AUTHENTICATED
U.S. GOVERNMENT
INFORMATION
GPO

THE TRUMP ADMINISTRATION'S AFGHANISTAN POLICY

HEARING

BEFORE THE

COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS
HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

ONE HUNDRED SIXTEENTH CONGRESS

FIRST SESSION

September 19, 2019

Serial No. 116–66

Printed for the use of the Committee on Foreign Affairs

Available: http://www.foreignaffairs.house.gov/, http://docs.house.gov, or http://www.govinfo.gov

U.S. GOVERNMENT PUBLISHING OFFICE
37–846PDF WASHINGTON : 2020

COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS

ELIOT L. ENGEL, New York, *Chairman*

BRAD SHERMAN, California
GREGORY W. MEEKS, New York
ALBIO SIRES, New Jersey
GERALD E. CONNOLLY, Virginia
THEODORE E. DEUTCH, Florida
KAREN BASS, California
WILLIAM KEATING, Massachusetts
DAVID CICILLINE, Rhode Island
AMI BERA, California
JOAQUIN CASTRO, Texas
DINA TITUS, Nevada
ADRIANO ESPAILLAT, New York
TED LIEU, California
SUSAN WILD, Pennsylvania
DEAN PHILLIPS, Minnesota
ILHAN OMAR, Minnesota
COLIN ALLRED, Texas
ANDY LEVIN, Michigan
ABIGAIL SPANBERGER, Virginia
CHRISSY HOULAHAN, Pennsylvania
TOM MALINOWSKI, New Jersey
DAVID TRONE, Maryland
JIM COSTA, California
JUAN VARGAS, California
VICENTE GONZALEZ, Texas

MICHAEL T. MCCAUL, Texas, *Ranking Member*
CHRISTOPHER H. SMITH, New Jersey
STEVE CHABOT, Ohio
JOE WILSON, South Carolina
SCOTT PERRY, Pennsylvania
TED S. YOHO, Florida
ADAM KINZINGER, Illinois
LEE ZELDIN, New York
JIM SENSENBRENNER, Wisconsin
ANN WAGNER, Missouri
BRIAN MAST, Florida
FRANCIS ROONEY, Florida
BRIAN FITZPATRICK, Pennsylvania
JOHN CURTIS, Utah
KEN BUCK, Colorado
RON WRIGHT, Texas
GUY RESCHENTHALER, Pennsylvania
TIM BURCHETT, Tennessee
GREG PENCE, Indiana
STEVE WATKINS, Kansas
MIKE GUEST, Mississippi

JASON STEINBAUM, *Staff Director*
BRENDAN SHIELDS, *Republican Staff Director*

CONTENTS

Page

WITNESSES

Wells, The Honorable Alice G., Acting Assistant Secretary, Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs, U.S. Department of State 7
Freeman, Ms. Karen, Assistant to the Administrator, Office of Afghanistan and Pakistan Affairs, United States Agency for International Development . 13
Cunningham, The Honorable James B., Nonresident Senior Fellow, South Asia Center, Atlantic Council 55
Miller, Ms. Laurel, Program Director, Asia, Crisis Group, Former State Department Acting Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan 59
Joscelyn, Mr. Thomas, Senior Fellow, Foundation for Defense of Democracies, Senior Editor, FDD's Long War Journal 71

STATEMENT FOR THE RECORD SUBMITTED BY A COMMITTEE MEMBER

Statement for the record submitted from Representative Yoho 23

APPENDIX

Hearing Notice 90
Hearing Minutes 91
Hearing Attendance 92

STATEMENT FOR THE RECORD SUBMITTED FROM A COMMITTEE MEMBER

Statement for the record submitted from Representative Connolly 93

ADDITIONAL MATERIALS SUBMITTED FOR THE RECORD

Article: June 3, 2019, How US "good guys" wiped out an Afgan Family submitted for the record from Representative Omar 95

RESPONSES TO QUESTIONS SUBMITTED FOR THE RECORD

Responses to questons submitted for the record from Chairman Engel 101
Responses to questons submitted for the record from Representative Omar 104
Responses to questons submitted for the record from Representative Allred 115

THE TRUMP ADMINISTRATION'S AFGHANISTAN POLICY

Thursday, September 19, 2019

House of Representatives

Committee on Foreign Affairs

Washington, DC

The committee met, pursuant to notice, at 10 a.m., in room 2172 Rayburn House Office Building, Hon. Eliot Engel (chairman of the committee) presiding.

Chairman ENGEL. The committee will come to order.

Without objection, all members will have 5 days to submit statements, extraneous material, and questions for the record, subject to the length limitation in the rules.

Ambassador Wells, Ms. Freeman, welcome. Welcome to members of the public and the press as well, as we are glad to have our friends from C-SPAN with us today as well.

We meet this morning so the committee can conduct oversight of the Trump Administration's policy toward Afghanistan and I will now recognize myself for an opening statement.

For months we have been attempting to get some visibility into the ongoing peace negotiations without success. We all want peace. We all want the fighting in Afghanistan to end.

But Congress needs to know what a potential deal looks like. Members on both sides need the chance to ask questions and offer views, and in the last few weeks we have seen the Afghan reconciliation process go off the rails in a spectacular fashion.

We learned from a Presidential tweet that the Administration was planning to host the Taliban at Camp David the same week that we marked the anniversary of 9/11.

We learned that the President upended that arrangement and we learned that the peace deal, evidently, is dead. If the reporting is accurate, the President's desire to get the credit and look like a deal maker got the better of him again and now months and months of diplomatic efforts seems to be thrown out the window.

As the committee that oversees American foreign policy we understandably had a lot of questions about this diplomatic effort and the Administration's refusal to provide us and the American people answers prompted me a week ago to subpoena our top negotiator, Ambassador Khalilzad, to testify today.

Just to be clear, I do not take subpoenas lightly and I would not have issued this one had we not sent three letters inviting him and asking Secretary Pompeo at a hearing to send him.

We simply could not wait any longer, and after I issued that subpoena I spoke with Secretary Pompeo. At the State Department's request he offered to send an official from the Bureau of South and

Central Asian Affairs to testify and for Ambassador Khalilzad to brief myself and Mr. McCaul in a classified setting.

I said I would consider accommodation but only if the Ambassador briefed every member of this committee, Democrats and Republicans, in a classified setting, the same courtesy that was afforded to the members of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

Anything less than that was a nonstarter for me and for Mr. McCaul. I will let him speak for himself. But we were eye to eye.

