

SIGAR

**Special Inspector General
for Afghanistan
Reconstruction**

OFFICE OF SPECIAL PROJECTS

**AFGHANISTAN'S CIVILIAN AVIATION: CAPACITY HAS
IMPROVED BUT CHALLENGES REMAIN,
INCLUDING RELIANCE ON DONOR SUPPORT FOR
OPERATIONS**



JULY 2019

SIGAR-19-46-SP



July 10, 2019

The Honorable Mike Pompeo
Secretary of State
Department of State

The Honorable Mark T. Esper
Acting Secretary of Defense
Department of Defense

The Honorable Mark Green
Administrator
U.S. Agency for International Development

The Honorable Daniel K Elwell
Acting Administrator
Federal Aviation Administration

In May 2015, we published SIGAR Audit 15-58 “Civilian Aviation: U.S. Efforts Improved Afghan Capabilities, but the Afghan Government Did Not Assume Airspace Management as Planned.” Our report corresponded roughly with the planned transfer of civilian aviation management from the Department of Defense (DOD) to the Afghan government. The report concluded that Afghanistan’s Civil Aviation Authority (ACAA) was not yet capable of managing civil aviation on its own, but U.S. assistance had made some progress in moving it toward self-sufficiency. The report recommended that the Secretary of State “ensure, to the extent possible, that the Afghan government awards a new airspace management services contract before the current interim DOD contract expires in September 2015.” Our audit also highlighted training shortcomings that were a significant factor in the ACAA’s inability to independently manage its airspace.

SIGAR initiated this follow-up review to determine the extent of U.S assistance provided for Afghan civil aviation since September 2015 and to determine whether the Afghan government has made progress towards taking control of its civil aviation operations since that time. We found that since September 2015, State and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) have dedicated approximately \$16 million in capacity, infrastructure, and technical development assistance to the ACAA. In addition, DOD has provided on-the-job training to the ACAA that was financed by NATO. Finally, the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) formalized relations with the ACAA and signed a Memorandum of Agreement to provide technical assistance.

SIGAR found that U.S. assistance helped the ACAA make progress towards rectifying institutional and training shortcomings identified in SIGAR’s May 2015 audit and aided the ACAA’s development of professional staff. However, we found that while the ACAA made important strides in being able to independently carry out civil aviation operations, it has not achieved several key objectives, and remains dependent on donor assistance.

We provided a draft copy of this report to DOD, State, FAA, and USAID for comment on June 19, 2019. DOD and FAA did not offer comments. State provided technical comments on July 9, 2019 and noted that the Afghans continue to make progress on technical upgrades to

their systems that should eventually increase revenues. State also noted that it continues to seek feedback from the ACAA on the types of technical support and training the U.S. government can provide. USAID provided comments on July 3, 2019. In its comments USAID stated that it “will continue to monitor the work of the ACAA, with the hope that it will continue to improve and become a better partner for Afghan businesses.”

We conducted our work in Washington, D.C. and Kabul Afghanistan from February 2018 through June 2019, in accordance with the Council of the Inspectors General on Integrity and Efficiency (CIGIE) Quality Standards for Inspection and Evaluation. SIGAR performed this work under the authority of Public Law No. 110-181, as amended, and the Inspector General Act of 1978, as amended. Should you or your staff have any questions about this project, please contact Mr. Benjamin Piccolo, Director of Special Projects, at (703) 545-2192 or benjamin.j.piccolo.civ@mail.mil.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'John F. Sopko', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

John F. Sopko
Special Inspector General
for Afghanistan Reconstruction

In the early 2000s, following decades of war, Afghanistan's civil aviation system was on the verge of collapse and the Afghan government did not have the infrastructure or the capability to manage its airspace or provide other civil aviation services. As a result, the U.S. government, through the Department of Defense (DOD), Federal Aviation Administration (FAA), Department of State (State), and United States Agency for International Development (USAID) provided over \$562 million for civil aviation-related activities in Afghanistan from 2002 to 2015. In addition, during that period, NATO provided civil aviation services for what NATO identifies as five essential civil aviation functions: air traffic control; fire crash and rescue; meteorology; communication, navigation, and surveillance; and airport safety management.

