a US Federal Aviation Administration–credentialed mechanic—which had the effect of barring Afghans from working on the planes.<sup>16</sup> There were, in short, any number of reasons why the process of building a truly self-sustaining air force from the ground up in Afghanistan was turning out to be agonizingly slow.

On its end, the United States had its own personnel problems. Decisions about equipping all branches of the Afghan military were often the result of inexperienced, untrained personnel who often lacked the expertise to identify more appropriate or cost-effective options.<sup>17</sup> What is more, they were never in their jobs for long, due to the DOD policy of deploying its personnel on one-year rotations—creating a constant personnel turnover that became known as “the annual lobotomy.” Not surprisingly, it was a system that produced bad decisions.

One notable example was the 2006 purchase of 20 refurbished G.222 fixed-wing aircraft for nearly half a billion dollars, which ended up being sold for scrap metal—an incident SIGAR first made inquiries about in 2014.<sup>18</sup> The planes were bought under time pressure, via a sole-source contract, to use up procurement funds before the end of the 2008 fiscal year. This was despite warnings from within the US Air Force that a virtually identical model had proved unreliable and expensive to maintain when the United States had used it in the 1990s. One year of use in Afghanistan's high altitudes and punishing desert conditions proved nothing had changed: the G222s were still unreliable and expensive to maintain. The US Air Force tried to sell the planes, found no takers, and eventually sold them to an Afghan scrap metal dealer for \$40,257.<sup>19</sup>

However, such missteps did not in themselves doom the US effort in Afghanistan. The more fundamental problem was the US military's proclivity for creating an Afghan military in its own image—and then failing to plan for the many challenges inherent in creating the air force that model required. A 2017 SIGAR lessons-learned report pointed out that, over time, Afghan officers became “addicted” to close air support—a dangerous dependency, considering the ticking clock and the still-developing AAF. As the report went on to say:

The tendency to train and assist the ANDSF with capabilities largely provided by the U.S. led-coalition extended beyond the provision of close air support. The



ANA became accustomed to other combat enablers, such as medical evacuations, intelligence gathering, and reconnaissance capabilities, that were largely underdeveloped or nonexistent within the ANA at the time. In April 2010, for example, Defense Minister Wardak told NATO assembly members that the ANA faced shortcomings in air transport, mobility, reconnaissance, and firepower. This view was largely shared by other ANA officers, who viewed the ANA as dependent on foreign support because of its own lack of heavy equipment, close air support, and intelligence.<sup>20</sup>

The United States did produce one highly effective program for training Afghan pilots and maintenance crews: the A-29 training program, which began in January 2015 at Moody Air Force Base, Georgia. US Air Force personnel selected as trainers for the program were required to attend the US Air Force's Air Advisor Academy to get teaching certifications and were then assigned to three-year tours as part of the 81st Fighter Squadron, based at Moody. After conducting introductory training for their Afghan students in Georgia, trainers and trainees were deployed to Afghanistan, where the trainers provided additional mentoring and training. Following the advisor's tour, the advisor would return to Georgia to train the next class of Afghan students. Long tours and sustained mentoring, both in the United States and in Afghanistan, allowed trainers to enforce consistent standards and establish rapport with their students and their Afghan counterparts.

By 2018, Afghan A-29 pilots were hitting targets with 88-percent accuracy, according to the DOD's December report to Congress that year—proof that an incremental training approach and long-term relationships could produce superior results. And then the DOD ended the program. That was not a reflection on the A-29 training program but the collateral casualty of a different problem: an increasing number of Afghans going AWOL from an English language course offered at Lackland Air Force Base, Texas, which prompted the DOD to end all US-based training for Afghan pilots. (Meanwhile, the short-lived A-29 program became a template for similar programs subsequently being operated in Nigeria and Lebanon.)<sup>21</sup>

All these issues were problems that could have been corrected, given enough time—but the AAF was running out of time. In February 2020, the Trump administration announced that it had arrived at a peace agreement with the Taliban for a complete US pullout within 14 months, conditioned on the Taliban's promises not to let Afghanistan become a haven for terrorists and to enter talks with the Afghan government. The so-called Doha agreement had a devastating effect on morale among the Afghan military forces, former Afghan National Army General Sami Sadat wrote in a *New York Times* op-ed, by putting “an expiration date on American interests in the region.”<sup>22</sup>

Across Afghanistan, Taliban forces slowly but inexorably began consolidating their small pockets of fighters, demolishing roads and bridges, and expanding their areas of control. Then came the Covid-19 pandemic, one effect of which was to restrict the use of US air assets. The AAF, already struggling to run air support, resupply, and medevac missions for Afghan ground troops, was “very effective but very small,” a former ANA official told SIGAR in a recent interview, and “the commandos were very effective, but now they were not getting the material support or the advisory or joint operation briefings that they used to get from the [United States]. Nonetheless, we have continued doing what we can.”<sup>23</sup> However, when scattered Afghan bases around the country began running out of ammunition and wounded soldiers began dying because of the lack of medical transport, the installations began falling to the Taliban. The result was an accelerating domino effect, ending with the 15 August flight of Afghan President Ashraf Ghani.

