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## Lessons from the Afghanistan Experience with Security Sector Reform, 2001–2021

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## ACRONYMS

| | |
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| **AM&E** | assessment, monitoring, and evaluation |
| **ANDSF** | Afghan National Defence and Security Forces |
| **COIN** | counterinsurgency |
| **CT** | counterterrorism |
| **M&E** | monitoring and evaluation |
| **NATO** | North Atlantic Treaty Organization |
| **NGOs** | non-government organizations |
| **SIGAR** | Special Investigator General for Afghanistan Reconstruction |
| **SSR** | security sector reform |
| **USIP** | United States Institute for Peace |

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Taliban's resumption of power in Afghanistan in August 2021 ended one of the most ambitious externally driven state building projects since the end of the Cold War. The fall of the Western-backed Afghan government shocked public opinion in the West, but it should not have shocked those who followed the situation in Afghanistan closely. Security and political conditions in the country had been deteriorating for several years amid declining external support and attention. The US deal with the Taliban in February 2020 that facilitated the withdrawal of US troops from the country merely set in motion the final phase of the conflict. A closer look at the legacy of one of the centrepieces of the state-building project, security sector reform (SSR), shows how flawed programming placed the Afghan state on a precarious foundation from the beginning. The Afghan SSR experience yields important lessons for the future of the SSR concept in other conflict-affected countries, including the need for a more rigorous and systemic approach to assessment, monitoring, and evaluation; the necessity of investing more donor political capital to facilitate progress; the importance of prioritizing access to justice; and the need to never lose sight of political and economic sustainability in programming. Rather than show the bankruptcy of the SSR concept, Afghanistan has demonstrated the need for a rethinking of how it is applied in the field. There is a need for innovation in how to address thorny issues such as the engagement of non-state security and justice actors; the fostering of cooperation with regional states on shared security and governance challenges; and the development of new models of SSR missions that can strike the right balance between technical and area expertise to better contextualize reforms. This paper argues that Afghanistan should serve as a stark warning for the future of the SSR concept in conflict-affected countries. If unheeded and a reimagining of SSR implementation is not undertaken, the SSR model will likely find its way into the policy dustbin.

## INTRODUCTION

On August 15, 2021, Taliban fighters triumphantly flooded into Kabul, Afghanistan, marking the end of a 20-year experiment to build an Afghan democracy in the image of the West. Afghan President Ashraf Ghani had fled the country under the cover of night and Western countries scrambled to shutter their embassies and withdraw their citizens. Only nine days after capturing their first provincial capital, the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan was complete. The stunning speed of the Taliban victory was assured by the catastrophic collapse of the Afghan National Defence and Security Forces (ANDSF). Few analysts predicted how quickly the Afghan government would fall because it was seemingly unimaginable that its security sector, built at a cost approaching US$100 billion over two decades, would collapse with such ease. Indeed, the Taliban took most of the country without firing a shot as most Afghan troops and police abandoned their equipment and dissolved into the local population. The security sector reform (SSR) process that most Afghan leaders and international donors described as the lynchpin for the success of the country's state-building process had failed in breathtaking fashion. The question of how this could occur, especially given the impressive array of resources dedicated to the process, will preoccupy analysts for years to come and is the subject of this thought paper.

The impact of the Taliban's return to power cannot be underestimated. Within Afghanistan it has triggered a humanitarian crisis and halted the impressive strides made in recent years to advance gender equality and human rights. It has altered regional power dynamics in yet unforeseen ways as China, Russia, Iran, Pakistan, and other countries in the region jockey to fill the vacuum left by the West. Internationally, it has shaken the faith of Western countries in the state-building and democracy-promotion project writ large. While some would argue that greater Western reticence toward interventionism may be a positive development considering the checkered record of their recent state-building ventures, any Western retreat from such engagements will have far-reaching implications for the way in which development and security assistance will be provided to fragile and conflict-affected states in the years ahead. One potential casualty of this fallout could be the SSR concept itself, the model for reconstructing security and justice institutions. Indeed, the mixed record of the SSR model in Afghanistan and other prominent transition countries, such as Iraq and Mali, has caused many donors and practitioners to become increasingly wary of the concept. The Afghan debacle has put an exclamation point on simmering doubts over the efficacy and even viability of the model in conflict-affected countries.

