

Congress of the United States

House of Representatives

COMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND REFORM

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May 6, 2020

The Honorable Mark T. Esper
Secretary of Defense
U.S. Department of Defense
1000 Defense Pentagon
Washington D.C. 20301

Dear Secretary Esper:

We are deeply concerned that the Department of Defense (DOD) continues to classify, or otherwise restrict from public release, information that is essential to conducting oversight of U.S. spending, security operations, and reconstruction efforts in Afghanistan. This information used to be readily available to the American people and included in public audits and quarterly reports issued by the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR), but it is now being restricted from public release under the Trump Administration.

Beginning in 2017, DOD has increasingly restricted critical performance data, security statistics, and other metrics that had served to inform Congress and the American people for years on the progress of the war in Afghanistan. According to SIGAR, this retroactively classified and restricted information includes Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF) attrition rates, personnel strength numbers, casualty statistics, and other performance metrics pertaining to the readiness of the ANDSF.¹

In May 2019, SIGAR informed Congress that the Resolute Support mission would no longer assess district-level insurgent or government control or influence—another key metric that would help Congress and the American people evaluate the progress of the U.S. mission in Afghanistan and the stability of the Government of Afghanistan. As the last reported district-level control data is from October 2018, this information is woefully out of date and hinders our ability to evaluate conditions on the ground in Afghanistan.²

On April 30, 2020, SIGAR disclosed that the NATO-led Resolute Support mission “for the first time restricted from public release the enemy-initiated attacks (EIA) and effective

¹ Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, *Quarterly Report to the United States Congress* (Apr. 30, 2020) (online at www.sigar.mil/pdf/quarterlyreports/2020-04-30qr.pdf).

² *The U.S. Public Will No Longer Have A Key Data Point About Afghanistan War*, National Public Radio (May 1, 2019) (online at www.npr.org/2019/05/01/719018027/the-u-s-public-will-no-longer-have-a-key-data-point-about-afghanistan-war).

enemy-initiated attacks (EEIA) data.” This is especially concerning because according to SIGAR, EIA and EEIA data “was one of the last remaining metrics SIGAR was able to use to report publicly on the security situation in Afghanistan since RS discontinued its previous system of assessing district control in 2018.”³

Resolute Support informed SIGAR that the data had been withheld because “EIA are now a critical part of deliberative interagency discussions regarding ongoing political negotiations between the U.S. and the Taliban,” but there are multiple open-source reports of violence in Afghanistan, and Afghanistan’s National Security Council has publicly discussed on social media recent Taliban attacks.⁴

The classification of once publicly-available information makes it impossible for us and our colleagues to discuss this information with constituents or in public, including in open Congressional hearings—a key and vital component to our Constitutional oversight responsibilities. We urge you to declassify this previously unrestricted information so Congress and the American people can determine for themselves the effectiveness of U.S. security and reconstruction programming in Afghanistan.

The Committee previously made similar requests, including in a letter to President Trump on November 17, 2017.⁵ Committee Members subsequently wrote to your predecessor, former Secretary of Defense James Mattis, on March 15, 2018, and on May 10, 2018.⁶ Instead of taking action that would shine more light on U.S. involvement and progress in Afghanistan, DOD and U.S. Forces-Afghanistan have done the opposite and continued to impose further restrictions on Afghanistan war data.

Since the U.S. war in Afghanistan began in 2001, our country has spent at least \$776 billion and lost more than 2,400 servicemembers in Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation

³ Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, *Quarterly Report to the United States Congress* (Apr. 30, 2020) (online at www.sigar.mil/pdf/quarterlyreports/2020-04-30qr.pdf).

⁴ See, e.g., Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project, *Dashboard* (accessed May 1, 2020) (online at <https://acleddata.com/dashboard/#/dashboard>); *Afghan War Casualty Report: April 2020*, New York Times (Apr. 30, 2020) (online at www.nytimes.com/2020/04/02/magazine/afghan-war-casualty-report-april-2020.html); Javid Faisal, *Twitter* (Apr. 25, 2020) (online at <https://twitter.com/Javidfaisal/status/1253983501059227648>).

⁵ Letter from Ranking Member Elijah E. Cummings, Committee on Oversight and Government Reform, and Ranking Member Stephen F. Lynch, Subcommittee on National Security, Committee on Oversight and Government Reform, to President Donald J. Trump, The White House (Nov. 17, 2017) (online at <https://democrats-oversight.house.gov/sites/democrats.oversight.house.gov/files/2017-11-17.EEC%20%26%20Lynch%20to%20POTUS.pdf>).

⁶ Letter from Ranking Member Elijah E. Cummings, Committee on Oversight and Government Reform, and Ranking Member Stephen F. Lynch, Subcommittee on National Security, Committee on Oversight and Government Reform, to Secretary James N. Mattis, Department of Defense (Mar. 15, 2018) (online at <https://oversight.house.gov/news/press-releases/cummings-and-lynch-raise-grave-concerns-about-rapidly-deteriorating-security>); Letter from Democratic Members of the Subcommittee on National Security, Committee on Oversight and Government Reform, to Secretary James N. Mattis, Department of Defense (May 10, 2018) (online at <https://oversight.house.gov/news/press-releases/all-national-security-subcommittee-dems-ask-mattis-to-reverse-trump>).

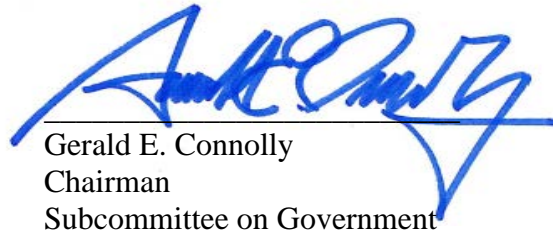
Freedom's Sentinel.⁷ While the financial costs have been carried by U.S. taxpayers, the losses of our servicemembers have been carried by their families, their friends, and their brothers and sisters in uniform. The U.S. government owes them, and the American people, the utmost transparency regarding conditions in Afghanistan.

The Committee on Oversight and Reform is the principal oversight committee of the House of Representatives and has broad authority to investigate "any matter" at "any time" under House Rule X. If you have any additional information related to the subject matter of this letter, or questions regarding this request, please contact Subcommittee staff at (202) 225-5051.

Sincerely,



Stephen F. Lynch
Chairman
Subcommittee on National Security



Gerald E. Connolly
Chairman
Subcommittee on Government
Operations

cc: The Honorable Glenn Grothman, Ranking Member
Subcommittee on National Security

The Honorable Jody B. Hice, Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Government Operations

⁷ Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, *Quarterly Report to the United States Congress* (Apr. 30, 2020) (online at www.sigar.mil/pdf/quarterlyreports/2020-04-30qr.pdf).