## **Conclusion**

An air force can be a game changer. If by 2021, the Afghan military had possessed a highly effective and self-sustaining air force, the outcome could have been different. Building a military that is reliant on airpower and then failing to provide that airpower considerably narrows the field of possible outcomes.

Building an air force is not the same as training an army. A soldier can be given a weapon, trained to use it, and then supplied with ammo. The soldier may even be able to find more ammo or weapons on the battlefield. Aircraft have no such agency. They are expensive and technically complex, their pilots and mechanics must be literate and highly trained, and their logistical supply chains must be robust to ensure fuel and parts are always available. Unlike an army, which can be more adaptable and resilient, an air force will fall apart in weeks without constant support.

The fate of the AAF was hardly the sole factor in the collapse of Afghanistan. As SIGAR’s work has shown, there were myriad reasons things went wrong, from corruption to mismanagement to lack of strategy and foresight. Moreover, there are more complex reasons—like morale and politics—that fall outside the purview of an oversight agency such as SIGAR.

However, one thing is clear: without political will and a long-term commitment—as we saw in Afghanistan—an air force cannot last long. It will be up to policy makers facing future contingencies to decide whether such an effort makes sense. Part of that decision would require a more realistic understanding of the limits of political will—both our own and that of other nations. ♣

### **James Cunningham**

Mr. Cunningham is the team lead for security-sector assistance for the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR). He led the teams for SIGAR's lessons-learned reports on the ANDSF and Divided Responsibility and is currently leading a team looking at the Afghan National Police. Mr. Cunningham has been working on Afghan security issues for 16 years, including a decade as an intelligence analyst with the Defense Intelligence Agency.

### **Joseph Windrem**

Mr. Windrem is the director of SIGAR's Lessons Learned Program, which identifies and preserves lessons from the US reconstruction experience in Afghanistan. He joined SIGAR in 2010 and has also written about the US-funded effort to build, train, equip, and sustain Afghan security forces—specifically troop strength and capability assessments. Before joining SIGAR, he worked on reconstruction and policy issues related to US efforts in Iraq.

### **Notes**

1. SIGAR, *Quarterly Report to the United States Congress*, 30 October 2021, 75.
2. SIGAR, *Quarterly Report to the United States Congress*, 30 October 2021, 77.
3. SIGAR interview with former senior ANA official, 14 October 2021.
4. SIGAR, *Reconstructing the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces: Lessons from the U.S. Experience in Afghanistan*, 17-62-LL, September 2017, electronic, 62.
5. Forrest L. Marion, "Training Afghan Air Force Pilots 2006–2011," *Air Power History*, Spring 2016, 24.
6. SIGAR, *Reconstructing the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces*, 62.
7. SIGAR, *Reconstructing the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces*, 62–63.
8. SIGAR, *Divided Responsibility: Lessons from U.S. Security Sector Assistance Efforts in Afghanistan*, 19-39-LL, June 2019, electronic, 102.
9. SIGAR, *Divided Responsibility*, 210.
10. SIGAR visit to Train Advise Assist Command–Air, 30 April 2017.
11. SIGAR, *Afghan Special Mission Wing: DOD Moving Forward with \$771.8 Million Purchase of Aircraft the Afghans Cannot Operate or Maintain*, 13-13-AR, June 2013.
12. SIGAR, *Afghan Special Mission Wing*, SIGAR, *Afghan Air Force: DOD Met the Initial Date for Fielding UH-60 Helicopters, but the Program Is at Risk of Not Having Enough Trained Pilots or the Capability to Maintain Future UH-60s*, 19-18-AR, January 2019; and SIGAR, *Reconstructing the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces*, 178, 180–181.
13. SIGAR, *Reconstructing the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces*, 112.
14. SIGAR, *Divided Responsibility*, 125.
15. SIGAR, Audit Alert Letter 14-80a-AL.
16. SIGAR, *Divided Responsibility*, 126.
17. SIGAR, *Divided Responsibility*, 106.
18. SIGAR, Inquiry Letter: G222 Disposition Notification Request, SIGAR-15-04-SP, 3 October 2014.
19. SIGAR, *Divided Responsibility*, 102–103; and SIGAR, *G222 Aircraft Program in Afghanistan: About \$549 Million Spent on Faulty Aircraft and No One Held Accountable*, 21-21-SPP, electronic, 2.
20. SIGAR, *Reconstructing the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces*, 106.
21. DOD vetting comments on the 2019 *Divided Responsibility* report; and SIGAR, *U.S.-Based Training for Afghanistan Security Personnel: Trainers Who Go Absent Without Leave Hurt*



*Readiness and Morale, and May Create Security Risks*, SIGAR-18-03-SP, 19 October 2017, electronic, 5, 7–9.

22. Sami Sadat, “I Commanded Afghan Troops This Year. We Were Betrayed,” guest essay, *New York Times*, 25 August 2021.

23. SIGAR interview with former senior ANA official, 14 October 2021.

### **Disclaimer**

The views and opinions expressed or implied in *JIPA* are those of the authors and should not be construed as carrying the official sanction of the Department of Defense, Department of the Air Force, Air Education and Training Command, Air University, or other agencies or departments of the US government or their international equivalents.