Some advocates of SSR argue, with some legitimacy, that intense criticism of the SSR concept over the failure in Afghanistan is an unfair overreaction. After all, Afghanistan represents a particularly vexing case for SSR that did not feature many of the fundamental preconditions for the concept to succeed, most importantly an absence of large-scale

conflict. It would be a mistake, the argument goes, to condemn a concept developed over three decades because of a setback in what most would agree to be one of the most challenging cases that could be imagined. However, it would also be folly not to recognize that the Afghan case reveals much about the imposing obstacles that confront the implementation of the current SSR concept in the field and the gap that exists between SSR policy and implementation. This thought paper will identify several lessons from the Afghan SSR experience and look at how they could inform a rethinking of how SSR programming can be better constructed and contextualized to fit field-level realities. The SSR model need not be discarded; rather, it should be better adapted to the unique challenges present in demanding conflict-affected settings like Afghanistan.

It is important to remember that the failure of SSR in Afghanistan was not the sole cause of the collapse of the Afghan state-building process, but it surely accelerated it. A political rot had taken hold in the Afghan government by 2021, marked by widespread corruption and clientelism; deep political and ethnic fragmentation; and dysfunctional governance. This bred public distrust of state institutions that was undermining the nascent social contract that the donor-supported state-building project was working to forge. The edifice of Afghan democracy was propped up by two pillars — the presence of the United States and its international coalition, and the developing ANDSF. In 2021, both of those pillars would crumble. The first to fall was the international donor presence with the United States announcing in April 2021 that its forces would withdraw from the country as a part of a deal with the Taliban. The collapse of the ANDSF, which was deeply dependent on its US allies, was only a matter of time after that, although it happened far sooner than anyone predicted. The breakdown of the Afghan security sector was not the only underlying cause of the of the Afghan government's collapse, but it sealed its fate.

## Lessons from the Afghan SSR Process

Launched in 2001 at a donor conference in Geneva, Switzerland, the Afghan SSR process has gone through several phases from a modestly resourced multi-lateral process at its outset to a resource intensive, US-dominated, and counterinsurgency (COIN)-driven endeavour in its final days. In its initial three to four-year phase, the Afghan SSR process was genuinely multi-lateral, albeit somewhat disjointed and poorly coordinated, with several donors playing important roles in the process, notably the European Union, Germany, the United Kingdom, Italy, and Japan. Over time, however, the United States would assume a dominant role in the process, contributing the lion share of resources and steering its strategy. [1] In the latter stages of the process, this assistance would be provided under the auspices of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), and its Resolute Support Mission.

Although the two-decade Afghan SSR process evolved considerably and took on many forms, the challenges that it encountered were fairly consistent throughout, from poor local ownership to the lack of an overarching political strategy. Perhaps the preeminent lesson from the Afghan SSR experience is that massive increases in money and other resources cannot compensate for fundamental contextual challenges and program design flaws; at most, they delay inevitable failure. This section will consider the challenges that dogged the SSR process from its beginnings in Afghanistan and outline five broad lessons that can be derived from them. Many of these lessons will not be new to policy makers or practitioners familiar with SSR, a reality that shows how the model has been resistant to change. Nonetheless, these lessons provide the outlines of a roadmap for donors to reshape the concept into one that is more realistic and fit for purpose in fragile and conflict-affected states.

*Lesson One: Do Not Neglect Assessment, Monitoring, and Evaluation*

A comprehensive needs assessment of the Afghan security sector was never undertaken prior to program design. Any analysis that informed the initial designs of SSR programming was quick and ad hoc, with the desire for rapid action trumping the imperative of understanding an exceedingly complex security and political environment. This bias for action over understanding was especially problematic because the donor community had limited expertise on Afghanistan. The country had been largely isolated and closed off from the rest of the world since the Taliban's ascent to power in the 1990s. As a result, SSR donors in Afghanistan never fully understood the country's political and power dynamics, particularly the patronage and clientelist networks that run through Afghan society. They did not comprehend the scope and character of factionalism within the state, causing some donors to inadvertently signal support for some factions over others through their programming. This had the effect of disrupting power balances and creating new fault lines of conflict. This lack of knowledge meant donors were often "flying blind" when designing and implementing SSR initiatives on the ground. As one donor official remarked in the early days of the process: "Often in Afghanistan you are creating policy without the necessary data. The donor community has made pledges and contributions of funds without knowing what the needs are" (Sedra, 2017: 249).

Reflecting on the US experience in Afghanistan in testimony to a US Congressional Committee, Laurel Miller, the International Crisis Group's Program Director for Asia, lamented that US policy makers were "woefully naive about what the United States could achieve in Afghanistan" a position driven by a "paucity of U.S. government expertise regarding the country" (Miller, 2021). Robert Gates, the former US Defense Secretary in the Bush and Obama administrations, admitted in an interview that the United States had made the fundamental mistake of "trying to train a Western army instead of

figuring out the strengths of the Afghans as a fighting people and then building on that."[2] Instead of accepting that they did not understand the underlying conditions in the country, the United States and its allies forged ahead with a hastily built strategy predicated on the false assumption that they had a "blank slate" to work with.

The socio-cultural complexity of contexts such as Afghanistan sets a high bar for external actors to comprehend local conditions, but donors have been guilty of failing to conduct even rudimentary baseline data collection and political analysis. This has made interveners prone to manipulation by local actors eager to instrumentalize SSR programs to strengthen their own political and economic positions at the expense of their rivals. NATO admitted in the results of its lessons learned process following the Taliban resumption of power that "future NATO train, advise and assist missions should carefully consider the political and cultural norms of the host nation and the ability of that society to absorb capacity building and training" (NATO, 2021).

Accentuating the problem of inadequate understanding of the local environment was the failure of donors to erect comprehensive monitoring and evaluation (M&E) systems to track the progress of SSR. M&E gives donors the insights needed to flexibly adapt programs to changing conditions on the ground and respond to setbacks in real-time. The difficulty of monitoring programs amid adverse security conditions meant that donors tended to assess performance on the basis of inputs, such as money spent, infrastructure built, and civilians employed, rather than their impact on the security of women, men, boys, and girls at the grassroots level. As one international contractor who worked on judicial reform put it, "progress was often measured through superficial indicators, such as the number of courtrooms built, the amount of equipment provided, and the number of trainings conducted" (Srivastava, 2021). Rather than assessing progress based on results and impacts, such as local perceptions of security or access to justice, it was the "burn rate," the speed in which resources could be spent, that was most often employed as a metric of success for donors (ibid.).

The lack of sophisticated and rigorous systems to gauge progress on the ground meant that any data that was collected could be manipulated to "elevate good news and success stories over data suggesting a lack of progress" (Walther-Puri, 2021). Speaking about the US experience, Andrea Walther-Puri (2021) notes that "during the 20-year effort, operational assessments from top U.S. military leaders exhibited entrenched optimism, which 'bore no resemblance' to conditions on the ground." John F. Sopko, the head of the US watchdog agency, the US Special Investigator General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR), went a step further in his assessment of US transparency, identifying "an odor of mendacity."[3] Every time SIGAR highlighted problems with the US program to train the ANDSF, Sopko explained, "the US military changed the goal posts, and made it easier to show success," until they just "classified the assessment tool" altogether (ibid.). Without

honest monitoring and evaluation, SSR programs will remain rigid, unable to adapt to fluid conditions on the ground.

The Afghan experience reaffirms the importance of establishing a comprehensive assessment, monitoring, and evaluation (AM&E) system from the outset of an SSR process. This should be linked to broader political economy analysis of the host country and should adopt a gender-sensitive lens to ensure that the needs of all citizens shape programming. AM&E should be treated as a core pillar of SSR that requires appropriate staffing and resources. Such a system will facilitate better program design and create feedback loops that can enable the type of iterative and flexible programming that is ideally suited for fluid and volatile contexts like Afghanistan. Conducting rigorous program assessments and establishing the necessary infrastructure to monitor results will inevitably delay the launch of program implementation, although there will be room for some quick-impact projects to build early momentum. However, the Afghan experience has painfully shown that it is better to delay programming to nurture understanding, than rush the process and get it wrong.

*Lesson Two: Invest Political Capital to Succeed*

SSR is inherently a political process as it seeks to realign power relations and entrench the state's monopoly over the use of coercive force. In a country like Afghanistan where power has been historically fragmented among a wide array of powerbrokers, warlords, tribes, and political factions, this axiom is particularly germane. Despite this reality, the SSR process in Afghanistan was advanced in a highly apolitical fashion. Donors tended to view their role as providers of resources and technical assistance rather than as facilitators of political compromise and consensus.

A prominent example of how donors have either neglected the political dimension of SSR or got it wrong is how they approached the indispensable goal of encouraging local ownership of the process. In Afghanistan, the international community clearly selected local owners on the basis of both expediency and shared interests and values. There were two sets of favoured local owners: the Tajik-led Northern Alliance that represented the main anti-Taliban grouping at the time of the US decision to invade Afghanistan, and the Afghan expatriate technocrats living in the West who returned to the country after the Taliban ouster. These two groups of elites occupied places on opposite ends of the political spectrum. Each faced significant legitimacy problems within Afghanistan, the Northern Alliance jihadi groups (often referred to as warlords) because of their human rights records and role in wartime atrocities, and the Western technocrats because of the public perception that they had abandoned the country during the civil war for greener pastures abroad. Relying so heavily on these favoured local partners to advance reforms instead of

broadening outreach to a wider set of Afghan stakeholders complicated efforts to imbue the process with broad-based legitimacy and ownership.

SSR donors consistently displayed an ingrained reluctance to do anything that would "risk harming relationships" with their existing Afghan clients, even if the behaviour of those clients ran counter to the objectives of SSR (Srivastava, 2021). As Sunil Srivastava (2021) points out, SSR "programs and activities…relied far too much on presumed levels of institutional integrity/functionality or good faith of key actors that did not, in fact, exist." Many local powerbrokers were emboldened to manipulate the process and compete for resources and authority within the security sector to benefit their narrow interests and allies. As long-time Afghanistan observer Antonio Giustozzi (2021) notes, "throughout 2002-2021, political infighting and rivalries disrupted efforts to reorganize and reform the security sector." He details how "political factions consistently tried to manipulate appointments to senior army, police and security services positions to their advantage" (ibid.). This, according to Giustozzi, not only undermined "the cause of 'meritocracy' in the Afghan security forces, but it also created a constant disruption to the chain of command, with opposing factions often refusing to cooperate with each other" (ibid.). A good example of this phenomenon was the appointment of General Bismillah Khan Mohammadi as Defence Minister in the final months of the Afghan government. Although Khan was regarded as a competent general with a significant powerbase, he was, as Candace Rondeaux (2021) explains, also widely known among NATO commanders to be "at the top of an elaborate, highly factionalized military mafia that was linked to all manner of corruption and pilfering of American and NATO military aid." Scant action was taken by donors to halt or even question the appointment despite its potential corrosive impact to the integrity of the security forces. The failure of the United States and its key international and domestic partners to adopt a more sophisticated and nuanced political strategy that could cultivate and galvanize local political will for change created a fertile ground for political abuse and instability.

Saying that an SSR program should be more political can seem vague and amorphous, but there are two concrete things that can be done to achieve a more politically sensitive approach. First, there is a need to develop a sizeable cadre of SSR advisers featuring technical, political, and local socio-cultural expertise. In the past there has been a tendency to deploy personnel solely with technical expertise to staff SSR missions, such as military trainers or judicial system experts. While technical capacity is important, there is also a need for diplomatic expertise that can negotiate the political enabling conditions for reform, as well as local socio-cultural knowledge that can help to contextualize programming. Diversifying missions is the key to making them more flexible and effective.

Second, in cases where there is a multiplicity of external and internal stakeholders there is a need to establish robust institutional coordination mechanisms. This could take the

form of a standing unified SSR mission under the auspices of either a lead donor or an international multi-lateral organization like the United Nations. This body could feature a diplomatic envoy or special representative that is empowered to exercise the combined political capital of the donors to advance SSR. Not only would such a body encourage greater coordination among external stakeholders, but would enable more effective exertion of political tools to encourage broad-based local consensus around SSR objectives. The link that this would establish between the technical and political dimensions of SSR has been lacking in many SSR missions. For instance, SIGAR lamented in a 2019 report that "there has been no command-and-control relationship between the most senior U.S. military commander in Afghanistan and the U.S. ambassador, nor is there an enduring mechanism in place to ensure effective coordination between the United States and other countries and international organizations" (SIGAR, 2019: XI). The report goes on to explain that "while international working groups and coordination boards have been created to resolve conflicts, they are often temporary and lack authority" (ibid.: XII). Ad hoc coordination structures have not been sufficient to create coherence and consistency across SSR programs in Afghanistan and a range of other cases. Leadership over such programs needs to be consolidated in a standing institution endowed with real political authority.

Some may interpret a more politically engaged and assertive donor approach to SSR as a veiled attempt to deprive local actors of agency or ownership over the process. Quite to the contrary, such an approach will enable donors to take a more nuanced and informed approach to facilitating local ownership and allow them to reach a wider array of local political stakeholders. Moreover, it will give domestic stakeholders a single authoritative partner to work with on reform programming rather than a plethora of donors each with different approaches and interests.

*Lesson Three: Prioritize Governance*

The great innovation of the SSR model as compared to conventional train-and equip security assistance is its focus on democratic governance. According to SSR orthodoxy, if security forces are not overseen by well managed institutions practicing principles of good governance and subject to democratic civilian control, they will invariably be prone to abuse, mismanagement and corruption. Yet in Afghanistan, governance reforms were always a secondary objective of the SSR process, largely window dressing for a traditional train and equip program geared to advancing counterterrorism (CT) and COIN objectives. Instead of improving the delivery of people-centred security and justice services for communities, the SSR process sought to get as many "trigger pullers" into the field as possible with little consideration for their oversight or accountability.

A closer look at the rapid collapse of the Afghan army in August 2021 aptly illustrates the danger of neglecting governance to advance hard security objectives. The failure to

adequately invest in the development of the Ministry of Defence, which managed and oversaw the army, meant that it could not carry out basic supporting functions and was rife with corruption. Mike Jason (2021), a retired US Army Colonel that was involved in the ANDSF training mission, admitted that the United States and its partners "failed to establish the necessary infrastructure that dealt effectively with military education, training, pay systems, career progression, personnel and accountability—all the things that make a professional security force." The corruption in the Ministry of Defence and the wider government had a particularly corrosive effect on the security forces. As Jodi Vittori (2021) notes, "over time, the ever-increasing corruption and predation by the Afghan government ground down the ability of many dedicated [Afghan] security professionals to build a sustainable security sector." By the time the Taliban started their advance in 2021, corruption and poor governance had crippled the Afghan government's capacity "to hire, supply, and retain a competent force willing and able to fight" (ibid.). The Afghan soldiers who fled or surrendered in the face of the Taliban advance in 2021 were not unwilling to defend their country as President Biden implied (Stokols, 2021). After all, 66,000 ANDSF had died over the previous two decades fighting the Taliban and other anti-government armed groups, with tens of thousands more wounded (Gibbons-Neff, Rahim, and Chivers, 2021). Trapped in remote outposts without air support and running low on food and ammunition many made the pragmatic decision to give up. The morale of the security forces had effectively collapsed. Soldiers no longer wanted to fight for a government that watched idly by while "senior government officials, including officers in their chain of command, [stole] their food, fuel, equipment, salaries, disability payments, [and] pensions with impunity" (Srivastava, 2021). Corruption had become so bad in the army that at the country's main national military hospital wounded soldiers had to bribe nurses and doctors to get food and basic care, with many soldiers dying of simple infections or even starving to death as a result (Abi-Habib, 2011). Under such conditions it is remarkable the force didn't collapse earlier. The government and the leadership of the security sector failed the rank-and-file security forces and the country more broadly, not vice versa.

The realization of the urgent need to combat corruption as a cross-cutting pillar of good governance promotion is one of the enduring legacies of the Afghan SSR experience. In many cases, donors justified turning a blind eye to corruption by Afghan government officials with the pretense that it was the "Afghan way" of doing things and they had to preserve relations with critical local allies. Many blatantly corrupt senior Afghan officials remained in office across the security sector because of the failure of Afghan and donor leaders to exercise the political will to call them out. Good governance is not a luxury that can be developed once the security forces are trained and equipped. It is the software that keeps the security and justice machine running and guards against abuses.

Two decades after the fall of the Taliban regime in 2001, many communities in Afghanistan viewed dysfunctional and predatory state institutions – notably the police

and judiciary — as the preeminent threat to their safety and livelihoods, not the Taliban. The Taliban quickly recognized this fact and sought to frame themselves as a "government in waiting." As Ashley Jackson (2018) states, "what began with a gradual recognition that unbridled violence would hurt the Taliban's battle for popular support grew into a sophisticated governance structure, including the management of schools, clinics, courts, tax collection, and more." In many areas of the country, one of the principal goals of the Taliban seemed to be to "out-govern" the Kabul administration. As the US and Afghan forces pulled back into major urban centres, the Taliban filled the void and sought to present themselves as a capable administrator of services (ibid.). Cutting corners on governance in SSR and more broadly in the state-building agenda did not undermine the Afghan government right away, but it gradually delegitimized the state and created an opening for the Taliban to exploit. It offered a vivid illustration of the importance of promoting good governance and grass roots service delivery in SSR to win the hearts and minds of the local population and buttress the sector against external threats.

*Lesson Four: Expand Access to Justice*

Expanding access to justice is a particularly important facet of establishing the legitimacy of the state and security sector. Adam Baczko (2021) shows that "while the Taliban gained power through arms, they also won the war through the establishment of a judicial system that allowed them to embody the state in the eyes of many Afghans." Far from offering predictable and peaceful recourse to resolve disputes, the justice system built by Western donors bred uncertainty and resentment among Afghans. It featured "a maladapted corpus of laws, largely dictated by the inconsistent priorities of the various donors (state-building, terrorism, narcotics, money laundering, gender promotion), as well as a police and a judiciary undermined by nepotism" and rampant corruption. All of this "led to an unbalanced legal system favoring the elites and inaccessible to the majority of the population" (ibid.). The Taliban, by contrast, built a parallel court system — rooted to sharia law — that included oversight and monitoring structures "designed to ensure judges' good practices and their impartiality on local issues." The result was that Taliban verdicts "were more respected locally than those of the government," positioning the movement "as a source of predictability in daily life" (ibid.). This is not an endorsement for "Taliban justice,", which routinely violates basic human rights norms and discriminates against women and minority groups. Rather, it is recognition that the predictability, perceived incorruptibility, and normative familiarity of that system made it highly attractive to a population that experienced the inequity, instability, and high levels of corruption of the donor-sponsored state system.

