

Congress of the United States
House of Representatives

COMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND GOVERNMENT REFORM

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November 17, 2017

President Donald J. Trump
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Ave.
Washington, D.C. 20006

Dear Mr. President:

We are writing about a recent decision by the U.S. Department of Defense (DOD) to classify and discontinue public reporting of information essential to conducting oversight of U.S. spending in Afghanistan, and to request an immediate reversal of this policy. This information relates to the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF), has been unclassified for years, and was previously published publicly in quarterly reports by the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR).

SIGAR was notified recently by DOD of its plan to begin classifying information SIGAR used previously in its role of evaluating waste, fraud, and abuse in U.S. programs in Afghanistan. In its most recent quarterly report to Congress on October 30, 2017, SIGAR wrote:

In a significant development this quarter, U.S. Forces-Afghanistan (USFOR-A) classified or otherwise restricted information SIGAR has until now publicly reported. These include important measures of ANDSF performance such as casualties, personnel strength, attrition, capability assessments, and operational readiness of equipment.¹

The report also stated that the sudden classification of ANDSF data would “hinder” SIGAR’s ability to report progress in Afghanistan:

USFOR-A said that the casualty data belonged to the Afghan government, and the government had requested that it be classified. More than 60% of the approximately \$121 billion in U.S. funding for reconstruction in Afghanistan since 2002 has gone to build up the ANDSF, so the increased classification of ANDSF data will hinder SIGAR’s ability to publicly report on progress or failure in a key reconstruction sector.²

¹ Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, *Quarterly Report to the United States Congress* (Oct. 30, 2017) (online at www.sigar.mil/pdf/quarterlyreports/2017-10-30qr.pdf).

² *Id.*

Furthermore, these key indicators have been classified as NATO information, a special heightened classification that will restrict access to all but a handful of congressional staff.³

The spokesman of USFOR-A defended the decision to classify the information by explaining that it was classified at the Afghan government's request.⁴

Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction John F. Sopko has questioned this rationale, stating, "The Afghans know what's going on; the Taliban knows what's going on; the U.S. military knows what's going on. The only people who don't know what's going on are the people paying for it."⁵

The safety and security of U.S. and NATO forces in Afghanistan is of the highest importance. However, inappropriately classifying information undermines the ability of Congress to conduct meaningful oversight and restricts the ability of the American people to know how the U.S. government is spending billions of their tax dollars.

This is not the first time that the U.S. military has sought to classify information on ANDSF capabilities. In 2015, NATO-led Resolute Support classified the answers to 31 SIGAR questions, but quickly reversed course after SIGAR released its quarterly report.⁶ We strongly urge you to direct DOD to change course once again.

As Republican Senator Chuck Grassley said in 2015 during the military's previous attempt to classify information, "With few exceptions, the public's business ought to be public. Suddenly classifying information that was public for years raises questions."⁷

We request an immediate reversal of the policy to classify previously unclassified information relating to Afghanistan.

³ Internal Memorandum from Research and Analysis Directorate to Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (Oct. 31, 2017).

⁴ *Afghan War Data, Once Public, Is Censored in U.S. Military Report*, New York Times (Oct. 30, 2017) (online at www.nytimes.com/2017/10/30/world/asia/afghanistan-war-redacted-report.html?_r=0).

⁵ *Id.*

⁶ Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, *Quarterly Report to the United States Congress* (Oct. 30, 2017) (online at www.sigar.mil/pdf/quarterlyreports/2017-10-30qr.pdf).

⁷ *U.S. Suddenly Goes Quiet on Effort to Bolster Afghan Forces*, New York Times (Jan. 29, 2015) (online at www.nytimes.com/2015/01/29/world/us-suddenly-goes-quiet-on-effort-to-bolster-afghan-forces.html).

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If you have any questions about this request, please contact Nimit Dhir of the Minority staff at (202) 225-5051. Thank you for your attention to this matter.

Sincerely,



Elijah E. Cummings
Ranking Member



Stephen F. Lynch
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on National Security

cc: The Honorable Trey Gowdy, Chairman
Committee on Oversight and Government Reform

The Honorable Ron DeSantis, Chairman
Subcommittee on National Security

Senator John McCain, Chairman
Senate Armed Services Committee

Senator Jack Reed, Ranking Member
Senate Armed Services Committee

Speaker of the House Paul Ryan

House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi

Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell

Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer

Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis