



# Office of Inspector General

## United States Department of State

### **THE BIDEN ADMINISTRATION'S DISASTROUS WITHDRAWAL FROM AFGHANISTAN, PART I: REVIEW BY THE INSPECTORS GENERAL**

STATEMENT BY  
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GLOBAL MEDIA

BEFORE THE HOUSE OVERSIGHT AND  
ACCOUNTABILITY COMMITTEE

APRIL 19, 2023

## Introduction

Good morning, Chairman Comer, Ranking Member Raskin, and distinguished Members of the Committee. Thank you for inviting me to appear before you to discuss the Department of State Office of Inspector General's (State OIG or OIG) past and ongoing Afghanistan-related oversight work. I am pleased to be joined today by my counterparts from the Department of Defense (DoD) and United States Agency for International Development (USAID) OIGs, and the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR), with whom State OIG has a long history of collaboration and coordination.

As the primary oversight body for the Department of State (Department), we have long been committed to overseeing Department-led programs and operations in Afghanistan. Since 2008, OIG has maintained a permanent presence at Embassy Kabul, and our personnel were there on the ground conducting oversight until the ordered departure of non-emergency embassy personnel in April 2021. Our commitment to this oversight continues now as the Department maintains limited operations in Doha, Qatar. In fact, we have completed 14 related products since the U.S. military withdrawal in August 2021 and we have 11 ongoing or planned projects, including a large body of work that sheds light on important issues related to the Afghan Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) program, which I will detail in this testimony.<sup>1</sup>

## U.S. Embassy Kabul, Afghanistan

Following more than 20 years without a diplomatic presence in Afghanistan, the U.S. bilateral relationship with the country was renewed on December 17, 2001. Embassy Kabul itself was reopened 1 month later (January 17, 2002). Across nearly 2 decades of operations, it is well documented – including through our own work – that Embassy Kabul faced serious challenges in advancing U.S. interests in Afghanistan, not the least of which was a difficult security environment that severely limited movement outside the compound.

On February 29, 2020, the United States and the Taliban reached an agreement to withdraw U.S. forces from Afghanistan by May 2021. On April 14, 2021, President Biden announced that a final U.S. military withdrawal would begin in May and be completed by September 11, 2021. On April 27, 2021, the Department ordered the departure of non-emergency Embassy Kabul employees whose functions could be performed elsewhere and recommended that all U.S. citizens leave Afghanistan as soon as possible because of deteriorating security conditions. On August 12, 2021, the Department ordered remaining personnel to evacuate the embassy, and on August 31, Embassy Kabul announced it was suspending operations. On February 24, 2022, the Department announced the opening of the Afghanistan Affairs Unit in Doha, Qatar to carry out diplomatic relations with Afghanistan.<sup>2</sup>

Throughout the operating life of Embassy Kabul, State OIG conducted, and continues to

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<sup>1</sup> OIG, [Completed Afghanistan-Related Reports](#).

<sup>2</sup> The White House, [U.S. Withdrawal from Afghanistan](#).

conduct, impactful oversight of Department programs and operations under a coordinated oversight model.

## Oversight Coordination

OIG has maintained an oversight focus on Department activities in Afghanistan for many years and built an extensive body of work that includes a range of audits, inspections, evaluations, and investigative efforts. These oversight efforts have benefited from longstanding coordination with oversight counterparts. Beginning in 2007, our office participated in the Southwest Asia Joint Planning Group and contributed to coordinated Afghanistan oversight plans with OIGs under the Comprehensive Audit Plan for Southwest Asia.<sup>3</sup>

After SIGAR was established in 2008, OIG built on this track record and coordinated closely with SIGAR and other oversight partners to avoid duplication of effort and promote effective coverage of key issues.<sup>4</sup>

When OIG oversight and reporting responsibilities for overseas contingency operations (OCO) were triggered in FY 2015 following the designation of Operation Freedom's Sentinel (OFS), we began to prepare quarterly reports to Congress jointly with our Lead Inspector General (Lead IG) counterparts at the DoD and USAID OIGs.<sup>5</sup> We have issued 31 such reports so far, now covering Operation Enduring Sentinel, which went into effect in October 2021.<sup>6</sup>

As part of its responsibilities under 5 U.S.C., Section 419,<sup>7</sup> the Lead IG engages in a strategic oversight planning process to ensure effective oversight of U.S. government activities related to each OCO. To satisfy this requirement, the Lead IG agencies annually produce joint strategic oversight plans for each OCO, which are published together in a comprehensive oversight plan (COP-OCO).<sup>8</sup> The Lead IG agencies then work with partner oversight agencies through the OCO Joint Planning Group to ensure a whole-of-government approach to oversight. Today this group consists of more than a dozen offices of inspectors general and other oversight entities and serves as a primary venue to coordinate audits, inspections, and evaluations of U.S. government-funded activities supporting OCOs.<sup>9</sup>

While the Lead IG mechanism is one method for ensuring coordination of Afghanistan-related oversight work, it is certainly not the only way the various oversight entities with jurisdiction over Afghanistan-related U.S. government programs and operations coordinate and deconflict their work. For instance, following the U.S. military withdrawal and evacuation from

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<sup>3</sup> Southwest Asia Planning Group, *Comprehensive Audit Plan for Southwest Asia*, FY 2009 Update, November 2008.

<sup>4</sup> Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, <https://www.sigar.mil>.

<sup>5</sup> Lead Inspector General Report to the United States Congress, *Operation Freedom's Sentinel*.

<sup>6</sup> Lead Inspector General Report to the United States Congress, *Operation Enduring Sentinel*.

<sup>7</sup> U.S. House of Representatives, 5 U.S.C., § 419, *Special provisions concerning overseas contingency operations*.

<sup>8</sup> Lead Inspector General, *FY 2023 Comprehensive Oversight Plan for Overseas Contingency Operations*, October 2022.

<sup>9</sup> State OIG, Office of Overseas Contingency Operations Oversight.

Afghanistan in 2021, the Department of Homeland Security OIG worked with our office to establish the OIG Afghanistan Project Coordination Group to share information about and deconflict oversight work related to the relocation and resettlement of Afghans. More than 50 personnel from 8 OIGs regularly attend the group's meetings. To date, OIGs in the Coordination Group have completed 29 reports and have approximately 20 ongoing projects related to the evacuation and Operation Allies Welcome, the U.S. government's effort to resettle vulnerable Afghans in the United States, including those who worked for the U.S. and coalition forces since 2001.<sup>10</sup>

In addition to these groups, extensive coordination is conducted at the working level. My staff is in frequent contact with our counterparts at each of the oversight offices represented on this panel, as well as the broader oversight community. These working groups and deconfliction mechanisms are well-established and have proven effective at promoting whole-of-government oversight while avoiding redundant efforts and other potential inefficiencies.

### **State OIG Oversight**

I would like to highlight some of our Afghanistan-related oversight work, starting with projects related to the planning for and execution of the evacuation in response to the U.S. military withdrawal. I will then share our completed and ongoing projects related to Afghan evacuees, particularly those being processed through the Afghan SIV program. I will conclude with a look at our work scrutinizing post-withdrawal Department programs and operations.

#### *Planning for and Execution of the Evacuation in Response to the U.S. Military Withdrawal*

As noted previously, the final U.S. military withdrawal was announced by the Biden Administration in April 2021. That same month, the Department initiated an ordered departure requiring non-emergency employees whose functions could be performed elsewhere to depart Embassy Kabul. On August 12, 2021, the Department ordered remaining personnel to evacuate the embassy, and on August 31, Embassy Kabul announced it was suspending operations in Afghanistan. We are conducting work that sheds light on Department actions and decisions as events unfolded during these pivotal months.

For example, in the next few weeks we will be issuing one of a series of reports on our review of the Department's planning for and execution of the evacuation of Embassy Kabul. The objective of the work was to determine whether the embassy followed established Department guidance in preparation for and execution of the evacuation of U.S. government personnel, U.S. citizens, Afghans at risk, and others from Afghanistan in August 2021. We found that while Embassy Kabul complied with applicable emergency planning guidance and took some preparatory actions, it was not fully prepared for the challenges it encountered. Among other things, we found that embassy leadership's concerns that overt evacuation planning would cause panic and undermine support for the Afghan government resulted in unclear communication with

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<sup>10</sup> Department of Homeland Security, [Operation Allies Welcome](#).

embassy personnel about the timing and scope of a potential evacuation. This lack of communication caused confusion among staff and reduced the preparedness of some personnel for an evacuation. We also found that the embassy did not have clearly defined eligibility criteria for the evacuation and used unreliable data regarding the potential number of evacuees. This resulted in a far greater number of people being evacuated than had been anticipated. We further found that, as the evacuation was unfolding, unclear leadership, logistical changes, and communication issues contributed to the chaos around the evacuation at the international airport in Kabul.