The failings of the government's justice system can be directly traced back to a conspicuous lack of attention and resources from the SSR process. The Afghan justice

system was neglected by donors from the very beginning. Lakhdar Brahimi (2007), the first UN envoy in Afghanistan after the fall of the Taliban, recognized in a 2007 speech the error of failing to prioritize justice from the very beginning of Afghanistan's transition:

> Building the capacity of the judicial system and the police is often the most fundamental task in re-establishing law and order, and with it, justice, accountability and public trust. The international community, including the United Nations, is just starting to pay enough attention to rule-of-law issues. In Afghanistan, the judicial reform process was largely neglected, and I must confess that I personally bear a large part of responsibility for that.

The lack of resources and attention that Brahimi mentioned in 2007 was never meaningfully addressed in the years that followed. Investments in justice reform did indeed increase over time, with the United States alone contributing roughly US$1 billion to justice programs from 2003–2015, but this was a tiny fraction of the resources dedicated to the development of the security forces and grossly insufficient to meet the needs of the justice system (SIGAR, 2015).

The remarks of one Afghan respondent from a 2010 opinion survey in two districts of Kandahar Province illustrates how the failings of the justice system undermined the government and contributed to the Taliban insurgency:

> If there are two people who want to refer their case to the government for a solution, both would have to pay money to the relevant authority to get the decision against another one. Whoever pays more money will win the case and the other who pays less money will lose the case. As the Taliban do not exercise such a practice, people prefer the Taliban to the government for not taking bribes for the solution of disputes and conflicts. Even if a high-ranking Taliban has a case with a very poor inhabitant, the Taliban treat them equally (Long and Radin, 2012: 113–128, 123.) [4]

The perception that all members of society have equal access to justice is essential to cement the legitimacy of the security sector; it is the foundation upon which the rule of law is built and consolidated. Despite this reality, the under resourcing of judicial reform is a common facet of SSR programs in conflict-affected countries around the world. The Afghan experience shows just how dangerous such a strategic misstep can be, as it helped to pave the way for the Taliban's return to power.

*Lesson Five: Never Lose Sight of Sustainability*

There is a bias among Western SSR donors toward programming that builds security and justice institutions modelled after those in Western countries. As Kori Schake (2021) notes,

"we try to create militaries in our image, and that's often not congruent with the political and social circumstances in which those forces are operating." This, however, is not just a problem of building institutions out of sync with the host country's culture, norms, and institutional traditions; such processes also tend to ignore the economic sustainability of such foreign transplants. A 2021 Washington Post article quotes a senior US government official admitting that "the Pentagon fell victim to the conceit that it could build from scratch an enormous Afghan army and police force with 350,000 personnel that was modeled on the centralized command structures and complex bureaucracy of the [US] Defense Department." And when it became clear, the official went on, "that the Afghans were struggling to make the US-designed system work, the Pentagon kept throwing money at the problem and assigning new generals to find a solution" (Whitlock, 2021). Simply speaking, the United States sought to create a technologically advanced Afghan army modelled after their own in one of the poorest countries in the world, amid an ongoing insurgency, where only two to five percent of recruits were literate at a grade three level (ibid.). In hindsight, the project was as audacious as it was unrealistic.

Instead of building security institutions that the Afghan government could project to afford and maintain over the medium to long term, the process created indefinite dependencies. To prove this, all you must do is look at the sustainment costs of the ANDSF. Sustaining Afghanistan's security forces at 2021 levels was expected to cost US$5 billion per year (Schroden, 2021). If this amount were paid entirely by the Afghan government, it would account for 81 percent of the Afghan government's entire approved budget for FY2021-2022 (Shapour, 2021). Of course, it was not a part of the budget as the lion share of that security sector bill was footed by the United States, a subsidy level that would have had to continue for decades according to projections of Afghan revenue-generating capacity.

The dependency of the Afghan security forces on the United States did not end with budgetary support: they relied on US contractors to keep their small air force in the sky and advanced weaponry operational; US air power for combat and transport support; and US mentors and trainers to keep their training and education systems afloat (Graham-Harrison, 2021). In many ways the ANDSF was built as an auxiliary of the United States rather than an independent force that could stand on its own. Afghan soldiers and police were acutely aware of this fact, so when President Biden announced in April 2021 that all US forces would be withdrawn from the country by August of that year, it shattered their confidence and morale, and made the ANDSF collapse inevitable.

Many analysts inside and outside Afghanistan raised the problem of this sustainability "time bomb" for many years leading up to the Afghan government's collapse but were routinely ignored. Moreover, Afghans who suggested alternative structures better aligned with the country's institutional history and resource limitations were marginalized.

