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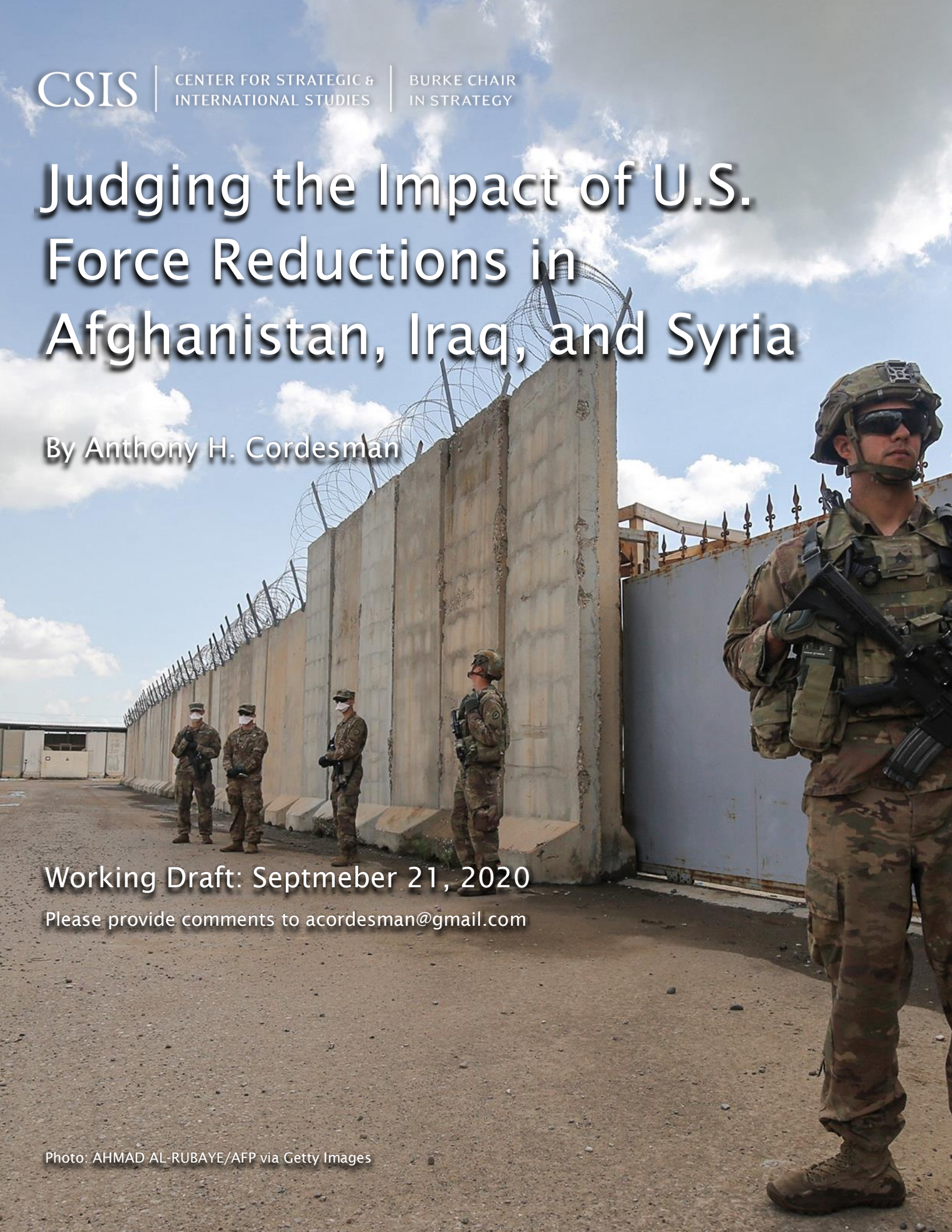
# Judging the Impact of U.S. Force Reductions in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria

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# **Judging the Impact of U.S. Force Reductions in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria**

**Anthony H. Cordesman**

The U.S. has said remarkably little about how conditional its future plans to withdraw all forces in Afghanistan are on the success of the peace process, whether it will provide adequate support for Afghan military forces if the peace effort fails, or whether the U.S. plans to provide any security guarantees and military aid if a peace agreement is reached.

