



Afghanistan Watchdog Says Officials Blocking His Reports

John Sopko (shown), the special inspector general for Afghan reconstruction ([SIGAR](#)), said in a speech delivered to the New America Foundation on May 8 that government “bureaucrats” have told him to stop making public his audits revealing waste, corruption, and mismanagement of projects to rebuild Afghanistan. Some government officials, said Sopko, have even complained that they cannot pre-screen or edit his reports, [Politico reported](#).



“Since my appointment by the president last summer, I have been surprised to learn how many people both in and out of the government do not understand the role of an independent inspector general,” said Sopko.

Sopko also said that more progress must be made in improving the security, economic, and political transitions before the United States completes its withdrawal of troops in December 2014, reported [Reuters](#). The inspector general stated that Afghanistan must demonstrate that it can better manage development assistance that is starting to be placed directly into its budget. In Sopko’s opinion, “We need to have the courage to withhold funding, if progress is not made by the Afghan government.”

Sopko cited many of the inefficiencies and potentially corrupt practices that might hamper the ability of the Afghan government to take over its own defense. Reuters noted:

Sopko said in his speech that the Afghan Ministry of Defense may be incapable of buying fuel for the Afghan army once U.S. troops leave; the U.S. government could not account for the fuel it provided the army; the U.S. paid for repairs on police vehicles it had not seen for over a year; police buildings sit empty and a number of ghost employees and desertions mean that the total number of Afghan troops is unclear.

“It is hard to know if the Afghan army and police are ready if we don’t know how many troops are available to fight insurgent forces,” Sopko said.

“Over the last 10 months, I have been criticized by some bureaucrats for not pre-clearing my press releases with them, for not letting them edit the titles of my audits, for talking too much to Congress, for talking too much to the press ... and, basically, for not being a ‘team player’ and undermining ‘our country’s mission in Afghanistan,’ ” Sopko said in his speech. He continued:

Many in our government, even some surprisingly senior officials you think would know better, seem to believe that an inspector general should be their partner — or, more correctly, their silent partner. In their opinion, my reports should be slipped in a sealed envelope in the dead of night under the door — never to see the light of day — because those reports could embarrass the administration, embarrass President Karzai, embarrass Afghanistan.

There was no official government response to Sopko’s charge that some government officials wanted to pre-screen his reports, though Pentagon Press Secretary George Little did say, “We value inputs from independent oversight, including from inspectors-general, who play a key role in advancing the



Written by [Warren Mass](#) on May 13, 2013

missions of the Department of Defense.”

During his speech at the foundation, Sopko provided specific examples of why he believes the Afghan government is ill-equipped to provide for its own defense.

Sopko said that he remains “very concerned” over the failure of the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) to recruit and retain troops, many of whom desert after enlisting.

“We are very concerned because the ANSF were supposed to achieve an end strength of 352 thousand troops by last October,” the [Washington Free Beacon](#) website quoted from Sopko’s prepared remarks.

“The ANSF has fallen short of its staffing goals by 20 thousand troops,” he said. “The number of troops ready for duty is even lower when you consider AWOL employees, desertions, and ghost employees.”

If the United States fails to prepare the ANSF before U.S. troops leave the nation, Afghanistan will likely revert back to terrorism, Sopko warned. “Without adequate security, meaningful progress in Afghanistan is not possible,” Sopko said. “We need to ensure security or else everything we are trying to do will fall apart.”

“Afghanistan could also once again become a safe haven for al Qaeda and others that are determined to harm our nation,” he added.

Sopko’s complaints have attracted the attention of Senator Claire McCaskill (D-Mo.) reported the online [St. Louis Beacon](#). McCaskill, a former Missouri state auditor, sent a letter to Sopko asking for more details and said she would “bring this fight to every corner of the federal government.”

“Our inspectors general are the eyes and ears of taxpayers within each federal agency — they’re the ones protecting our tax dollars from waste, and they’re the ones to call out federal officials for abuse of power,” McCaskill, said on May 10.

Sopko’s statements during his speech at the New American Foundation were continued in his talking points during an exclusive interview with the [Fiscal Times](#) last month. The *Fiscal Times*’ writer David Francis wrote on April 26 that Sopko had charged that many projects in Afghanistan are simply not sustainable, and that “continuing to spend money on them results not just in a wasted fortune, but very real risks to nearly 70,000 American soldiers who are still there.”

“[The U.S. military, State Department and aid agencies] have not thought about sustainability,” Sopko said. “If you don’t think about that, you’re going to build a bridge and give it to the Afghans who can’t sustain it.”

Sopko also charged: “There’s pervasive corruption throughout the country.”

Reports issued by Sopko’s SIGAR found that millions of contracting dollars have ultimately ended up in the hands of the Taliban. The *Fiscal Times* recently reported that the Pentagon did not have the required protocols in place to prevent 80 percent of all contracts from getting into the hands of the enemy.

The *Fiscal Times* also referred to recent congressional testimony in which Sopko laid out criteria for evaluating whether a reconstruction program should continue. He summarized his criteria with the following seven questions:

- Does the project or program make a clear and identifiable contribution to our national interests or strategic objectives?



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- Do the Afghans want it and need it?
- Has it been coordinated with other U.S. implementing agencies, with the Afghan government, and with other international donors?
- Do security conditions permit effective implementation and oversight?
- Does it have adequate safeguards to detect, deter, and mitigate corruption?
- Do the Afghans have the financial resources, technical capacity, and political will to sustain it?
- Have implementing agencies established meaningful, measurable metrics for determining successful project outcomes?

In Sopko's opinion, if an agency can answer these basic questions in the affirmative, then the project should continue, but if not, the project should be reevaluated. If, after reevaluation, said Sopko, an agency still wants to proceed with the project, it must provide justification.

While Inspector General Sopko's recommendations may make sense from a purely fiscal standpoint, it appears that there is one important question missing from his list of questions: Is the project or program authorized by the U.S. Constitution?



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