We saw this just the same way. We were defending the integrity of the legislative process and the integrity of our committee.

Last evening after a few days of negotiations, the State Department finally agreed to this compromise and I withdrew the subpoena on Ambassador Khalilzad.

We just wrapped up that classified briefing and we are going now to continue our examination of these issues with the officials before us.

So let's take a step back. I know that the idea of negotiating with the Taliban may seem abhorrent. I am from New York City and for myself and a lot of New Yorkers who lived through 9/11 it is a tough pill to swallow.

And since then, many brave Americans have lost their lives at the hands of Taliban fighters. But here is the reality.

After 18 years of war the Taliban still exists. We need, unfortunately, to deal with that fact, and the adage remains true, you do not make peace with your friends and, believe it or not, there is some common ground.

For starters, the Taliban wants our troops out of Afghanistan and we want our troops home.

So where do we go from there? In my view, any viable deal needs to be built on three pillars. The first is that the Taliban must pledge that Afghanistan will never be used again as a base to plan attacks against the United States and our allies.

We understand that the Administration secured that commitment from the Taliban in earlier negotiations.

Second, the Taliban must agree to separate from al-Qaida, something they have indicated they would do, and renounce violence including against the Afghan people or government.

And last, the Taliban and the Afghan government must engage in a good faith process that can lead to reconciliation among all Afghans.

This area still has a lot of unanswered questions, and with the President declaring the deal dead it is not clear where we go from here.

The way I see it, we need to use whatever leverage we can to promote inter-Afghan dialog. The president suggested that peace would not be possible unless we first had a cease-fire in place.

Well, guess what? There was a cease-fire in June 2018 to celebrate Eid, and what did we do to seize on this opportunity? Nothing.

Why? Because the Administration has hollowed out the State Department. We have complained about this for a long time.

State Department inspector general found that the Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs has, quote, "lost both staff and ex-

pertise," unquote, under the Administration, including experts on peace talks with the Taliban and reconciliation.

So what will this administration do to get a second bite at the apple? Another cease-fire that might create an opening for more dialog?

I would like to hear from our witnesses about that, among many other issues, because one thing is crystalline clear. There is no military solution to end the fighting in Afghanistan, and if there is another opportunity even following the President's disastrous attempt at deal making to forge a peace that advances American security interests, we need to consider those options.

We owe this to the men and women who have fought and died in this war. We owe it to those who lost their lives or their loved ones at 9/11.

We owe it to future generations of Americans who do not want to see our country entrenched in endless war and to the Afghan people who want a peaceful and prosperous future for their country.

We will soon hear from our witnesses but first I will yield to our ranking member, Mr. McCaul of Texas, for any opening remarks he might have and I want to thank him publicly for his cooperation, as usual. We work together and we believe it brings good results not only for the Congress but for the American people as well.

Mr. McCaul.

Mr. MCCAUL. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for holding this important hearing. I would also like to thank Ambassador Khalilzad for briefing committee members this morning where we had a robust and informative discussion on a range of timely issues. I look forward to staying engaged with him.

I do want to say for the benefit of the members of this committee the chairman and I stand unified in our commitment to the—preserving the integrity of this committee.

This is the second oldest committee in the Congress dating back to the Continental Congress. We do have Article 1 constitutional oversight responsibilities and we do deserve that respect.

Just last week, we commemorated the eighteenth anniversary of the 9/11 terror attacks that took the lives of 3,000 innocent people.

It was one of the most tragic days in American history. In the aftermath of 9/11 counterterrorism and homeland security became our top priority.

It was necessary to go on the offense militarily and attack the terrorists abroad. That strategy included invading Afghanistan, removing the Taliban, and destroying al-Qaida.

Since 2001, we have achieved many successes on the battlefield and through diplomacy. Specifically, we have decimated the leadership of al-Qaida.

We captured Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, killed Osama bin Laden, and most recently, removed his son and rising leader, Hamza bin Laden, from the battlefield.

And most importantly, we have not allowed Afghanistan to be the staging ground for another devastating attack on our homeland.

We have also helped implement many political and social reforms. Millions of Afghanistan people have voted in democratic

elections at all levels and Afghan women, who were not allowed to attend school or hold a job during the brutal reign of the Taliban in the 1990's, have made significant gains and I was pleased to hear women were part of these negotiations.

These accomplishments have not been without great sacrifices. Over 2,300 Americans have given their lives in this conflict including Sergeant First Class Jeremy Griffin, who was killed in action in Afghanistan just on Monday.

Over 20,000 more have been wounded. We must never forget their courage or the price we have paid on both blood and treasure to protect our homeland and to build a better future for Afghanistan.

Unfortunately, the Taliban has made significant gains. Today, they control almost 50 percent of the country and have become increasingly violent.

But after 18 years on the battlefield the American people and Members of Congress want to know what our plan is for peace, moving forward.

I am glad the President decided against welcoming leaders of the Taliban to Camp David, particularly in the week of 9/11. Perhaps the current suspension of talks will allow us to reevaluate our strategy.

And this committee, Mr. Chairman, I should say, and the Congress have a role in the process. There is no doubt that all of us would like to see this war come to an end and I fully support the Administration's efforts to bring a diplomatic resolution to this conflict.

But there is also real doubt that the Taliban can act as legitimate partners for peace. By all accounts, their ties to al-Qaida remain intact, and further, the Taliban is not a monolithic organization. To only encourage—engage with the organization's central leadership overlooks local power brokers who do not always follow them.

We also have to keep in mind many in the Taliban has some longstanding objections to a negotiated peace. They think our military will come home no matter what. I think some more extremist factions were responsible for that attack just to end the peace negotiations.

And as Ambassador Crocker has assessed, and I have visited with him many times in Afghanistan, when he said that, quote, "The Taliban will offer any number of commitments, knowing that when we were gone and the Taliban is back, we will have no means of enforcing any of them."

We must also avoid the same mistake President Obama made in Iraq by withdrawing all of our troops for the purposes of preventing another 9/11 style attack on our homeland. I personally believe that we should keep a residual force in place to focus on counterterrorism intelligence and partner force training.

I would also like to thank Ambassador Wells, Ms. Freeman, for being here. This hearing really comes at a critical time.

