

DEFENSE DEPARTMENT RULES DATA ON FAILURE IN AFGHANISTAN IS NOT RELEASABLE

Today, the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction released the 38th quarterly report on the “reconstruction” effort in Afghanistan. We need only read as far as Inspector General Sopko’s cover letter to learn that the Department of Defense has decided that the effort in Afghanistan is failing so badly that a complete lid must be placed on information that provides details that can be used to document that failure:

This quarter, the Department of Defense (DOD) instructed SIGAR not to release to the public data on the number of districts, and the population living in them, controlled or influenced by the Afghan government or by the insurgents, or contested by both.* SIGAR has been reporting district-control data since January 2016, and later added estimates of population and land-area control reported by DOD. As shown in Appendix E of this quarterly report, SIGAR was informed this quarter that DOD has determined that although the most recent numbers are unclassified, they are not releasable to the public.

This development is troubling for a number of reasons, not least of which is that this is the first time SIGAR has been specifically instructed not to release information marked “unclassified” to the American taxpayer.

Aside from that, the number of districts controlled or influenced by the Afghan government had been one of the last remaining publicly available indicators for members of Congress—many of whose staff do not have access to the classified annexes to SIGAR reports—and for the American public of how the 16-year-long U.S. effort to secure Afghanistan is faring. Historically, the number of districts controlled or influenced by the government has been falling since SIGAR began reporting on it, while the number controlled or influenced by the insurgents has been rising—a fact that should cause even more concern about its disappearance from public disclosure and discussion.

This worrisome development comes as DOD this quarter, for the first time since 2009, also classified the exact strength figures for most Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF), another vital measure of ANDSF reconstruction.** Meanwhile, for the second consecutive quarter, DOD also classified or otherwise restricted information SIGAR had previously reported including such fundamental metrics of ANDSF performance as casualties, attrition, and most capability assessments.

DOD continues to blaze new ground in its efforts to hide its failures. Remember when it tried retroactive classification to hide a report it didn’t like? This is an interesting variation on that play. Now, data that is clearly known to be unclassified, and that SIGAR has been publishing for two years, is suddenly “not releasable”.

Why is it not releasable? That, of course, is because it shows just how badly DOD is failing in Afghanistan. Note that SIGAR tells us “the number of districts controlled or influenced by the government has been falling since SIGAR began reporting on it”. You can bet everything you own that had there been even the slightest improvement on territory held by Afghan forces,

DOD would have told SIGAR to release the data and would have had generals on every network touting their resounding success. At the same time, DOD is replaying a previous trick in classifying the actual force size for Afghan forces. I interpret that move to be telling us that Afghan forces are dwindling faster than previously claimed, presumably through the also-classified rates of casualty, attrition and capability metrics.

The ruling prohibiting release of data on the territory held becomes even closer to an attempt at retroactive classification as we move to the next part of Sopko's cover letter:

Ironically, DOD published population-control and exact authorized strength numbers in its own December 2017 unclassified report, *Enhancing Security and Stability in Afghanistan*. General John W. Nicholson Jr., commander of Resolute Support and U.S. forces in Afghanistan, also discussed population-control data with reporters during a press briefing on November 28. Accordingly, the population-control and authorized force-strength numbers reported in this quarterly report are drawn from either the unclassified DOD report or from General Nicholson's press briefing. The more recent data classified or deemed unreleasable to the public by DOD will, however, be reported in SIGAR's classified annex to the quarterly report.

Just because they don't want us looking closely at the data from November, here it is:

2.2 CURRENT SECURITY CONDITIONS

Afghanistan continues to face an externally enabled and resilient insurgency. As Afghanistan completes its third year of full responsibility for the security of the country, Afghan forces have shown determination and growing capability in their fight against the Taliban-led insurgency. The Afghan Government retains control of Kabul, major population centers, most key transit routes, provincial capitals, and a majority of district centers. In this reporting period, the Taliban was able to contest district centers, but did not seriously threaten provincial capitals, which was a significant milestone for the ANDSF. As of October 2017, RS assessed that the Afghan Government maintained control or influence over approximately 60 percent of the population, while insurgents had control or influence over approximately 10 percent of the population, with the remainder contested. In this reporting period, the ANDSF increased the number of operations compared to the same period 12 months ago. This operational increase resulted in pushing the Taliban from population centers into rural areas and, denied the Taliban their operational goal of capturing provincial centers.

Granted, this report is from December 15, but let's take a look at how that claim that "The Afghan Government retains control of Kabul" holds up. In today's New York Times, we have this:

Three strikes over the past two weeks have killed 128 people, mostly civilians, in Kabul, the Afghan capital, alone. The latest came on Monday, when Islamic State militants stormed an Afghan military training base, killing at least 11 soldiers.

With Kabul suffering this badly, imagine how bad it must be in the rest of the country. The war in Afghanistan is now over 16 years old. It's time for it to take those car keys and drive itself home, because things are going so badly there that DOD is hiding all the data it can.