So far, all that is clear is that the official total of U.S. military personnel has dropped from 16,000 in 2019 to around 12,000 at the start of 2020 to 8,600 in July 2020. They will now drop to some 5,000 personnel, and all U.S. troops will leave by May 2021 if a successful peace agreement is reached.<sup>1</sup>

The U.S. has said even less about the possible details of any new security agreement with Iraq. About all that the U.S. has announced is that it will now cut its present total military personnel in Iraq from some 11,000 in 2019, to 5,200 in mid-2020, to around 3,000 towards the end of 2020 – which does not indicate any clear picture of what the U.S. plans to keep in Iraq in the future or in Syria.<sup>2</sup>

These numbers strongly imply that the U.S. will have removed most forward deployed train and assist, Special Forces, and elite units from Afghanistan and Iraq by the end of 2020, as well as many of the U.S. military personnel supporting U.S. combat air missions. It is important to note that U.S. occupied facilities have so far deteriorated remarkably quickly once U.S. forces have left – a problem exacerbated by the cuts in contractors discussed shortly. They also break up any continuity in personal military relations between U.S. and Afghan or Iraqi/Syrian personnel. This makes it difficult to rapidly redeploy U.S. forces in a crisis, sharply reduces Afghan or Iraqi/Syrian ability to effectively use U.S. air support, and contributes to the loss of significant human intelligence and overall situational awareness.

There also is no indication of the size of U.S. forces that will remain elsewhere in the Gulf region or at sea, of any U.S. effort to preserve a redeployment capability in a crisis, of the level of U.S. allied forces that will remain, or of the trends in hostile outside forces like those of Russia, Syria, Iran, the Hezbollah, or other outside non-state actors – as well as powers that have different goals from the U.S. like Turkey and Pakistan.

## **Numbers that May or May Not be Accurate**

None of these gross numbers say anything about what kind of forces are involved in each series of cuts, what kind of support the remaining forces will provide to the host country, what the impact of cuts have been on the effectiveness of the remaining U.S. forces, and what has been done to keep local forces effective.

Moreover, a variety of media reports indicate that such gross numbers are far from reliable. At least some numbers only seem to have counted troops that were deployed and that had permanent change of station (PCS) orders. They seem to have excluded significant numbers of key additional personnel deployed on a covert or temporary duty basis, and they have failed to count additional civilian intelligence and special forces personnel. These unreported or “temporary” personnel assignments sometimes were highly specialized and supported key local combat, intelligence, and security missions.

At the same time, these numbers do not count U.S.-supported contractors. They include additional U.S., other foreign, and local personnel. It is also clear from past Department of Defense unclassified reporting that such contractors sometimes totaled as many or more personnel as the number of U.S. troops. Many perform roles that have been performed by uniformed personnel in the past. These contractors also have provided critical technical and maintenance support, and they have been essential to the functioning of the logistic and support systems used by local forces.

To put the importance of such numbers in perspective, the spring SIGAR *Quarterly Report* for 2020 stated that,<sup>3</sup>

...DOD contractors...provide essential in-country support to U.S. forces and the ANDSF. As of April 2020, 27,641 contractors were serving in Afghanistan, about 40% (11,077) of whom were third-country nationals, 39% (10,711) were U.S. citizens, and 21% (5,853) were local nationals, or more than twice the number of U.S. troops currently in country. These contractors fulfill an array of important responsibilities, with most providing logistics and maintenance support (34%), security (19%), and support for U.S. military bases (14%), and the rest providing construction, translation and interpretation, transportation, training, and other services.

The LIG *Quarterly Report* gave the same total for contractors as SIGAR. It did not provide details on any on-going cuts in contractors, but reported that,<sup>4</sup>

CSTC-A stated... that it had worked to “optimize” its force, including U.S. military personnel, civilians, and contractors in Afghanistan, between November 15, 2019, and March 18, 2020. According to CSTC-A, this optimization was achieved by using multifunctional advisors: single individuals who train, advise, and assist multiple ANDSF personnel and units which had previously had multiple advisors. CSTC-A stated that this enabled it to reduce 50 military personnel, 12 civilians, and 31 contractor positions. However, the contractor numbers remain in flux due to contract structures and the processes by which the scopes of the contracts are reduced.