As I can say, we did commend Ambassador—the prior Ambassador and special envoy this morning for his commitment and his service to the country in what I consider to be one of the most difficult negotiations on the planet.

And with that, Mr. Chairman, I yield back.

Chairman ENGEL. Thank you, Mr. McCaul.

I will now introduce our witnesses. Alice Wells is the Acting Assistant Secretary of State for South Central and Asian Affairs. Karen Freeman is the assistant to the administrator in the Office of Afghanistan and Pakistan Affairs at the United States Agency for International Development.

I, again, thank you both for your service and for your testimony this morning. Without objection, the witnesses' prepared testimony will be made part of the record and I will now recognize the witnesses for 5 minutes each to summarize their testimony.

We will start with Ambassador Wells.

STATEMENT OF THE HONORABLE ALICE WELLS, ACTING ASSISTANT SECRETARY, BUREAU OF SOUTH AND CENTRAL ASIAN AFFAIRS, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE

Ms. WELLS. Good morning, Chairman Engel, Ranking Member McCaul, and distinguished members of the committee.

I appreciate the opportunity to testify this morning on the Trump Administration's policy in Afghanistan. Last week in New York, Washington, Kabul, and around the world we commemorated the 18th anniversary of the September 11th attacks on the United States.

And when the U.S. began its military engagement in Afghanistan, our core interest was clear—to ensure that Afghanistan would never again be a platform for a terrorist attack on America.

And in that regard, our mission over the last 18 years and partnership with our NATO allies has been a success. Since 9/11, no terrorist group has used Afghanistan to attack our shores. But the threat remains significant.

Afghanistan remains a haven for terrorist organizations. ISIS Khorasan has demonstrated the intent to organize or inspire attacks in the U.S. and Europe.

It has the capacity and willingness to indiscriminately kill civilians who do not support their nihilistic ideology. In April, Russia, China, joined us in calling on the Taliban to make good on its commitments to cut ties with international terrorist groups to prevent terrorist recruiting, training, fund-raising, and to expel any known terrorists.

While the United States remains committed to countering the threat of terrorism from Afghanistan, the Administration understands that the American people are ready to end this war responsibly.

Military power alone will not bring peace to Afghanistan or eliminate the threat of terrorists exploiting Afghan soil. A negotiated political settlement accepted by most Afghans remains the best way to ensure a durable peace, and to enable Afghans to focus on ridding their country of international terrorists.

In the last 12 months, we have made significant progress toward this objective. The Taliban engaged in dialog with the United States and discussions with our fellow Afghans, including Afghan government officials at an inter-Afghan dialog in Qatar this July.

Special Representative Khalilzad and his team consulted with the government of Afghanistan and stakeholders across society. We

built regional and international support for peace, enlisting the help of Pakistan, Russia, China, the Gulf, EU members and regional partners, and consultations within the U.S. Government are continuing on the best way forward.

As we foster the conditions for direct negotiations between the Afghans, we are rationalizing our risk and our exposure to ensure a sustainable diplomatic assistance and military presence.

Diplomatically, we have reduced our civilian direct hire presence from over 1,100 personnel in 2011 to around 500 staff today. Developmentally, we have tapered our civilian assistance from over $4 billion in 2010 to about $480 million today.

Our international partners are now contributing three-quarters of all development and humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan.

Militarily, we have reduced our presence from over 100,000 troops in 2011 to less than 14,000 today. NATO is constantly evaluating the requirements of the 39 allies and partners in Resolute Support Mission.

Afghanistan is a different country than it was in 2001. Afghan troops are leading the fight against ISIS-K and the Taliban. Over 9 million students are enrolled in school, 39 percent of them girls.

One-third of the 4 million voters in the parliamentary elections were women. Afghan farmers are beginning to export high-value crops and a nascent private sector is strengthening supply chains and building market linkages with India and Central Asia.

But challenges remain. Over half the Afghan population lives below the poverty line. Corruption, government malfeasance, and record high opium production threatens sustainability.

We will continue to hold the Afghan government accountable for combating corruption and we will adjust our assistance levels accordingly.

Afghanistan is holding a Presidential election on September 28th. We have called for the Afghan government and electoral institutions to ensure the election will be credible and transparent.

We have emphasized that all candidates are accountable to the code of conduct they signed pledging to respect the electoral process.

Afghans have the right to vote without fear of intimidation, attack, or violence, and the Taliban statements threatening election workers and voters are naked intimidation.

We offer our strong support to the Afghan security forces who are in charge of electoral security and sacrifice their lives on a daily basis.

Even as Afghanistan goes to the polls, Afghans cannot pause their efforts to advance peace. Every Afghan must be invested in a political process that brings security and reconciliation after 40 years of violence.

Finally, the United States will continue to safeguard American security. For too long the Taliban have taken comfort in their conviction that our engagement is unsustainable.

Our friends and adversaries should understand our interest in protecting American citizens is enduring as we advance a responsible way toward peace, development and security in Afghanistan.

Thank you.

[The prepared statement of Ms. Wells follows:]

Written Testimony of Alice G Wells

Acting Assistant Secretary for South and Central Asia
Before the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee for the Asia and the Pacific
Thursday, September 19, 2019

Good morning Chairman Engel, Ranking Member McCaul, and distinguished members of the Committee. I appreciate the opportunity to testify this morning on the Trump Administration's policy in Afghanistan.

Last week in New York, Washington, Kabul, and around the world, Americans and our allies commemorated the 18th anniversary of the September 11 attack on the United States – honoring the nearly 3,000 people who lost their lives in New York, the Pentagon, and in Pennsylvania. When the United States began its military engagement in Afghanistan in response to those attacks, our core interest was clear: to ensure that Afghanistan would never again be a safe haven for international terrorism.

In that regard, our mission over the last 18 years has been a success. Thanks to the skill and vigilance of the U.S. military and our NATO and international allies – supported by our robust diplomatic engagement and development assistance to the Afghan people – no terrorist group has used Afghanistan to launch a successful attack on our shores since 9/11.