In 2012, the Afghan government approved Afghanistan's Civil Aviation Law and established the Afghanistan Civil Aviation Authority (ACAA). The ACAA's many duties and responsibilities include the operation and development of all of Afghanistan's airports and writing and organizing civil aviation policies and regulations. Key objectives of the ACAA include meeting International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) *Standard and Recommended Practices*, assuming control over the five critical civil aviation functions provided by the international community, and achieving operational safety standards that would merit the removal of Afghan airlines from the European Union's *Air Safety List*, which bans airlines from flying to or over any European Union member state.

The United States initially planned to transition airspace management responsibilities back to the Afghans at the end of 2014. However, in 2013, FAA and coalition forces recognized that the planned transition of airspace management services might not occur and the Afghan government would have to award a contract to conduct airspace services when the United States relinquished control. The U.S. officials in Kabul facilitated discussions between contract bidders and the Afghan government throughout 2013, but the Afghan government failed to award a contract. In August 2014, due to the lack of a new contract and the ACAA's inability to independently assume airspace control, the Afghan government requested that DOD extend its contract for the provision of airspace management services into 2015. In response, State provided \$29.5 million to DOD to extend its contracted airspace management services through September 2015.

In a 2015 audit, we found that the failed transfer of civilian airspace management was partly due to a lack of certified air traffic controllers stemming, from security concerns that restricted on-the-job training opportunities.¹ Our audit also found that Afghanistan's civil aviation system would have the potential to be self-sustaining if it were able to use its over-flight revenue to pay for airspace management services, reduce airspace management contracting costs by using less costly Afghan personnel in future years, and improve over-flight revenue through increased fees.² In response to our audit, State responded, "We have also been clear to the Afghans that continued support from the United States in the form of a further contract extension is unlikely and both logistically and financially very difficult" and that following the conclusion of the 2015 extension, "the Appropriate Afghan [Agencies] would procure follow-on services." Consequently, to ensure effective use of U.S. civil aviation assistance funds, our audit recommended that State ensure, to the extent possible, that the Afghan Government award a new airspace management services contract before the interim DOD contract expired in September 2015. In June 2015, the ACAA signed a contract for the

¹ SIGAR, *Civil Aviation: U.S. Efforts Improved Afghan Capabilities, but the Afghan Government Did Not Assume Airspace Management as Planned*, SIGAR 15-58-AR, May 2015.

² Overflight fees are charged to aircraft flying over the territory of a given country.

management, operations, and maintenance of Afghanistan’s airspace control with Readiness Management Support.

This review follows-up on SIGAR’s previous performance audit and (1) determines the amount of U.S. government assistance since the transfer of airspace authority; and (2) examines the extent to which U.S. assistance has improved the Afghan government’s ability to independently carry out civil aviation operations.

To accomplish these objectives, we reviewed program and strategy documents, Afghan aviation laws and regulations, relevant correspondence, memoranda of understanding and other agency provided data. We also interviewed officials from State, USAID, DOD, FAA, and ACAA, along with other senior Afghan government officials and contractors responsible for providing Afghan civil aviation services. We conducted our work in Washington, D.C., and Kabul, Afghanistan, from February 2018 through June 2019.

BACKGROUND

The ACAA is responsible for organizing and controlling civil aviation in Afghanistan. The ACAA has its own independent governmental budget and structure, and, since its inception in 2012, it has been tasked with, among other things, “regulating and arrangement [sic] the civil air transportation services in compliance with the Convention of International Civil Aviation, International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) documents and annexes.”³ To achieve this, the ACAA has worked with contractors and the international community, and according to ACAA Director, hopes to develop the institutional capacity required to pass an ICAO *Universal Safety Oversight Audit Programme* review of the ACAA’s compliance with ICAO *Standards and Recommended Practices*.