As for Iraq, the only data on contractors seems to date back to 2019, when there seems to have been at least 11,000 troops and 7,475 U.S. and non-U.S. contractors.<sup>5</sup>

The data on the numbers of U.S. military personnel also exclude allied military forces – which have been particularly critical in Afghanistan – and U.S. civilians. It is clear that major cuts have taken place in the State Department, USAID, and to other civilians that provided the civil side of U.S. assistance to the host country and that also once provided substantial situational awareness of what was happening in the field and outside the capital.

Allied forces have played a key role in some areas. A SIGAR report to Congress in July 2020 also notes that allied forces were roughly equal to the formal total for U.S. forces, and they have not yet made equally serious cuts:<sup>6</sup>

NATO also reported a reduction in the number of Coalition troops in Afghanistan this quarter. NATO’s latest figure for the Coalition-support RS train, advise, and assist (TAA) mission is 15,937 Coalition military personnel as of June 2020, a 614-person decrease from the figure reported in February 2020. The decrease was entirely made up of non-U.S. personnel. The current force level includes 8,000 U.S. personnel (unchanged from February) and 7,937 military personnel from NATO and non-NATO partner nations. The remaining U.S. troops in Afghanistan serve Operation Freedom’s Sentinel mission in supporting roles, training Afghan special forces, or conducting air and counterterrorism operations.

The reduction of the Coalition-nation forces was expected, but has yet to reach the level NATO announced earlier this year. In early April, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg said “to support the peace efforts, we are reducing our presence to around 12,000 by the summer,” but “no decision for a further reduction has been taken and all of our steps will be conditions-based.”



## **Crippling Afghan Forces and Undercutting Iraqi Capabilities?**

These cuts in U.S. forces are occurring in war zones where the bulk of Afghan and Iraqi combat forces still have key weaknesses in many key areas, and those forces have relied heavily on forward deployed U.S. and allied train and assist forces to support a relatively limited number of effective local combat units.

It seems all too likely that such cuts will seriously weaken the development of Iraqi forces and potentially cripple Afghan forces. Although the U.S. has steadily classified – or ceased to report on – many aspects of the U.S. effort to create effective local security forces, the reports that the Lead Inspector General (LIG) and the Special Inspector General for Afghan Reconstruction (SIGAR) provide to Congress still show that Afghan, Iraqi, And U.S.-backed forces in Syria are far from ready to stand on their own.

Moreover, the number of both U.S. military and civilian facilities in each country is also being steadily cut back – along with the mobility and security forces that allow U.S. personnel to travel throughout the country, maintain human intelligence access, evaluate the impact of aid, and build personal relationships with local officials and units.

These cuts in deployment locations have inevitably empowered the Taliban and Iranian-backed militias in some areas – as well as local power brokers and the ethnic, sectarian, and tribal factions. They make it harder to track corruption and waste, real world progress in the rule of law, and the competence of local security forces and police. They also raise serious questions about the progress being reported in education, health, and key human rights areas, such as the rights of women.

## **Losing a Forward Presence and Situational Awareness**

As noted earlier, taking U.S. train and assist personnel out of the field and away from active combat forces has a high cost. Virtually all of our experience in working with foreign forces in wars, ranging from Korea to Vietnam, to the first Gulf War in 1991, and then to the present wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, has shown the need to keep providing train and assist capabilities at the forward level.

This means continuing assistance in using and supporting complex combat systems and weapons, carrying out efforts to deal with weak commanders and high levels of corruption, and persuading local forces to provide civil-military efforts that win popular support. It is the quality and focus of the overall U.S. effort that counts, not the total military manning – even if one can actually trust the numbers being provided.

## **Failing to Address Key Cuts in U.S. Air Support**

And finally, it is worth pointing out that the U.S. has not only ceased reporting on many of the details of Afghan and Iraqi force developments, it ceased to report on the levels of air support the U.S. provides to Afghan and Iraqi forces at the end of February 2020. This is critical because total military personnel numbers say absolutely nothing about the impact of the cuts in air capability on the continued dependence of Afghan and Iraqi forces on U.S. combat airstrikes and on the information gained from intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance missions.