Nevertheless, the terrorist threat posed by the ability of international terrorist groups to operate in Afghanistan remains significant. Afghanistan remains a haven for a host of terrorist organizations, including those based in Pakistan that are responsible for the murder of American citizens in deadly attacks on India. ISIS-Khorasan has demonstrated the intention to organize or inspire attacks in the United States and Europe. It has the capacity and willingness to indiscriminately kill civilians who do not support their nihilistic ideology, as they showed again in August when an ISIS-K suicide bomber killed over 90 Afghans at a Kabul wedding hall. In April, Russia and China joined us in calling on the Taliban to make good on its commitments to cut ties with international terrorist groups, prevent terrorist recruiting, training, and fundraising, and expel any known terrorists.

While remaining committed to countering the threat of terrorism from Afghanistan, the Administration understands that the American people are ready to end this war responsibly. In 2017, the President's South Asia Strategy acknowledged that military power alone will not bring peace to Afghanistan or stop the terrorist threat arising from that country. The United States has instead sought to create the conditions for a negotiated political settlement that produces a lasting peace between the Taliban and the Afghan government and people. A comprehensive peace agreement will enable Afghans to effectively focus on eliminating the international terrorist organizations that threaten our societies.

In the last twelve months, under the leadership of Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation Khalilzad and his team, we have made more progress in establishing the terms for a negotiated political settlement than in the previous 17 years. The Taliban engaged in sustained dialogue with the United States and in significant political discussions with their fellow Afghans

– including Afghan government officials – at an intra-Afghan dialogue held in Qatar this July. Simultaneously, the United States has consulted with the Government of Afghanistan and stakeholders across society on the principles that need to undergird a peace agreement.

In this pursuit, Ambassador Khalilzad has also built regional and international support for peace, from securing Pakistan's assistance in bringing an empowered Taliban negotiating team to the table, to enlisting the help of Russia, China, the Gulf, EU and neighboring countries. We continue to believe a negotiated political settlement among Afghans remains the best way to ensure a durable peace in Afghanistan. A durable peace can only come from an agreement between Afghans that is accepted by most Afghans. More importantly, Afghans consistently tell us that achieving peace is their priority. Consultations within the U.S. government are continuing on the best way forward.

As we foster the conditions for direct negotiations among Afghans, we are taking steps to rationalize our risk and exposure in Afghanistan, to ensure a sustainable diplomatic, assistance, and military presence. Our focus on a sustainable level of commitment sends an important message to the Afghan government that they must accelerate their own development on the path to self-reliance and identify ways to reduce their dependence on the American people. It also sends a clear message to the Taliban that they cannot simply wait us out to achieve a military victory in Afghanistan that would undo the gains of the last 18 years.

- **Diplomatically**, we have reduced our civilian direct hire presence from over 1,100 personnel in 2011, spread throughout the country, to around 500 dedicated staff today, based in Kabul. We have also consolidated our physical presence in Kabul, closing outlying facilities and reducing the contractor footprint.

- **Developmentally**, we have responsibly tapered our civilian assistance from over $4 billion in 2010 to approximately $500 million per year today – focusing on the most urgent humanitarian needs and initiatives designed to increase Afghan self-sufficiency. We continue to seek greater burden-sharing and this week are convening with like-minded partners in London for important discussions on the principles and approaches that will guide donor contributions to the implementation of any future peace agreement. At the 2012 Tokyo Donors Conference, the United States accounted for 50 percent of civilian donor assistance to Afghanistan. Today, thanks to the increased contributions of our donor partners, the United States contributes only 25 percent of total humanitarian and development assistance to Afghanistan.

- **Militarily**, we have reduced our military presence from over 100,000 troops in 2011, to less than 14,000 men and women today, with the NATO Resolute Support Mission constantly evaluating the requirements of its Train, Advise, and Assist Mission. We do this in partnership with an international community that shares our concerns over the threat posed by the insurgency and the terrorist eco-system it has spawned. We are working alongside 39 NATO Allies and Partners as part of the Resolute Support Mission to train, advise and assist the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces. We have committed $4 billion per year to sustain the ANDSF – which bears the brunt of the fight against terrorism. Our NATO Allies have joined us in committing to fund the ANDSF through 2024.

Thanks to our diplomatic, development and security efforts, Afghanistan is a different country than the one we entered in late 2001. Afghan troops are increasingly leading the fight against ISIS-K and the Taliban, backed by the small, but critical support mission of United States and international partners. Today, more than 57 percent of Afghans have access to basic healthcare, compared to 9 percent in 2002. Over half of the Afghan population today has access to electricity, 30 percent via a power grid, compared to only 6 percent in 2001. More than 2,000 kilometers of roads have been constructed and rehabilitated, allowing Afghans to travel and trade. Over 9 million students are enrolled in school, 39 percent of them girls. Over 1 million Afghans have received advanced education, with over 100,000 women enrolled in public and private universities. One-third of the approximately 4 million voters in the 2018 parliamentary election were women, with over 400 female candidates running for office. Afghan farmers are beginning to export high value crops, with a nascent private sector strengthening supply chains and building market linkages. Afghanistan is trading more with its Central Asian neighbors, diversifying the country's markets for energy supplies and exports, and finding new markets in India. This new generation of Afghans lives in one of the most open media environments in South Asia, with access to a large and diverse array of information sources promoting vigorous public dialogue.

But the challenges remain daunting. The number of Afghans living in poverty increased from 36 percent in 2007 to over 50 percent in 2017. Corruption, government malfeasance, record-high opium production, and criminalization of the economy continue to be the greatest threats to the sustainability of what Afghans, the United States and our partners have sacrificed to achieve in Afghanistan. The lack of security and criminality prevent Afghanistan from commercially exploiting its natural resources or serving as a natural transit route for landlocked Central Asia. The Afghan government needs to live up to its commitments to the international community, as well as to its own people. We will continue to hold the Afghan government accountable for its progress in combatting corruption and will adjust our assistance levels accordingly.

Afghanistan will hold a presidential election on September 28. We have called repeatedly for the Afghan government and electoral institutions to make preparations for the election to be credible and transparent, particularly given the deficiencies of the 2018 parliamentary election. We hold all candidates accountable to the code of conduct they signed. The Afghan government is fully responsible for administering the presidential election and has allocated $90 million from its budget to administer the polls, complemented by $60 million from the donor community. The use of polling center-based voter registration lists has the potential to curb industrial level corruption, but the Government of Afghanistan and its electoral institutions will need to demonstrate a higher level of technical competence than was seen in the parliamentary elections. The 24 percent reduction in polling centers as compared to the 2014 elections is the reality of a deteriorated security landscape.