Another critical priority for the ACAA is to improve its safety standards to enhance the competitiveness and international reach of Afghan airlines. In 2010, prior to the ACAA’s inception, the European Union placed all Afghan airlines on its *EU Air Safety List*, which provides a list of air carriers banned from operating within the European Union due to Afghanistan’s failure to set up a proper safety regime. According to the ACAA Director General, a key goal of Afghanistan’s developing civil aviation sector is to achieve ICAO regulatory compliance and meet the requirements for removal from the European Union’s air safety ban imposed on Ariana, Kam Air, and other Afghan carriers.⁴ Doing so would allow Afghan passenger and freight traffic to resume routes to Europe, a key source for air cargo trade and revenue.

The ACAA also plans to take over the civil aviation responsibilities that are currently performed by NATO’s Resolute Support partner nations at Afghanistan’s four international airports in Kabul, Kandahar, Herat, and Mazar-i-Sharif (see figure 1).

³ Government of Afghanistan, *Law on Civil Aviation, Islamic Republic of Afghanistan Ministry of Justice, Issue No. 1093, December 16, 2012. Chapter 1, §2-2, (2012).*

⁴ European Commission, *EU Safety List Annex A “List of Air Carriers Which Are Banned From Operating Within The Union, With Exceptions.”*

Figure 1: Location of Primary Airports in Afghanistan



Source: Army Geospatial Center, 2018

THE U.S. HAS COMMITTED APPROXIMATELY \$16 MILLION IN CAPACITY DEVELOPMENT AND INFRASTRUCTURE ASSISTANCE SINCE IT TRANSFERRED AIRSPACE MANAGEMENT RESPONSIBILITY TO THE ACAA IN 2015 AND PROVIDED OTHER ASSISTANCE REIMBURSED BY NATO.

The Department of State and USAID committed approximately \$16 million in capacity, infrastructure, and technical development assistance to the ACAA since DOD awarded a bridge contract to manage Afghanistan’s civilian airspace between August 2014 and September 2015. In addition, DOD has provided on-the-job training to the ACAA that was financed by NATO. Finally, the FAA formalized relations with the ACAA and signed a Memorandum of Agreement to provide technical assistance, if requested.

State Committed \$9.9 Million to Build the Capacity of the ACAA, but Only Disbursed \$2.2 Million and Trained 75 ACAA Employees Over Four Years

In 2014, State approved a four year \$9.9 million grant with ICAO and the United Nations Office for Project Services (UNOPS) to provide classroom and on-the-job training for ACAA air traffic controllers and fire, crash, and rescue employees at ICAO certified institutions in India. Although approved in late 2014, the program did not yield any tangible results until July 2016, when 75 ACAA employees travelled to India as part of a \$2.2 million “Phase 1” training.⁵

State relied on UNOPS to provide financial and reporting oversight of the ICAO training program. UNOPS conducted two monitoring visits in 2016, and concluded, among other things, that the facilities, curriculum, and professors were satisfactory, and all of the students were able to pass the program. However, UNOPS reported shortcomings including low levels of student English-language proficiency – which the ACAA acted to address by increasing language training and vetting – and bureaucratic delays and capacity limitations that were beyond the exclusive purview of the ACAA to address.

Overall, the former Director General of the ACAA⁶ considers this State-funded grant program to have been the most successful training program to date. As of April 2019 the ACAA reported that all but six of the 75 Phase 1 trainees were still employed by the ACAA.

In 2018, State and the ACAA began pursuing a second phase of training (Phase 2) that would utilize the remaining \$7.7 million from the grant. Phase 2 was planned to be much larger, involve 360 trainees from a wider variety of aviation functions and returning trainees taking more advanced course work. State and ACAA, however, made insufficient progress toward implementing Phase 2 before the September 2018 deadline when the grant funds were set to expire. As a result, the funds were reprogrammed and transferred to USAID, which has yet to disburse the funds due to changes in the U.S. Mission’s priorities, according to USAID.