In practice, the U.S. has boosted air strikes in both countries as a substitute for its previous withdrawals of most U.S. land combat forces, and it has created one of the most sophisticated manned and unmanned airborne intelligence efforts in history. It seems doubtful that Iraq could

have defeated ISIS without such efforts, or that the Afghan central government could have kept the Taliban from conquering whole provinces.

In the case of Afghanistan, for example, it raised the number of weapons released in air strikes from a low of 914 in 2015 to 7,423 in 2019. In the case of Iraq, the U.S. supported the recovery of Iraqi ground forces after their defeats from ISIS by rushing airpower back into the country as it helped Iraq rebuild its ground forces. The number of munitions used in air strikes rose from 6,292 in 2014 to 28,696 in 2015; to 30,743 in 2016; and to 39,576 in 2017 – and then tapered off to 8,713 in 2018; and to 4,729 in 2019 as reconstructed Iraqi forces concentrated on driving ISIS out of populated areas like Mosul.<sup>7</sup>

## **Cutting the Money?**

There are no matching data as of yet to determine the actual level of U.S. military support that the U.S. will actually provide as these cuts take place. A CSIS analysis does indicate that the total global Overseas Contingency Operations (OCO) and Emergency Spending will drop from \$89.9 billion in FY2020 to \$69.0 billion in FY2021, and to \$23.5 billion in FY2022. This analysis notes that,<sup>8</sup>

In the FY 2021 request, DoD divides the OCO budget into three categories of funding. Direct war requirements total \$20.5 billion in FY 2021 and include the incremental costs of ongoing combat and combat support operations in Afghanistan (\$14 billion) and Iraq and Syria (\$7 billion). At \$32.5 billion, the largest share of OCO funding is for enduring requirements—activities that are expected to continue even if combat operations end. These include the costs of overseas basing, depot maintenance, the European Deterrence Initiative (EDI), and security cooperation funding (including \$250 million for the Ukraine Security Assistance Initiative). The third category is OCO for base requirements, which totals \$16.0 billion and is used for a variety of base budget activities.

The budget request does not include a detailed projection for OCO funding in future years. Instead, it includes a placeholder of \$20 billion per year in FY 2022 and FY 2023 and \$10 billion in FY 2024 and FY 2025. This is consistent with the current level of direct war costs. Other enduring and base budget activities currently funding in OCO return to the base budget in FY 2022 and beyond and are included in the FYDP projections. Importantly, the budget does not project that enduring and base budget activities currently funded in OCO will displace other base budget funding when these items return to the base budget. Rather, the topline base budget increases to accommodate these activities. This is possible because the BCA budget caps end in FY 2021 and the OCO loophole will no longer be needed in FY 2022 and beyond.

The rapid changes taking place in U.S. forces, strategy, peace efforts, and aid plans for Afghanistan and Iraq make it just as impossible to predict actual future U.S. grant aid and other aid levels as they do to predicting future troop levels. The United States, however, has already disbursed \$77.2 billion in Afghanistan Security Forces Funds (ASFF); \$2.29 billion in Commander's Emergency Response Program (CERP) funds; \$3.28 billion in Drug Interdiction and Counter-Drug Activities (DICDA) Funds; \$4.5 billion in International Narcotics Control and Law Enforcement (INCLE) funds; \$881 million in Non-Proliferation, Antiterrorism, Demining, and Related Program (NADR) funds; and \$1.67 billion more in NATO Afghan National Army (ANA) Trust Fund contributions to Afghanistan as of mid-July 2020.<sup>9</sup>

There was also a substantial backlog of undisbursed appropriations, and the annual appropriations for just the Afghanistan Security Forces Funds (ASFF) totaled at \$3.92 billion in FY2019 and \$3.75 billion in FY2020.<sup>10</sup>

There are only limited data on the FY2021 funding for Iraq/Syria and Afghanistan, although a House Armed Services Committee press release has noted that the FY2021 defense budget figures that the Committee approved the following funding for the Afghan Security Forces Fund:<sup>11</sup>