Afghan voters have the right to go to polling centers on election day without fear of intimidation, attack, or violence. The Taliban statements threatening election workers and voters are naked intimidation of a population that the insurgents have only been able to subjugate by fear. Any attempt to intimidate, coerce, or buy voters is an attack on democracy. We offer our strong support to the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces, who are in charge of electoral security and day-in and day-out sacrifice their lives for the cause of peace and stability.

Even as Afghanistan goes to the polls, it cannot pause its efforts to advance peace. The intra-Afghan dialogue on peace must continue. Every Afghan is a victim of the last forty years of violence. Every Afghan must be invested in a political process that brings security and reconciliation. No political party or group can monopolize or dictate peace.

The United States will continue to support efforts to achieve an honorable and enduring outcome in Afghanistan that preserves our investment in Afghanistan's future. For too long the Taliban have taken comfort in their conviction that our fight is unsustainable. Our friends and adversaries should understand that our interest in protecting American citizens is enduring, as we advance a responsible way forward toward peace, development, and security in Afghanistan.

Chairman ENGEL. Thank you, Ambassador Wells.

Ms. Freeman.

STATEMENT OF MS. KAREN FREEMAN, ASSISTANT TO THE ADMINISTRATOR, OFFICE OF AFGHANISTAN AND PAKISTAN AFFAIRS, UNITED STATES AGENCY FOR INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Ms. FREEMAN. Chairman Engel, Ranking Member McCaul, and members of the committee, thank you for this opportunity to discuss the role of USAID in supporting U.S. interests in Afghanistan.

Since May of this year, development and humanitarian partners have sustained three separate attacks by the Taliban that resulted in loss of life and injury to staff.

These are senseless attacks on people who have dedicated their lives to improving Afghanistan's future. USAID sends our condolences to the families of the deceased and we hope for fast recovery to those who have been wounded. We echo Secretary Pompeo's call for the Taliban to stop attacking its civilians.

This week's attack by the Taliban on energy infrastructure in Baghlan Province cut imported electricity to 12 Afghan provinces including power to Kabul's industrial parks.

We were glad to hear this morning that power is being restored and we are happy to note that the USAID-constructed Tarakhil power plant is providing immediate backup supply of energy as intended for critical uses including hospitals and the Kabul Airport.

This morning, there is also news of an attack that damaged a hospital. Attacks on civilians as well as projects that facilitate and advance the economy and the standards of living for the Afghan people must stop.

Earlier this year, the U.S. Embassy in Kabul led a review of all U.S. civilian assistance, which directed departments and agencies to focus on three objectives: supporting the Afghan peace process, preserving stabilization of the Afghan State, and assisting Afghanistan's transition to self-reliance to create conditions for a political process.

USAID's strategy in Afghanistan aligns with and supports these objectives by accelerating private-sector led economic growth, advancing education and health gains made over the past 18 years, particularly for women and girls, and increasing accountability between the Afghan government and its citizens.

USAID has pressed the government of Afghanistan to take the lead in the country's own future and make development gains sustainable.

Just a few weeks ago, I joined my USAID colleagues in Kabul to close the formal review of U.S. Government civilian assistance to Afghanistan.

We unequivocally stressed to the minister of finance that transparent, effective, and citizen response of government systems are essential to achieving private sector growth and attracting investment.

The U.S. Government continues to convey to all Afghans that their country's relationship with the international community will depend heavily upon the inclusivity of any potential settlement which must preserve the rights and dignity of women.

We also expect the upcoming Presidential elections scheduled for September 28th to be transparent and credible. The Afghan government must recommit and redouble its efforts to enhance transparency, increase citizen responsiveness and reduce the corruption that weakens Afghanistan's—the Afghan citizens' faith in a democratic civilian government.

Over the past 18 years, USAID-funded gains have been significant. In the energy sector, as Ambassador Wells said, more than 30 percent of Afghans now have access to the power grid.

More importantly, USAID is also working directly with the Afghan national utility to improve its management systems and ability to collect revenue.

This assistance has helped to double revenue collection and increase its customer base by 73 percent in just a few years.

In health, USAID is working with the Afghan ministry of public health to increase access to basic health care and ensure that sustainability of health throughout—through the development of effective public-private partnerships.

In the education sector, not only have USAID programs supported millions of students but a future generation of Afghan women will have opportunities in STEM fields such—as a result of a USAID partnership with Texas A&M University.

Afghanistan is a different place than it was in 2001 and its people are capable of more if it achieves citizen-responsive good governance and transparency.

USAID is prepared to support emerging needs and opportunities that could arise from a political settlement. The trajectory of Afghanistan remains clear.

Civilian assistance helps create the economic and social conditions necessary for peace and self-reliance by focusing on long-term broad based development and reinforcing efforts to reduce violence and stimulate a peace settlement to end the conflict with the Taliban.

Thank you for your attention and thank you for inviting me here today. I welcome your questions.

[The prepared statement of Ms. Freeman follows:]

Testimony of Karen Freeman,
USAID Assistant to the Administrator,
Office of Afghanistan and Pakistan Affairs
Before the House Foreign Affairs Committee
"The Trump Administration's Afghanistan Policy"
Thursday, September 19, 2019, 10:00 a.m.

Chairman Engel, Ranking Member McCaul, and Members of the Committee, thank you for inviting me here to discuss role of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) in supporting U.S. interests in Afghanistan. It is an honor to testify before you and a pleasure to be here alongside my colleague, the Acting Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs, Ambassador Alice Wells.

I would like to begin by thanking our colleagues, the brave women and men in our military, the Foreign Service, local nationals, and our partners who have served in Afghanistan and who, in some cases, have given their lives to build a better, more peaceful future for the Afghan people.

Since May of this year, development and humanitarian partners have sustained three separate attacks by the Taliban that resulted in loss of life and injury of staff. These senseless attacks are a stark reminder of the challenges faced by international aid workers and local partners who are working in Afghanistan and around the world. The organizations targeted by the Taliban implement programs that improve the lives of Afghans by providing humanitarian assistance; reducing poverty; and enhancing opportunities for education, economic empowerment, and increased participation in Afghan society, especially for women. Members of these organizations dedicate their lives to improving Afghanistan's future. USAID extends our

condolences to the families of the deceased, and we hope for a fast recovery to those wounded. We echo Secretary Pompeo's call for the Taliban to stop attacking civilians.