USAID Programs Have Contributed Approximately \$6.1 Million to Enhance Air Cargo Capacity and Infrastructure, and Facilitate Airport Expansion Planning

Since 2015, USAID has not pursued programs aimed at assisting the ACAA to assume responsibility for aviation services specifically, but has conducted several initiatives that support ACAA capacity-building as part of wider programs. For example, USAID, through its \$22.1 million three-year (2015-2018) Afghanistan Public Financial Management project, sought to strengthen the Afghan government's capacity to forecast, increase, and manage domestic revenue to enable Afghanistan to move toward fiscal sustainability, this included enhancing individual ministries’ nontax revenue. However, the Afghanistan Public Financial Management project did not specifically focus efforts on improving ACAA revenues. Instead, it focused on improving overall Afghan government revenues across several ministries, which could then improve the Afghan government’s ability to fund its own civilian airspace operations. In addition, USAID’s Afghanistan Trade and Revenue (ATAR) initiative worked with the ACAA to build and improve air cargo infrastructure, capacity, and export processes at Hamid Karzai International Airport (HKIA) in Kabul. The ATAR efforts are aimed at enhancing ACAA’s

⁵ Of the 75 “Phase 1” trainees, 44 were air traffic controllers and 31 were airport rescue and firefighter personnel.

⁶ On February 19, 2019, Afghan President Ashraf Ghani appointed Dr. Mohammed Wafayezada as Director General of the ACAA to replace Mr. Mahmood Shah Habibi who served as the ACAA Director General from May 2017 to February 2019.

revenue generation capacity, and increasing funds available for investment in personnel, equipment, and infrastructure critical for airspace operations and safety. USAID estimates that it provided \$567,853 in ACAA-related assistance through ATAR since 2015, to:

- Assist ACAA to develop and review remodeling plans to convert the dilapidated and underutilized Hajj Terminal facilities into a more useful export cargo terminal. ATAR also developed a feasibility study and comprehensive Air Cargo Terminal Operations Manual for this facility.
- Construct a “One-Stop-Shop” facility at HKIA to streamline customs clearance procedures and expedited exports by air. The initiative also assisted in establishing a refrigerated consolidation warehouse to help prevent the spoiling of perishable goods.
- Facilitate an “Export Processing Zone” concept that is intended to streamline the air cargo export bureaucratic and logistical process, reducing risk and transaction cost to exporters. This effort included legal/regulatory advisory support.

In addition to these initiatives, USAID disbursed \$5.5 million through the Engineering Support Program for seven feasibility studies to improve air transport at HKIA. These studies examined the feasibility of constructing the following: an export processing zone; air cargo area; maintenance, repair, and overhaul facility; fuel station; improved passenger terminal; airport hotel and convention center; and software needs assessment.

[DOD Has Provided Resources for Aviation Services and On-the-Job Training at Kandahar Airfield but the ACAA Has Not Taken Full Advantage of Training Opportunities](#)

Since 2015, DOD’s efforts to enhance Afghanistan’s civil aviation system primarily consisted of providing NATO-financed essential aviation functions and training at Kandahar international airport. In addition, following our 2015 audit highlighting concerns with the ACAA on-the-job training program, NATO Resolute Support signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the United States and other Resolute Support partner nations to provide civil aviation support to Afghanistan and on-the-job training to Afghan civil aviation employees. According to the DOD officials we spoke with, DOD has provided assistance to the ACAA through the delivery of the five essential aviation functions (air traffic control; fire crash and rescue; meteorology; communication, navigation, and surveillance; and airport safety management) for 16 hours per day and airfield/airspace on-the-job training for 8 hours per day at Kandahar International Airport since the Memorandum of Understanding was signed in September 2015.⁷ All of the aviation services and on-the-job training at Kandahar are reimbursed by NATO.⁸

On-the-job training at Kandahar is conducted under ICAO standards which can be more stringent than military standards. The program at Kandahar consists of a maximum of 45 training slots across the five essential aviation functions. Specifically, the on-the-job training maximums include training for up to:

⁷ NATO members support civil aviation operations and conduct training at each of Afghanistan’s major airports. The U.S. supports operations and conducts training in Kandahar. Germany, Italy, and Turkey support operations and conduct training at the other three major airports.