While there are constraints on what more I can share in a public forum, my team would be happy to brief interested members of Congress on our full findings and recommendations in a closed session once our final report is issued. I will also note that although the upcoming report will be classified, given the importance of these events and to promote maximum transparency, we plan to publish on our website an unclassified summary containing as much detail about our findings as possible.

Our other forthcoming work on the evacuation includes an audit of the disposition of the Department's defensive equipment and armored vehicles in advance of the evacuation. The primary objective of this audit – which is also looking at disposition of such assets in the context of the suspension of operations at Embassy Kyiv, Ukraine, in February 2022 – is to determine whether, in accordance with Department guidance, the embassies managed, safeguarded, and disposed of sensitive security assets in advance of the evacuation at each post in accordance with Department guidance. We are also completing work on an audit that will determine whether the Department identified and terminated unneeded contracts impacted by the suspension of operations in accordance with federal and Department requirements.

Farther down the road, we plan to conduct an audit that will look at the Bureau of Intelligence and Research's (INR) role in the events in Afghanistan. INR directs the Department's program of intelligence analysis and research, ensuring that intelligence activities support foreign policy and national security. Our work will determine whether INR provided all source intelligence analysis and information to the appropriate decision-makers in preparation of the evacuation of Embassy Kabul.

### *Afghan Evacuees*

Another major area of oversight for us pertains to Afghan evacuees. The U.S. military withdrawal and Taliban takeover of Afghanistan in 2021 prompted thousands of Afghans, including many who worked closely with the U.S. government, to seek refuge abroad. From the immediate wake of the withdrawal until today, significant efforts have been made and continue to be made across the U.S. government and the non-governmental sector to help those Afghans at risk of persecution by the Taliban. A major mechanism for this is the Afghan Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) program, which was established by Congress in 2009 to resettle Afghans who had worked on behalf of the U.S. government in Afghanistan.

We looked closely at this program in 2020, reporting our findings in two reports. In one report, we identified obstacles that risked undermining the effective protection of Afghan allies and offered recommendations to improve the program. Specifically, we found that staffing levels across the various Department offices that have a role in processing Afghan SIVs had generally remained constant since 2016 and were insufficient to reduce an SIV applicant backlog that had accumulated over time. We also found that IT issues within the Bureau of Consular Affairs hampered efforts – namely, the Department lacks a centralized database to effectively document the identity of locally employed staff and contractors and instead has relied on multiple IT systems that were not interoperable.<sup>11</sup>

Our second report drew specific attention to issues with harnessing and reporting SIV program-related data. Specifically, we found that the method for collecting, verifying, and reporting on applicant wait times was inconsistent and potentially flawed because the entities responsible for reporting processing times at each of the four stages of the Afghan SIV process were using differing methodologies to perform their calculations. We also found that the Department did not report all required information in mandated quarterly reports to Congress. In fact, none of the 23 quarterly reports published from April 2014 to October 2019 included required descriptions of improvements made to the efficiency of the process.<sup>12</sup>

Last fall, we published a compliance follow-up review related to this earlier work. A compliance follow-up review is designed to assess the Department’s compliance with, and the general effectiveness of, OIG’s recommendations. Our review found Department actions to address our prior recommendations provided minor improvements to quarterly reporting but did not improve methods for collecting or verifying Afghan SIV application processing times. In addition, although the Bureau of Consular Affairs included, in its quarterly reports, explanations for failures to process applications within 9 months, the Department lacked internal controls for verifying Afghan SIV data, resulting in inaccurate information. We concluded that, despite taking some recommended actions, the Department continued to face a significant Afghan SIV application backlog. Among other things, we recommended that the senior official responsible for coordinating the program improve coordination and monitoring of SIV program improvement implementation, increase staffing to address the application backlog, and enhance coordination with DoD to improve the applicant employment verification process.<sup>13</sup>

Since the August 2021 evacuation, we have also received multiple congressional requests to review a range of topics related to the SIV program and became responsible for reporting requirements established by Section 5275 of the James M. Inhofe National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2023 (FY23 NDAA).<sup>14</sup> We aggregated and are addressing the various requests and reporting requirements in a series of projects that will provide a

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<sup>11</sup> OIG, *Management Assistance Report: Quarterly Reporting on Afghan Special Immigrant Visa Program Needs* (AUD-MERO-20-34, June 2020).