Further, this week's attack by the Taliban on energy infrastructure in Baghlan Province cut imported electricity from Uzbekistan and Tajikistan to 12 Afghan Provinces, including power to Kabul's industrial parks. We are pleased to hear reports that some power has been restored and that repairs on the lines impacted by the attacks are underway. We are also happy to note that the USAID-constructed Tarakhil Power Plant provided an immediate backup supply of energy - as intended - for critical uses, including for hospitals and the Kabul airport, for three full days following the attacks. Along with ending attacks on civilians, attacks on projects and facilities that advance the economy and standard of living for the Afghan people must stop.

As we have briefed the Committee, earlier this year the U.S. Embassy in Kabul led a review of all U.S. civilian assistance, which directed Departments and Agencies to focus on three objectives: supporting the Afghan peace process; preserving the stabilization of the Afghan State; and assisting Afghanistan's transition to self-reliance to create conditions for a political process. USAID's Strategy for Afghanistan aligns with, and supports, these objectives by focusing on: accelerating private-sector-led economic growth in key population centers; advancing gains made over the past 18 years, particularly for women and girls, in education, and health; and increasing accountability between the Afghan Government and its citizens through improved service-delivery, reduced corruption in key ministries, and credible and transparent elections.

Furthermore, we have pressed the Government of Afghanistan to take a lead in the country's own future and Journey to Self-Reliance, to make development gains sustainable. Just a few weeks ago, I joined my USAID colleagues in Kabul when the Governments of the United States and Afghanistan officially closed the formal review of U.S. Government civilian assistance to Afghanistan. At the meeting, USAID reiterated that investing in the private sector is the foundation of our development strategy and highlighted our investments in health, education, and women's empowerment, which have been essential factors that contribute to Afghanistan's self-reliance. We unequivocally stressed to the Minister of Finance that transparent, effective, and citizen-responsive government systems are essential to achieving private-sector growth and attracting investment.

The U.S. Government continues to convey to all Afghans that their country's relationship with the international community, and particularly donors, will depend heavily upon the inclusivity of any potential settlement, which must preserve the rights and dignity of women. The United States and the international community remain committed to standing with Afghan women. We will continue to work with the Afghan government to support the constitutional protections and gains made in the last 18 years. No current or future Afghan Government should count on international donor support if it restricts, neglects, or represses Afghan women. Further, the international community expects the upcoming presidential elections, scheduled for September 28, to be transparent and credible. The Afghan Government must re-commit and redouble its efforts to enhance transparency, increase citizen-responsiveness, and take all measures possible to seriously reduce the corruption that impedes Afghanistan's Journey to Self-Reliance, reduces prospects for foreign investment, and weakens Afghan citizens' trust and faith in democratic

civilian governments. Additionally, the humanitarian situation in Afghanistan remains critical. While the United States remains the single largest donor, we appeal to traditional and non-traditional donors to take a greater role in providing humanitarian assistance.

USAID-funded gains over the past 18 years have been significant. In the energy sector, as Ambassador Wells mentioned, more than 30 percent of Afghans now have access to a power grid. USAID is also working directly with the Afghan national electric utility to improve its management systems and its ability to collect revenue. This assistance has helped double revenue collection and increase its customer base by 73 percent in just the past few years. This enhanced capacity also means they are already on the ground to repair power lines downed in recent attacks. In health, USAID is working with the Afghan Ministry of Public Health to increase access to basic health care and to ensure the sustainability of health care and knowledge through the development of effective private-sector partnerships in areas such as pharmaceutical distribution. In the education sector, not only have USAID programs supported millions of students, but a future generation of Afghan women will have opportunities in science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) fields as a result of a USAID partnership with Texas A&M University. This partnership established an endowment that will provide a sustainable source of scholarships for Afghan women who are pursuing STEM degrees.

Afghanistan is a different place than it was in 2001, and its people are capable of more if it achieves citizen-responsive good governance and transparency. USAID is also prepared to support emerging needs and opportunities that could arise from a political settlement. The

Mission has reviewed its existing portfolio to determine how to modify programs to support a potential political settlement and is exploring flexible mechanisms to respond accordingly.

The trajectory in Afghanistan remains clear. Civilian assistance helps create the economic and social conditions necessary for peace and self-reliance by focusing on long-term, broad-based development and reinforcing efforts to reduce violence and stimulate a peace settlement to end the conflict with the Taliban.

We appreciate Congress' recognition that USAID's development programs are critical components for achieving U.S. national security objectives, that, in the long run, will improve the prosperity of the United States, Afghanistan, and our regional partners. USAID is committed to investing development assistance strategically in support of the Administration's priorities in Afghanistan. We will continue to make these important contributions and responsibly safeguard taxpayer funds.

Again, thank you for inviting me here today. I welcome your questions.

Chairman ENGEL. Thank you very much.

Let me ask both of you this question. You both mentioned in your remarks the recalibration efforts of U.S. assistance to Afghanistan, moving forward.

Could each of you please explain what drove the department to propose these significant cuts to our assistance and how such a cut would support inter-Afghan peace and reconciliation?

Ms. WELLS. Thank you, sir.

We were trying to ensure that the level of assistance that we were providing for Afghanistan was sustainable, was structured in a way that encourages the rise of the private sector and that it elicits better government performance so that the government increasingly has the capacity and the ability to assume all functions of a sovereign State, and at the same time ensure that our investment in Afghanistan reflects the level of investment, given global threats.

Obviously, there has been a lot that has changed since 9/11. Afghanistan is not the only country in which we face a terrorist threat.

And so we wanted to be able to signal through the embassy posture and the aid restructuring that we are committed to the long-term development of Afghanistan but not over committed to the point that we are assuming an unreasonable or even a counterproductive level of nation building.

Chairman ENGEL. Ms. Freeman.

Ms. FREEMAN. Thank you for the question.

As always best practice, USAID regularly reviews its missions' presence worldwide and in Afghanistan over the last 18 months we established a new development strategy that focuses on establishing the conditions necessary for peace and self-reliance, and responsibly revise the portfolio based on lessons learned and input from various stakeholders.

So during the recent embassy-led assistance review, we sought to further consolidate the portfolio while ensuring its ability to manage and provide proper oversight over taxpayers' resources and our ability to implement the program.

We took into account the interests and the feedback from our congressional committees and from the Administration's priorities to support the Afghan peace process to preserve the stabilization of the Afghan State and to assist Afghanistan's transition to self-reliance.