⁸ Kandahar aviation management services and on-the-job training assistance provided to the ACAA by DOD totals an annual estimated amount of roughly \$29 million; this amount is reimbursed by NATO.

- Nine air traffic controllers;
- Eleven communication, navigation, and surveillance personnel;
- Four meteorologists;
- Two airport safety management office personnel; and
- Nineteen fire, crash and rescue service personnel.

However, ACAA has not fully utilized the program and only 17 ACAA personnel—11 fire, crash and rescue service employees and six air traffic controllers—are currently participating in on-the-job training with Air Force Central Command personnel at Kandahar International Airport.

The Federal Aviation Administration Formalized Relations with the ACAA, but the ACAA has not Requested Assistance since September 2015

From 2004 through 2014, the FAA provided the ACAA with technical advising, training, and assistance to support airspace operations. Since the transition of airspace authority in 2015, however, the FAA's involvement in Afghan civil aviation infrastructure and capacity building has been minimal. FAA continues to interact with the ACAA primarily through ICAO summits and other regional meetings, but it does so in a multilateral context addressing broader aviation issues and not in a direct advisory or assistance role.

After 2015, the FAA moved towards formalizing its relationship with the Afghan government and the ACAA. A key part of this formalization included a 2016 FAA-ACAA Memorandum of Agreement that provided a mechanism for ACAA to make formal requests for assistance. However, other than providing Notices to Airmen⁹ and other such general interactions, no large scale coordination or assistance programs commenced under this MOA. FAA representatives we spoke with explained that the FAA is largely reactive, and FAA policy requires the agency to be approached by a host country government with a specific request for technical assistance rather than actively seeking to provide assistance if not requested overtly by a partner state. As of April 2018, no such requests have been made by the Afghan government or ACAA.

Generally, FAA would review any such request for assistance in the context of U.S. foreign policy objectives and guidelines dictated by State. However, according to multiple FAA representatives we spoke with, it has not received guidance that outlines State (and therefore) U.S. foreign policy priorities in Afghanistan related to the civil aviation sector. According to the FAA, such a document would better inform the FAA as to the context and validity of potential Afghan requests for support of civil aviation and better shape FAA's response to such requests.

⁹ According to the FAA a Notice to Airmen is a notice containing information essential to personnel concerned with flight operations but not known far enough in advance to be publicized by other means. In 2015, the FAA provided such notices on behalf of the ACAA due to minor technical problems related to the ACAA's issuance of informational notices for the Kabul Flight Information Region and Hamid Karzai international Airport.

THE ACAA HAS MADE PROGRESS SINCE 2015 BUT STILL RELIES ON INTERNATIONAL SUPPORT

U.S. and donor support for the ACAA over the past several years, coupled with significant changes made by the ACAA, have led to improved capacity and increased revenues. However, the ACAA remains reliant on donor support for operations and has not met several key objectives.