<sup>12</sup> OIG, *Review of the Special Immigrant Visa Program* (AUD-MERO-20-35, June 2020).

<sup>13</sup> OIG, *Compliance Follow-Up Review of the Afghan Special Immigrant Visa Program* (AUD-MERO-23-01, October 2022).

<sup>14</sup> U.S. Congress, James M. Inhofe National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2023, Review relating to vetting, processing, and resettlement of evacuees from Afghanistan and the Afghanistan special immigrant visa program.

comprehensive review of the Afghan SIV program. Specifically, in addition to the compliance follow-up review described above, OIG has issued one report and has another six ongoing or planned projects, which include two planned joint reports required by the FY23 NDAA.

The issued report, which was published last fall, provided an update on the status of the Afghan SIV program, including the number and status of applicants at each stage of the process. We found that from 2009 through 2021, the Department received nearly 60,000 complete Afghan SIV applications, from which it subsequently approved and issued SIVs to about 37 percent of applicants and denied SIVs to about 48 percent of applicants. During this same period, 15 percent of applications remained pending. Eight percent of the SIVs issued since 2009 were issued within the period beginning with President Biden’s April 2021 announcement of the U.S. military withdrawal through the eventual evacuation and suspension of operations of Embassy Kabul in August 2021. As of May 31, 2022, more than 15,000 Afghan SIV applications were still in process.<sup>15</sup> Since that time the number has significantly increased – in an upcoming report we note that as of last month the Department reported that more than 152,000 SIV applicants remain in Afghanistan.

As noted, we have much more to come on this topic, including two more reviews, one on the adjustments made by the Department to SIV processing from 2018 to 2021 and another on resettlement outcomes of SIV recipients. We have also planned a review of Afghan SIV screening and vetting processes and continuing support for Afghan relocation efforts, which we are closely coordinating with the Department of Homeland Security OIG in response to FY23 NDAA requirements. Additionally, we intend to produce a “capping” report on this body of work to provide a comprehensive summary of OIG’s findings on this topic.

The last piece of related work I would like to highlight is a report we published a couple of weeks ago that examined the Afghan Placement and Assistance (APA) program, which was implemented by the Department in 2021 in conjunction with nine resettlement agencies in order to facilitate the resettlement of Afghan nationals (primarily those who were at various stages of SIV processing and those who were eligible to apply for an SIV but had not yet applied at the time of evacuation) in communities around the United States. Resettlement agencies reported to OIG that implementing the APA Program presented them with some of the most significant challenges they had ever faced. Many of these resulted from the extremely fast pace and unprecedented number of Afghan arrivals and the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, following the decrease in refugee admissions under the prior administration, many of the agencies and their affiliates did not have adequate staffing for the number of arrivals they began receiving in the aftermath of the withdrawal. OIG also found that the lack of available housing, difficulty obtaining necessary documentation for the APA participants, and minimal pre-arrival cultural orientation presented challenges for resettlement agencies. Despite such challenges, the agencies involved in implementing the program reported that the Department provided sufficient funding for the program and facilitated effective coordination among the relevant agencies.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> OIG, *Information Report: Afghan Special Immigrant Visa Program Metrics* (AUD-MERO-22-38, September 2022).

<sup>16</sup> OIG, *Review of Challenges in the Afghan Placement and Assistance Program* (ESP-23-01, March 2023).

## *Ongoing Department Programs and Operations*

When the Department evacuated and suspended operations of Embassy Kabul in August 2021, it moved its core embassy personnel to Doha, Qatar, to maintain diplomatic operations and respond to the ongoing political and humanitarian crises in Afghanistan. By February 2022, the Department had formalized the Doha operation as the Afghanistan Affairs Unit (AAU). Although significantly altered, its Afghanistan-related programs and operations did not cease. As a result, our oversight of them also has not ceased. In fact, just prior to the evacuation of Embassy Kabul we published a report on lessons learned for establishing remote missions when events dictate that Department operations must cease in another country. Although not directly related to Kabul, after the suspension of operations, we provided a copy to the Embassy Kabul management team to use as a reference when establishing the AAU.<sup>17</sup>