During the course of the review, we had a great deal of input and a lot of thought on what that consolidation should look like and took that all in as recently as a couple of months ago, and have honed down and consolidated the portfolio to mesh with the appropriate number of staff.

Thank you.

Chairman ENGEL. OK. Thank you.

The U.N. assistance mission to Afghanistan founded the NATO and Afghan Security Forces were responsible for more civilian casualties than the Taliban in the first 6 months of 2019.

What accounts for the increase in civilian casualties at the hands and pro-government forces? Have there been any significant

changes in the rules of engagement? Is that the reason? And how has this impacted Afghans' view of their own security forces?

Ambassador.

Ms. WELLS. Coalition forces and coalition forces working with the Afghans do everything possible to try to avoid civilian casualties and implement the highest levels of accountability. And I would contrast this, sir, with what is the focus of the Taliban in targeting civilians.

As we saw in the attack on election workers, the attack against the hospital, all of which have just happened this week, I think statistically the Taliban, over time, have been the largest contributors to civilian casualties.

The statistics that we saw, which we do not necessarily agree with the methodology, are an aberration and I think the intent of the—of the U.S. forces and the Afghan forces is very different from the intent of the terrorists who are literally terrorizing the Afghan civilian population.

Chairman ENGEL. Thank you.

Ms. Freeman, do you agree?

Ms. FREEMAN. I would cede that territory to Ambassador Wells. Thank you.

Chairman ENGEL. OK. Thank you. Thank you.

Mr. McCaul.

Mr. MCCAUL. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The Taliban hosted and protected al-Qaida both pre-9/11, on 9/11, and after 9/11. So there is a healthy amount of skepticism about cutting a deal with the Taliban.

I remember visiting with Ambassador Crocker in Kabul when this idea was launched in our military. I guess the question is what other alternative do we have when they occupy and own 50 percent of Afghanistan.

I suppose, Ambassador, that is a necessary step? Or is there any other alternative to that?

Ms. WELLS. The peace framework agreement that was negotiated by the U.S. Government in discussions with the Taliban is very much a conditions-based approach.

The Taliban are focused on securing the removal of U.S. and international forces from Afghanistan. They understand from nine rounds of negotiations that that can only come about if they are committed to working to ensure that Afghanistan cannot be a platform for international terrorism.

Mr. MCCAUL. I am glad to hear that it's condition based and on a time line. Would that also—could that include the complete withdrawal of U.S. forces?

Ms. WELLS. I cannot speak to what ultimately a peace agreement is going to look like. As you know, for now the process is suspended.

But, certainly, the discussion was very much about the interrelationship between the presence of troops, international forces, and the ability of the Taliban to ensure that not only were there not international terrorists allowed to operate on soil that they had influence over, but no recruiting, no fundraising, no tolerance of, sanctuary—any connections whatsoever.

Mr. MCCAUL. And, of course, if that happens it would sort of snap back, if you will, correct?

Ms. WELLS. Right.

Mr. MCCAUL. I always think, given our history lessons from Iraq, and I am glad the President decided to keep a residual force in Syria, and I think we should have one in Afghanistan for the foreseeable future if only to protect the homeland from an external operation like 9/11.

Let me ask you about ISIS and the Khorasan group. When I was chairman of Homeland Security, particularly in 2015–2016, pretty terrifying briefings. External operations—the Khorasan group always one of the most active groups out there. And so the notion is that the Taliban is actually going to war with ISIS and the Khorasan group. How accurate is that information?

Ms. WELLS. The Taliban do oppose the ISIS Khorasan group. They devote resources—significant manpower resources to combat the Taliban—combat ISIS Khorasan.

I think one of the reasons we put such an emphasis on peace is that we need Afghans to be united against ISIS Khorasan, and ISIS has been able to take advantage of the fact of the insurgency and the war that is going on in Afghanistan to exploit territory, despite what had been very fierce efforts by Resolute Support Mission and others to target them.

We see a resilience and an enduring presence in places like Nangarhar and Kunar where it can be quite difficult to eliminate them as—or eliminate their presence entirely.

Mr. MCCAUL. And that is based on the premise that the Taliban would be more willing to partner with the Afghan government than they would with ISIS?

Ms. WELLS. We would assume a peace agreement would unify—provide a unified government that would reflect the—will of all of the Afghan people and that would allow a concentrated effort against what will be remnant terrorist forces in Afghanistan, not just ISIS Khorasan but others, whether it is Tehrik-I-Taliban, Pakistan. There is a vegetable soup of militant organizations that have some presence in Afghanistan.

Mr. MCCAUL. I commend State on what is a very difficult negotiation. We all understand the drill here. The Taliban are not very nice people.

But sometimes, you have to deal with the world the way it is and there is not a whole lot of great choices here.

Last question. A withdrawal from Afghanistan—what assurances would you—could you get? I mean, like, you cannot predict the future but this would not result in the Taliban eventually overthrowing the Afghan government and then we have a Taliban-controlled Afghanistan.

Ms. WELLS. Well, what animates all of our diplomacy is the President and the secretary's absolute commitment to the security of the American people.

And so any peace deal is going to be structured to ensure that Afghanistan cannot and will not reemerge as a threat to America.

On the hypotheticals, I do not like answering hypotheticals but let me put it this way. The Taliban say they want to be a legitimate part of the international community.

They argue that they want to attract foreign direct investment. They say they have learned lessons from the isolation that Afghanistan experienced under Taliban rule in the late 1990's and early 2000's.

For any Afghan government that includes the Taliban to have those relationships, to attract that foreign direct investment, it is going to have to be a government in that upholds standards and values that the international community has been working to instill over the last 18 years.

So I think that there is a substantial amount of leverage that the international community will continue to have in the form of assistance moneys and in how we engage the Afghan——

Mr. MCCAUL. And I think that is correct, and if it—the problem with the Taliban they live in the mountains and the desert, and then you got the palace in Kabul that's U.S. backed and financed, and I think there is an inherent potential conflict. I think that is a great challenge that the State Department has.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman ENGEL. Thank you.

Mr. Sherman.

Mr. SHERMAN. Ambassador Wells, welcome back. We look forward to seeing you again next month at the Asia Subcommittee for our hearings on human rights in South Asia, and of course, there is considerable interest in my district and a number of others on events in Kashmir.