- \$3.05 billion. Funds may only be obligated if the Secretary of Defense certifies that the Afghanistan Security Forces are controlled by a civilian, representative government that is protecting human rights and women's rights and preventing terrorists from using the territory of Afghanistan to threaten the security of the United States and U.S. allies.
- Provides not less than \$20 million for the recruitment and retention of women, which is twice the amount specified last year.
- Prevents payments to so-called "ghost soldiers" by prohibiting funds for Afghanistan security personnel who are not enrolled in the Afghanistan Personnel and Pay System.
- Directs quarterly reports to Congress on United States and coalition personnel in Afghanistan and the current conditions of the conflict, including metrics related to the peace agreement and an assessment of whether the Taliban is adhering to its commitments.

Iraq may be able to cope with major cuts in U.S. military support – although Iraq's economy is in a massive crisis and is projected to shrink by some 10% in 2021 because of COVID-19 and low petroleum demand – but Iraq's ability to fully fund the creation of an effective military and security forces is highly questionable.

It is all too clear, however, that Afghan forces – and the entire Afghan government – cannot survive even part of a full fiscal year without massive continued U.S. and other grant aid. A World Bank analysis summarizes the situation as follows:<sup>12</sup>

*Under a baseline scenario of continued slow economic growth and moderate improvement in revenues, grant needs would range between US\$5.8 billion and US\$7.6 billion per year. US\$5.8 billion per year would be sufficient to finance maintenance of existing services and gradual expansion of infrastructure in line with population growth. US\$7 billion per year would be sufficient to finance current services and infrastructure with additional investments to support more-rapid growth (including human capital and infrastructure improvements). US\$7.6 billion per year would be sufficient to meet current infrastructure and service costs, finance growth-enhancing investments, and provide resources for additional programs to sustain and consolidate peace, including through expanded community development and job creation programs.*

*A precipitous decline in grant resources, however, would force very difficult trade-offs between important policy objectives. A precipitous reduction in either security or civilian grants would force a choice between: i) sustaining security spending; ii) maintaining the delivery of basic government functions (such as social services and infrastructure); iii) undertaking required public investments to support faster economic growth and poverty reduction; and iv) delivering short-term benefits to Afghans following a political settlement to help to sustain and consolidate peace. Benefits of short-term post settlement programming are likely to be short-lived if they come at the cost of continued investment in the basic functions of government and the core service delivery mechanisms that have been built up since 2001.*

*Expectations should be realistic regarding the capacity of new grant-financed programs to deliver a substantial peace dividend. Resources available for delivering a post settlement dividend are likely to remain limited under any scenario, relative to the extent of grant support already being provided. The most significant benefits of a political settlement are likely to be realized if such a settlement leads to improvements in security, political stability, and freedom of movement. Increased private sector investment, job creation, and access to services resulting from such improvements is likely to deliver much more significant and sustainable benefits than grant-financed interventions. This is especially the case given the current context of already-unsustainably high public expenditure and likely declines in grant support over the medium-term.*

*... Post-settlement programming is likely to occur in the context of tight resource constraints. Grant support to Afghanistan remains at extremely high levels. The future level of grant support is subject to substantial*

*uncertainty, with current pledges extending only through 2020. Declines in grant support are expected over the medium-term.*

*... Public expenditure in Afghanistan is at high and unsustainable levels. Total public expenditure is equal to around 58 percent of GDP, much higher than average for a low-income country. High total expenditure is driven by very substantial security sector expenditures. Security spending accounts for just over half of total expenditures. Security spending is equal to around 30 percent of GDP, compared to just three percent for the average low-income country.*

*... While revenue performance has improved significantly over recent years, total revenues fall far short of expenditures. Afghanistan has achieved remarkable progress in increasing revenues over recent years, with total government revenues increasing from around 8 percent of GDP in 2014 to around 13.5 percent today. Government revenues are currently comparable to those of other South Asian countries. However, total revenues are currently equal to only around US\$2.5 billion dollars per year, while total on- and off-budget expenditures are equal to around US\$11 billion per year.*

*Afghanistan therefore remains heavily reliant on grants. Reflecting the wide gap between revenues and expenditures, Afghanistan continues to rely on grants to finance 75 percent of total public expenditures. Total grants are equal to around US\$8.5 billion per year. This is equal to around 45 percent of GDP, compared to an average of around 10 percent for low income countries.*