SIGAR admitted in a 2019 report that the United States did not adequately involve "the Afghans in key decisions and processes" resulting in the creation of systems and structures "the Afghans will not be able to maintain without U.S. support" (SIGAR, 2019: XII). Sustainability was an afterthought from the very beginning of the SSR process, spurred by short-term thinking coupled with the flawed idea that massive amounts of money can paper over programmatic deficiencies and weak local political will. Any SSR process in a low-income country recovering from conflict will inevitably require significant amounts of aid, but planning must take into consideration from the very beginning how those structures will be weaned off external subsidies and transitioned to self-sustainability. Given the fickle nature of global security assistance, any plan that kicks sustainability considerations down the road is a recipe for disaster.

There is a tendency among some policy makers and practitioners to see increases in aid and resources as a magic bullet to solve deep-seated problems in SSR. The Afghan case shows how dangerous such an assumption can be. In Afghanistan, external aid was initially slow to materialize, causing the process to stall at its outset. Illustrating the early paucity of resources, the initial lead donor for police reform, Germany, dedicated only a single adviser to support reforms in the entire Ministry of Interior in 2003, one of the largest and most complicated ministries in the government employing tens of thousands of civilian staff and police personnel (SIGAR, 2012: 57). Efforts by the international donor community, principally the US, to make up for the early under resourcing of SSR paradoxically resulted in far too much aid being dispatched to Afghanistan. Between 2009 and 2012 alone, the US spent roughly US$37.5 billion on the ANDSF, an amount both the Afghan state and donor missions on the ground lacked the capability to absorb and disburse effectively (ibid.:175). The massive aid increase in a very short period had the perverse effect of encouraging grand corruption within the Afghan state — crowding out reformist elements — and fostering aid mismanagement and leakage among donor agencies. By 2021 the aid delivered to the security sector had risen to US$88.6 billion (Arabia, 2021: 1), a significant portion of which was lost to corruption, waste, and mismanagement.

One corrosive manifestation of this grand corruption was the problem of "ghost soldiers." These were soldiers on paper only, put on the payroll by military commanders so they could pilfer their salaries. It is still unclear exactly how many ghost soldiers existed, but a former Afghan Minister of Finance, Khalid Payenda, told the BBC in 2021 that the bulk of security personnel on the government's books did not exist and the reported troop strength of the army may have been six times higher than the actual figure (BBC, 2021). In 2019, a crackdown on the problem led to the removal of nearly 42,000 personnel from the government payroll, but that may have just been the tip of the iceberg for a scheme that has resulted in the theft of hundreds of millions of dollars in security assistance (Reuters, 2019).

The accelerated infusion of US money into Afghanistan's security institutions may have fostered the perception in Western capitals that the deficiencies of the SSR program were being addressed, but in reality, it compounded them. The Afghan experience taught us that too much money, delivered too quickly and amid the wrong political and security conditions, can be as damaging as too little. The dramatic rise of corruption in Afghanistan revealed that under difficult conditions it may be advisable to keep programs small in scope and modest in scale. Ethan B. Kapstein (2017: 8) shows how "large programs appeared to be much more susceptible than their smaller counterparts to negative forces such as corruption and violence." Smaller projects keep the expectations of the civilian population in check, are easier to monitor, and carry less risk in terms of vulnerability to corruption. In other words, less aid used for more modest purposes can be more impactful — and less harmful if programming goes awry — than major initiatives and infusions of assistance. While donors will never be able to eliminate corruption in complex SSR missions like Afghanistan, reducing it by all means necessary must be a bigger priority as it has a cascading effect on all other aspects of the process.

### Priority Areas for Research

In addition to the broad lessons outlined above, the Afghan case has demonstrated the need for new research and analysis on three important facets of SSR programming. The first is the vexing challenge of engaging non-state and hybrid security and justice structures. Afghanistan is a country with a wide and overlapping array of state and non-state security and justice actors and norms. In many parts of the country, the local population sees non-state and informal structures as more effective and legitimate than the state. While initially reticent to engage these alternative security and justice providers, over time, numerous initiatives were established to work with them. While some efforts, notably projects by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) like the Afghan Tribal Liaison Office, the United States Institute for Peace (USIP) and the Norwegian Refugee Council, to engage non-state justice structures made significant gains, the majority of donor-driven initiatives in this area did more harm than good. Notably, several experiments to mobilize non-state militia groups under the authority of externally manufactured local shuras (councils) to buttress counter-insurgency operations served more to alienate communities than enhance security and stability. As *The New York Times'* Luke Mogelson (2011) notes, many Afghans saw the strategy of employing militia groups "as a distressing step backward" to "the anarchic '90s, when warlords and militias terrorized the country." Despite these missteps, non-state security and justice providers represent a major component of the security and justice sphere in conflict-affected societies; thus, there is a need for better understanding of how to engage them effectively in a manner that respects human rights principles and gender equality, and does not undercut the

legitimacy of the state. There is wide acceptance in the SSR community of the imperative of engaging the non-state but little practical guidance on how to do so in the field. This policy-practice gap needs to be filled.

