

May 9, 2019

Honorable Patrick M. Shanahan
Acting Secretary of Defense
U.S. Department of Defense
1000 Defense Pentagon
Washington, DC 20301

Dear Secretary Shanahan:

The undersigned groups write to ask that you reverse the recent decision to stop collecting and releasing important information on stability in Afghanistan. We are deeply concerned that the military will no longer assess insurgent or government control at the district level in Afghanistan, as noted in the latest report from the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) report. This information is vital to the American public's understanding of the war in Afghanistan. Not tracking this information and disclosing it to the public is one more step the Department has taken away from transparency and accountability.

According to the SIGAR report from April 30, 2019, the U.S.-commanded NATO Resolute Support (RS) mission claimed that "the district-level stability assessments were 'of limited decision-making value to the [RS] Commander.'" Regardless of the utility to the Commander, these assessments are vital to public understanding of the conflict, especially given that there are "few remaining publicly available measures of the security situation in Afghanistan."¹ Members of Congress from both sides of the aisle have repeatedly challenged decisions to classify information about the capabilities and effectiveness of operations in Afghanistan.² It has become increasingly difficult for the public to assess the state of the conflict in Afghanistan, as the Department chooses to release less and less data. Colonel David Butler, spokesperson for U.S. Forces in Afghanistan, told Reuters that "while Resolute Support was no longer doing the analyses, the intelligence community did its own classified assessment of districts controlled by the government and Taliban."³ Even if the intelligence community continues this assessment, however, classified analysis is no substitute for informing the public.

¹ Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, report for April 30, 2019, *available at*: <https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/quarterlyreports/2019-04-30qr.pdf>

² See for example Representative Stephen Lynch, "Cumings and Lynch Request Immediate Reversal of Decision to Classify Previously Unclassified Information about Afghanistan," November 17, 2017. <https://lynch.house.gov/press-release/cummings-and-lynch-request-immediate-reversal-decision-classify-previously>; Senator Chuck Grassley, "Afghanistan Data Inexplicably Classified After Years of Public Availability," November 6, 2017. <https://www.grassley.senate.gov/news/news-releases/afghanistan-data-inexplicably-classified-after-years-public-availability>; Tim Molloy, "Declassified: U.S. Backs Down From Secrecy on Afghanistan Spending," *Frontline*, February 3, 2015. <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/article/declassified-u-s-backs-down-from-secrecy-on-afghanistan-spending/>

³ Idrees Ali, "U.S. military stops tracking key metric on Afghan war as situation deteriorates," Reuters, May 1, 2019, *available at*: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-afghanistan-military/us-military-stops-tracking-key-metric-on-afghan-war-as-situation-deteriorates-idUSKCN1S734C>

This development is especially troubling given the Department's general move toward greater secrecy. Civil society groups called for more transparency in an August 2018 letter, citing the Department's decision to restrict the information publicly disclosed on Afghan forces' capabilities, among other issues.⁴ Since then, there have been other concerning steps that reduce public access to information about the military. For example, in January 2019, the Department stopped releasing information on U.S. airstrikes in Iraq and Syria. It has also been nearly a year since the Department held a televised press briefing, a dramatic departure from past policy.

Public access to information about the U.S. military is vital. Civilian casualties have increased in Iraq, Syria, and Afghanistan – the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) found that there were more civilian casualties in Afghanistan in 2018 than in any other year since they began counting – and Afghanistan in particular is suffering from continued instability. Given these developments, it appears that the Department is restricting access in order to hide embarrassing information from the public. This is unacceptable, and the public has a right to assess U.S. military actions overseas for themselves.

It is imperative that the Department make a renewed commitment to transparency and restore public trust, particularly given the Department's requested \$750 billion budget, including a significant increase for the overseas contingency operations account.⁵ We ask that you reverse the trend of diminishing transparency, and resume collecting and publicly releasing as much information as possible about the conflict in Afghanistan and everywhere the U.S. military is conducting operations. In particular, we ask that you immediately reverse your decision to end public assessments of stability in Afghanistan.

Thank you for your consideration.

Afghanistan Peace Campaign
American Civil Liberties Union
Amnesty International USA
Campaign for Liberty
Coalition to Reduce Spending
Common Defense
Defending Rights and Dissent
Friends Committee on National Legislation
Government Information Watch
Justice for Muslims Collective
National Security Archive
Open the Government
Project On Government Oversight

⁴ Mandy Smithberger and Rebecca Jones, "Civil Society Calls on Pentagon to Increase Public Access to Information," Project On Government Oversight, August 7, 2018, *available at*: <https://www.pogo.org/letter/2018/08/civil-society-calls-on-pentagon-to-increase-public-access-to-information/>

⁵ Brian Everstine, "DOD's FY20 Budget Shifts Large Portion of Base Budget to War Funding Account," Air Force Times, March 12, 2019, *available at*: <http://www.airforcemag.com/Features/Pages/2019/March%202019/DODs-FY20-Budget-Shifts-Large-Portion-of-Base-Budget-to-War-Funding-Account.aspx>