*... Economic growth in Afghanistan is currently too slow to reduce poverty and increase living standards. The economy is currently growing by around two percent per year, while the population is growing at around 2.3 percent per year. This equates to declining per capita incomes. Poverty rates are rapidly increasing, with the number of Afghans living below the basic needs poverty line (of around US\$1 per day) increasing from around 39 percent in 2012 to around 55 percent today. The number of jobs available to Afghans is currently declining, while 300,000 young people enter the labor force every year. While a reduction in violence may facilitate improvements in growth, employment, and living standards, substantial public investments to improve services and expand infrastructure are likely to be needed to mobilize new growth sources that could drive a step-change in economic growth.*

*... Grant financing to both the civilian and security sectors is channeled through trust fund and bilateral mechanisms. The largest single source of on-budget civilian support to Afghanistan is through the Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund (ARTF), administered by the World Bank. The ARTF provides around US\$800 million of on-budget grant support per year, complemented by around US\$400 million of World Bank International Development Association (IDA) resources. Additional on-budget support is provided through the Asian Development Bank-administered Afghanistan Infrastructure Trust Fund (AITF).*

*... Current security sector expenditure in Afghanistan is approximately US\$5.6 billion. Security expenditures are financed overwhelmingly through grants, with security grants equal to around US\$4.9 billion per year... Under the assumption of an improvement in security conditions and realization of potential savings, security expenditures are projected to decline to around US\$4 billion by 2024. This represents a US\$1.6 billion reduction from current levels arising from both efficiency improvements and any potential change in force size and composition.*

*... The largest source of on-budget security support is the Combined Security Transition Command - Afghanistan (CSTC-A), which currently provides around US\$900 million per year to the Ministry of Defense and Ministry of Interior. The UNDP-administered Law and Order Trust Fund for Afghanistan (LOTFA) provides an additional US\$300 million per year of on-budget support.*

*Base civilian expenditure needs include the provision of basic services and infrastructure. Total on-budget base civilian expenditure is currently around US\$3.6 billion per year. Of this amount, around US\$1 billion is spent on salaries and wages, with the majority of salary expenditure allocated to social sectors. Other operating costs are equal to around US\$1 billion per year. Around US\$1.2 billion a year is spent on capital acquisition, almost entirely through the development budget. These expenditures represent the core functions of government, including the delivery of health and education and key investments in roads, energy, and irrigation.*

*Base on-budget civilian expenditure needs are expected to grow over time. Base civilian expenditure needs are expected to grow over time for two primary reasons. Firstly, Afghanistan's population is growing rapidly*

*(at around 2.3 percent per year). Some level of expenditure growth is required simply to sustain the current level of services to an expanding population. Secondly, Afghanistan is currently significantly underinvesting in operations and maintenance (O&M) expenditures. GoIRA is taking on responsibility for operating and maintaining assets provided by donors. Previous analysis has shown that Afghanistan must increase investment in O&M expenditure to around seven percent of GDP to effectively sustain the current asset base and avoid a deterioration in services and infrastructure.*

*Based on conservative assumptions, base on-budget civilian expenditure needs are expected to increase to around US\$4.2 billion by 2024. This represents an increase of around US\$500 million per annum over current levels. This assumes: i) constant per capita on-budget expenditure on services and infrastructure (taking no account of potential expansion of services to new areas following a political settlement); and ii) Gradual increases in O&M expenditure to the equivalent of seven percent of GDP by 2024 (from a current level of around five percent of GDP).*

## **Ending “Long Wars” with No Clear Strategy**

Using these force cuts to leave America’s “long wars” also creates broader uncertainties. Claiming lasting victory against ISIS in Iraq, ignoring Syria, and claiming Afghan forces can survive some kind of peace agreement with the Taliban ignores all of these realities. So does the lack of any clear plan for the future development of a U.S. forward presence in USCENTCOM and AFRICOM.