Another challenging area highlighted in Afghanistan that requires increased attention from researchers, analysts, and policy makers, is the issue of engaging regional states in SSR programming. Given that the Afghan conflict has a strong regional character, it is only rational that SSR programs be oriented to take on a regional outlook. This could involve joint reforms and capacity building with neighbours on border enforcement, anti-narcotics initiatives, and counterterrorism. In practice, however, the Afghan SSR process had little interaction with the security institutions of neighbouring countries. This is partially a diplomatic problem due to broader political dynamics and sensitivities, but it also reflects a blind spot of SSR, which tends to view programming as confined within nation-state boundaries. It would be worthwhile to explore the potential to develop regional SSR initiatives that could involve joint training, operational cooperation, or multi-lateral policy development.

The final area of the Afghan SSR process that can be singled out for greater attention is the challenge of finding and deploying suitable foreign expertise. An earlier section of this paper discusses the need to deploy more diverse SSR teams featuring political and local socio-cultural expertise in addition to the technical expertise that typically comprises the majority of SSR missions. But even when it comes to technical expertise, finding appropriate candidates for deployment is often a challenge. As Mike Jason (2021) points out in regard to US personnel deployed to train the ANDSF, "we didn't send the right people, prepare them well, or reward them afterward." He went on to describe how advisers sent to the field were often limited to one-year rotations, barely enough time to understand the local environment and build relationships. SIGAR admits that most of the US advisers deployed to support the ANDSF "came from backgrounds unrelated to advising foreign security forces and were often underprepared for their tours of duty" (SIGAR, 2019: VIII). Compounding the problem, "most predeployment training did not adequately…expose advisors to Afghan systems, processes, weapons, culture, and doctrine" (ibid.: XII).

Several countries have experimented with standing expert rosters to get the right SSR capacity in the field at the right time, but they have not filled the gap effectively. More thinking must be dedicated to building a diverse reservoir of global talent for SSR deployments with tailored training. Moreover, thought must be given to how these personnel are deployed and for how long. All of this may require the creation of a standing multi-lateral institution that will not only develop and oversee training regimes but coordinate deployments among donor states and international agencies. While there are some international NGOs that have initiatives resembling this, they need to be scaled up significantly to meet the demand that exists.

## CONCLUSION

Few observers and insiders who followed the Afghan SSR program were surprised that it collapsed following the US announcement that it would withdraw all forces from the country in 2021. The process had been floundering for several years and despite rosy assessments from top US and NATO officials, the facts on the ground looked more grim with each passing month. However, few would have predicted the astonishing speed with which the security forces collapsed; it revealed just how brittle the sector's foundation had become. Afghanistan is not your typical SSR case. The process was being implemented in a country with an active war, involved high levels of resources from a wide array of donors, and was a flashpoint for geopolitical competition. While it may be an outlier in some respects, Afghanistan thoroughly tested the SSR model in ways that should influence the way SSR programs are implemented in the future.

This paper has outlined five broad lessons that can be drawn from the Afghan experience as well as three areas that require more intensive study. Taken together, they call for a rethinking of how SSR is conducted in the field. SSR programs need to be more pragmatic, flexible, context-driven, evidence-based, politically sensitive, economically sustainable, and results-focussed. It is a long-term process requiring strategic patience and commitment from donors and recipients alike. SSR will always have a robust train and equip element, but it must be balanced by meaningful effort to build effective institutions conforming to principles of democratic governance. Afghanistan showed yet again that there are no perfect solutions for SSR challenges; donors and recipients must work to craft a sector that aligns with SSR principles in a manner consistent with local norms, values, politics, and financial realities. The goal is not to create clones of Western security sectors, but to imbue existing systems with the resources, tools, and expertise to meet the security and justice needs of their populations. While much of this guidance is hardly new, it is typically not heeded in the field. Unless that changes, there will be more Afghanistans in the future and the SSR model itself will likely find its way into the policy dustbin.

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## NOTES

1. The European Union was a major contributor to the Afghan reconstruction effort with the European Union and its member states contributing approximately US$13 billion in aid by 2021. However, this was dwarfed by the US$145 billion contributed by the United States, the bulk of which went to SSR. The final major standalone program of the European Union in the SSR arena was the EUPOL police mission, which closed in November 2016. After that, the bulk of EU assistance was channelled through NATO's Resolute Support Mission, which ran from 2015–2021 under the leadership of the United States. See (Hassan, 2021).
2. Quoted in Whitlock (2021).
3. Quoted in Davis (2021).
4. Quoted in Long and Radin (2012).

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