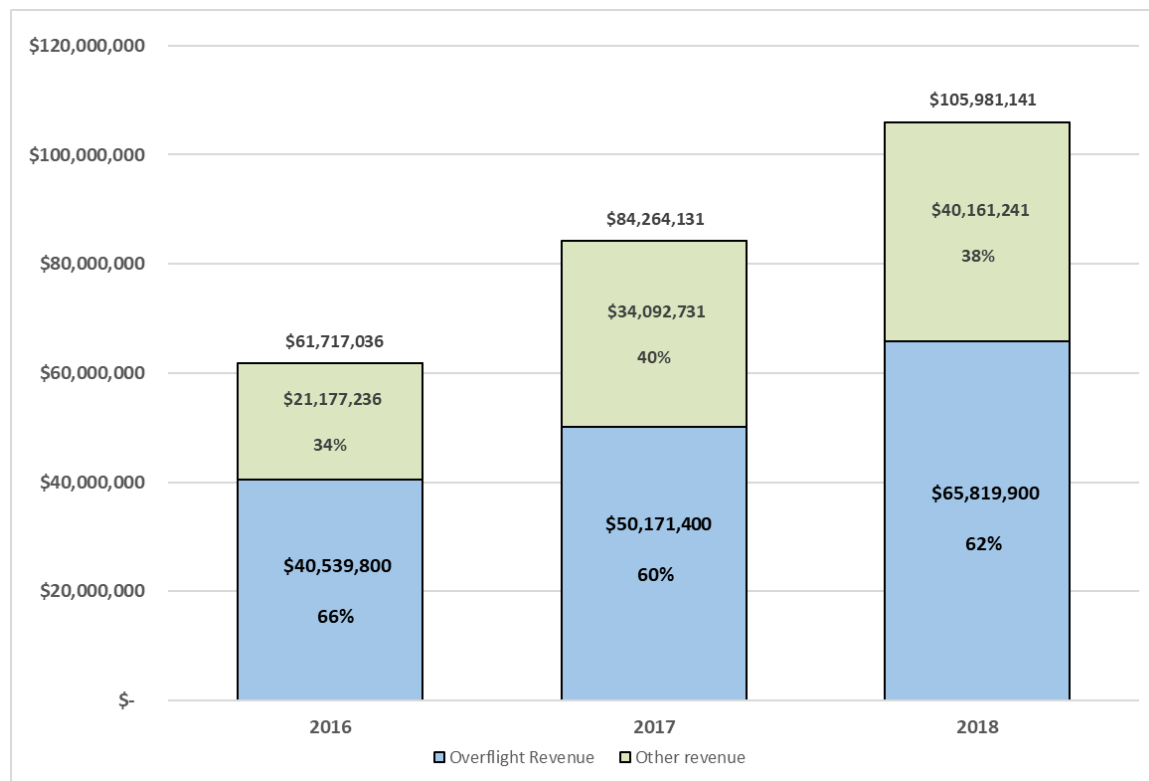
The ACAA improved its capacity and its financial situation over the past several years in order to slowly move away from the hybrid approach it currently uses to manage its civil aviation operations—a combination of contracted airspace management, internationally managed aviation operations, and direct ACAA management. The increased capacity—gained in part through an improved training regime that includes the previously mentioned DOD on-the-job training and the State grant program with ICAO and UNOPS—has allowed the ACAA to conduct some civilian aviation operations at the four major Afghan airports. State’s collaborative effort with ICAO, UNOPS, and accredited training institutes abroad have improved ACAA capacity by facilitating institutional classroom and practical training for air traffic controllers and firefighter personnel in preparation for ICAO *Universal Safety Oversight Audit Program* review that otherwise would be difficult for the ACAA to obtain domestically.

In addition to developing its workforce, the ACAA increased revenues by raising the over-flight fees, installing new communication and radar equipment, and pursuing other non-aeronautical or commercial activities.¹⁰ Through these actions the ACAA increased its over-flight fee from \$400 in early 2015 to \$700 in late 2017 (a 75 percent increase), and helped promote an increase in overflights from 81,326 in 2016 to 95,257 in 2018 (a 17 percent increase). The result was an 89 percent increase in revenues from approximately \$56 million in 2015 to approximately \$106 million in 2018. Figure 2 shows ACAA overflight revenues as a proportion of total revenue 2016-2018. According to the ACAA Director General, the increased revenues have allowed the ACAA to independently fund airfield security contracts as well as the last two years of its airspace management contract.¹¹

¹⁰ Examples of non-aeronautical or commercial revenue sources include parking fees and concessions.