It says nothing about what the U.S. will now do to deter and potentially defeat Iran; the impact of a Turkey that steadily distances itself from NATO and U.S. goals in the Middle East; the impact of Russia and China’s efforts in the region; the lack of any Arab unity in the Gulf; or how the U.S. will deal with the wars in Libya, Syria, Yemen, and Somalia. There is no link to the fact that if one also considers U.S. tensions with Pakistan, withdrawal from Afghanistan will leave the U.S. with no role in Central Asia, no tangible military ties to India, in addition to no clear role in North Africa or the Red Sea Area.



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<sup>1</sup> Based on media reports in early September 2020, Mark F. Cancian, “U.S. Military Forces in FY2020,” *CSIS*, October 2019; Congressional Research Service, *Department of Defense Contractor and Troop Levels in Afghanistan, and Iraq*, CRS R44116, May 10, 2019; Military personnel data from Under Secretary of Defense (Comptroller), *Defense Budget Overview FY 2020*, 6-4; “Military and Civilian Personnel by Service/Agency and Country/Location,” *Defense Manpower Data Center*, March 2019.

<sup>2</sup> Based on media reports in early September 2020, Mark F. Cancian, “U.S. Military Forces in FY2020,” *CSIS*, October 2019; Congressional Research Service, *Department of Defense Contractor and Troop Levels in Afghanistan, and Iraq*, CRS R44116, May 10, 2019; Military personnel data from Under Secretary of Defense (Comptroller), *Defense Budget Overview FY 2020*, 6-4; “Military and Civilian Personnel by Service/Agency and Country/Location,” *Defense Manpower Data Center*, March 2019.

<sup>3</sup> SIGAR, *Quarterly Report to Congress*, p. 71, April 30, 2020.

<sup>4</sup> Lead Inspector General (LIG), *Quarterly Report to Congress on Operation Freedom’s Sentinel, January 1, 2020-March 31, 2020*, p. 45, May 19, 2020, <https://www.dodig.mil/reports.html/Article/2191020/lead-inspector-general-for-operation-freedom-sentinel-i-quarterly-report-to-th/>.

<sup>5</sup> Mark F. Cancian, “U.S. Military Forces in FY2020,” *CSIS*, October 2019; Congressional Research Service, *Department of Defense Contractor and Troop Levels in Afghanistan, and Iraq*, CRS R44116, May 10, 2019; Military personnel data from Under Secretary of Defense (Comptroller), *Defense Budget Overview FY 2020*, 6-4; “Military and Civilian Personnel by Service/Agency and Country/Location,” *Defense Manpower Data Center*, March 2019.

<sup>6</sup> SIGAR, *Quarterly Report to Congress, July 30, 2020*, p. 73, <https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/quarterlyreports/2020-07-30qr.pdf>.

<sup>7</sup> CENTAF, “Combined Forces Air Component Commander 2013-2019 Airpower Statistics,” <https://www.afcent.af.mil/About/Airpower-Summaries/>.

<sup>8</sup> Todd Harrison and Seamus P. Daniels, “Analysis of the FY2021 Defense Budget,” *CSIS*, 2020, p. 2, 13-14, <http://defense360.csis.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Analysis-of-the-FY-2021-Defense-Budget.pdf>.

<sup>9</sup> SIGAR, *Quarterly Report to Congress, July 30, 2020*, pp. 50, 51, 55, 57, 73, <https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/quarterlyreports/2020-07-30qr.pdf>.

<sup>10</sup> SIGAR, *Quarterly Report to Congress, July 30, 2020*, pp. 48, <https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/quarterlyreports/2020-07-30qr.pdf>.

<sup>11</sup> “Appropriations Committee Releases Fiscal Year 2021 Defense Funding Bill,” HASC press release, July 7, 2021, <https://appropriations.house.gov/news/press-releases/appropriations-committee-releases-fiscal-year-2021-defense-funding-bill>.

<sup>12</sup> World Bank, *Financing Peace: Fiscal Challenges and Implications for a Post-Settlement Afghanistan* (English). <https://documents.worldbank.org/en/publication/documents-reports/documentdetail/776581575555846850/financing-peace-fiscal-challenges-and-%20implications-for-a-post-settlement-afghanistan>. The order of the chosen quotes has been changed to provide additional clarity in a short summary. Italics added by the author.