We have already conducted an inspection of the newly constituted AAU in Doha, reviewing the unit's executive direction, policy and program implementation, and resource management. We found that Department and interagency stakeholders were not always clear about the lines of responsibility among the multiple Department entities with roles in the management of U.S. government policy or programs for Afghanistan. Additionally, the embassy was struggling to rebuild contacts within Afghanistan after losing access to contact data for tens of thousands of Afghans who had worked with the embassy in the past. Furthermore, Department bureaus were in the process of improving coordination and communication with the AAU on foreign assistance program activities in Afghanistan expected to continue after the closure of the embassy.<sup>18</sup>

Related to these ongoing assistance activities, our recent inspection of the Bureau for International Law Enforcement Affairs (INL) found that, following the withdrawal and Taliban takeover, INL had reassessed and significantly reduced its assistance programs in Afghanistan, but had not updated the risk assessment and monitoring plans for its still-active federal assistance awards despite the material changes to the security situation in-country. Department guidance requires continuous evaluation of risks throughout the life of the project and consideration of the environment where the award activities will be performed. The sudden, heavy work burden experienced by Afghanistan program officers following the U.S. military withdrawal contributed to the lack of an updated risk assessment and monitoring plans. While this may be understandable, we noted that failure to complete these important tasks elevates the risks of waste, fraud, and mismanagement.<sup>19</sup>

Lastly, I'd like to mention an analysis we undertook of our office's body of outstanding recommendations related to Embassy Kabul immediately following the suspension of operations. Recognizing that the changed circumstances in Afghanistan may affect the

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<sup>17</sup> OIG, *Audit of Department of State Protocols for Establishing and Operating Remote Diplomatic Missions* (AUD-MERO-21-33, July 2021).

<sup>18</sup> OIG, *Inspection of the Afghanistan Affairs Unit* (ISP-I-23-05, November 2022).

<sup>19</sup> OIG, *Inspection of the Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs* (ISP-I-23-08, January 2023).

relevance and/or viability of some of our open Embassy Kabul recommendations, we reviewed all open recommendations and ultimately closed five that had become moot.<sup>20</sup> This allowed OIG and the Department to focus efforts on the remaining three open recommendations, which we determined continued to have merit. These recommendations stemmed from an audit of the embassy's Public Affairs Section's grants and cooperative agreements, focusing on the Department's handling of grant and cooperative agreement due diligence and vetting; risk assessment, mitigation, and monitoring; and award monitoring and evaluation. OIG found that the Department failed to verify whether grant recipients had ties to corruption, human rights violations, or illicit narcotics production; did not sufficiently document annual reviews of awards or the mitigation of identified risks; and failed to obtain the required performance and financial reports for awards. The recommendations associated with these findings remained open and relevant because the grantees' activities were ongoing.<sup>21</sup>

## Conclusion

Since the withdrawal and evacuation concluded on August 31, 2021, the gravity of the situation in Afghanistan has remained dire. The number of Afghans in need of humanitarian assistance has increased from 15 million to 28 million since the Taliban came to power, while the rights of women and girls have been severely curtailed. We remain focused on events there, and we will continue to monitor the Department's programs and operations related to Afghanistan, refining our work plans to ensure that we are directing oversight to the areas of highest risk and greatest impact. Not only does the situation there demand such a commitment, but we feel confident the work we do in this area will have broader implications for Department operations elsewhere, particularly in Ukraine.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify and elaborate on the vitally important work that State OIG has performed and is performing related to the U.S. military withdrawal and the Department's evacuation and ongoing operations since that withdrawal from Afghanistan. We appreciate the committee's interest in our work. I will continue to work with my DoD OIG, USAID OIG, and SIGAR counterparts who join me today, as well as the other members of the oversight community, to advance quality oversight in this context and keep you and the public up to date on our efforts.

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<sup>20</sup> OIG, *Information Report: Office of Inspector General's Analysis of Open Recommendations Specific to U.S. Embassy Kabul, Afghanistan* (AUD-MERO-22-18, January 2022).

<sup>21</sup> OIG, *Audit of U.S. Embassy Kabul, Afghanistan, Public Affairs Section Administration of Grants and Cooperative Agreements* (AUD-MERO-21-42, September 2021).