¹¹ Japan provided a grant to pay for the initial year of the contract.

Figure 2 - ACAA Overflight Revenues as a Proportion of Total Revenue 2016-2018



Note: Other revenue includes monies receive from concessions, landing fees, parking fees, and licensing and certification.

Source: SIGAR Analysis

Despite these improvements, the ACAA still faces challenges, has not achieved two key objectives, and remains reliant on donor support for civilian aviation operations. First, the ACAA has yet to undergo a Universal Safety Oversight Audit Programme (USOAP) assessment of ICAO *Standard and Recommended Practice* compliance. Without such a review, the ACAA and the international community are left without assurances that Afghanistan is able to manage its civilian airspace and airfields in accordance with internationally accepted safety standards. As a result, NATO and certified contractors continue to provide services to ensure the safety of regional civil aviation. According to the ACAA Director, however, the ACAA is scheduled to receive an ICAO desktop audit at the end of 2019 and a full Universal Safety Oversight Audit Programme in 2020.

Second, as of June 2019, all ACAA certified Afghan carriers remain banned by the European Union's *Air Safety List*. According to the ACAA Director General, the ACAA is currently working to meet EU standards and informed SIGAR that it is confident that Afghan airlines will be removed from the EU air safety list following the USOAP assessment scheduled for 2020.

Although the ACAA and its workforce made significant strides in recent years, it is not currently capable of conducting civil aviation operations without donor support, including technical, training, and financial assistance—all of which were also identified as shortfalls in our 2015 audit. Moreover, NATO Resolute Support—whose member nations support operations and conduct training at airports

throughout Afghanistan—has neither set a transition date nor created a transition plan to transfer its civil aviation responsibilities to the ACAA.¹² According to NATO Resolute Support, the transition of its civil aviation responsibilities is a nonmilitary, condition-based mission with each Senior Airfield Authority (SAA)—the NATO member responsible for supporting operations and conducting training at the major Afghan airports—determining its own transition goals and processes specific to its own airfield. Each SAA maintains a large degree of discretion and relies on internationally recognized standard practices and its own professional expertise to guide the development of ACAA employees at each location.

In conversations with SIGAR, the ACAA Director General stated that it remains roughly two to three years away from meeting the personnel, financial, and regulatory requirements to enable transfer of all civil aviation services provided by NATO and international aviation contractors to full ACAA control.

CONCLUSION

Though the ACAA is among Afghanistan’s youngest institutions, it has made noteworthy progress in building its operational and institutional capacity, especially over the last several years. US support, principally from State, USAID, and DOD have helped build the capacity of the ACAA, and changes made by the ACAA have resulted in significantly increased revenues. Although capacity development and increased revenues appear to have put the ACAA on a path toward civilian aviation independence, the ACAA has yet to demonstrate its capacity to assume control over the five essential aviation functions (Air Traffic Control; Fire Crash and Rescue; Safety Management Office; Meteorological Service; and Communication Navigation and Surveillance), undergo ICAO audits to assess compliance with ICAO standards, and gain removal of Afghan airlines from the European Union’s *Air Safety List*.

AGENCY COMMENTS

We provided a draft copy of this report to DOD, State, FAA, and USAID for comment on June 19, 2019. DOD and FAA did not offer comments. State provided technical comments on July 9, 2019 and noted that the Afghans continue to make progress on technical upgrades to their systems that should eventually increase revenues. State also noted that it continues to seek feedback from the ACAA on the types of technical support and training the U.S. government can provide. USAID provided comments on July 3, 2019. In its comments USAID stated that it “will continue to monitor the work of the ACAA, with the hope that it will continue to improve and become a better partner for Afghan businesses.”

¹² As mentioned previously, the U.S. supports operations and conducts training at Kandahar airport. Italy, Germany, and Turkey have that responsibility at the other three major Afghan airports.

This project was conducted
under project code SP-187.

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