It occurs to me that it is unlikely that we are going to have a peaceful and prosperous Afghanistan unless Pakistan wants to see a peaceful and prosperous Afghanistan.

The border between Afghanistan and Pakistan is the Durand Line, but no government of Afghanistan has ever accepted that and all of—and including the Taliban and the current government have all seemed to taken the position that a huge chunk of Pakistan should actually be part of Afghanistan.

It seems unlikely that Pakistan is going to be rooting for a peaceful prosperous Afghanistan if that Afghan government is actively claiming a big chunk of Pakistani territory.

First, does the United States accept as inviolate the Durand Line as the border between Pakistan and India—Pakistan and Afghanistan?

Ms. WELLS. We do recognize the Durand Line as the boundary between Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Mr. SHERMAN. And is there any prospect that we can persuade this Afghan government to if not permanently accept the line at least declare that they will not use violence in an effort to change that border?

Ms. WELLS. A great deal of effort—diplomatic effort—has gone into trying to increase the collaboration between Afghanistan and Pakistan, and yesterday we were very pleased to see Prime Minister Im Khan open up the Torkham Border for 24/7 trade.

It is going to be, I think, these practical steps to increase trade.

Mr. SHERMAN. Yes. I do—I do think we can work toward practical and tactical steps. But I hope that we are also dealing with this festering problem as long as those Afghan claims are made and as long as Pakistan can fear that at some future point India

and Afghanistan will agree that Pakistan should be—well, I will move on to the next question.

We are supposed to have had a deal and then the tweet came down and we rejected the deal. Whether or not that was—or at least put the deal on—I believe negotiations are frozen.

Since the deal seemed to envision a Camp David visit on 9/11, I am not—there might be reasons. But I am trying to understand why this deal was not—or at least as of yet has not been effectuated, and the reason given by the President is that there was one instance in which one American soldier was killed.

But at the same time, Secretary Pompeo has said during this same period of time we have engaged in successful military operations that have killed over a thousand Taliban fighters.

Did we really have a deal with the Taliban that during the two or three—that they would not attack us but that we would attack them and their violation of that deal is why we, did not go forward with the agreement?

Ms. WELLS. Both the President and the secretary have spoken to this and, basically, what we saw—the Taliban actions that we saw in the days leading up to a potential agreement on a political framework were inconsistent with the nine rounds of negotiations that we had held with them.

And we saw the Taliban attempting to use violence as a form of intimidation and they took actions that were basically inconsistent with what ultimately was going to need to be a reduction in violence.

Mr. SHERMAN. I would point out that killing a thousand Taliban forces, as Pompeo claims we did, is also a violent action.

Finally, there is this idea that they are going to prevent recruiting and fundraising by terrorists in their territory.

We have recruiting and fundraising by terrorist organizations here in the United States where we have an FBI office in every major city.

What verification system do we have on the ground in Taliban-controlled areas to see that there was not a terrorist presence, was not terrorist recruiting, and was not terrorist fundraising?

Ms. WELLS. Again, I am not going to be able to speak to the specifics of what was being negotiated. But very much this was a conditions-based approach and the—built into the discussions that Ambassador Khalilzad had with the Taliban——

Mr. SHERMAN. Are you aware of any verification system that we had at all or was it trust and do not bother to verify?

Ms. WELLS. This was very much about being able to verify and have confidence that the Taliban had taken the steps they had undertaken to implement.

Mr. SHERMAN. And but you are not aware of any verification systems?

Ms. WELLS. I am not in a position to discuss the details of what was—what was being discussed.

Chairman ENGEL. Thank you.

Mr. Yoho.

Mr. YOHO. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and Mr. Chairman, I have got an opening statement I would like to submit to the record, without objection.

Chairman ENGEL. Without objection.
[The information referred to follows:]

Statement for the Record from Representative Ted Yoho

The Trump Administration's Afghanistan Policy

September 19, 2019

Good morning and thank you Chairman Engel and Ranking Member McCaul for holding this hearing to discuss the US government's approach to Afghanistan. I would also like to thank both panels of witnesses for being here today to answer our important questions.

Over the past few decades, the United States has had a turbulent, yet delicate relationship with Afghanistan. While our two governments may not always see eye-to-eye, Afghanistan is a strategically located partner in the region and its prosperity and stability directly affects the national security of the United States.

Since 2001, the United States has been engaged in Afghanistan in an effort to combat radical terrorism.

We are a part of a coalition of more than 100 countries and organizations that provide both security and civilian assistance to Afghanistan. This alone shows the profound investment that our global partners have made in Afghanistan with the goal of bringing stability and security to the nation.

As the Trump Administration continues to attempt to negotiate with both Afghan leaders and the Taliban, as the administrations before them have done, we must ensure that the outcome of these talks brings peace, stability and transparency to Afghanistan that will benefit Afghanistan's people and people all over the world.

Afghanistan is located in South Asia and serves as an important gateway and transit hub between Asia and the Middle East. To this extent, Afghanistan is surrounded by some often difficult neighbors.

As Ranking Member of the Asia, Pacific and Non-proliferation Subcommittee, I especially want to bring attention to growing Chinese influence in Afghanistan via their high debt/bad terms Belt and Road Initiative.

The country's strategic and geopolitical location has made it a target for China's BRI. China has already invested billions of dollars in the region under the BRI.

I have time and time again warned countries around the world that engaging with China under the Belt Road Initiative, which leave countries with unsustainable debt and therefore economically and politically beholden to the Chinese Communist Party.

For this reason, I urge our negotiating team to thoroughly outline our withdrawal strategy for Afghanistan so our adversaries, namely China and Russia, do not immediately come in our fill our void in the region.

I commend the individuals who have worked tirelessly to bring this conflict to a peaceful and sustainable end. For the sake of our national security, we must do what is best for our country and our troops while also ensuring that Afghanistan is stable and secure and not left in the hands of bad actors like China and Russia.

Mr. YOHO. Thank you, sir.

Ambassador Wells, Ms. Freeman, thank you for being here.

There is a generation of Americans that have grown up—actually, they are approaching 20 years of age and they were not around when 9/11 happened, and we have been at this conflict—this war—for 19 years and, know we know all the expense and the lost lives that can never be replaced.

And the person that brings a peace deal to this conflict will win the Nobel Peace Prize, and I appreciate the work you have done.

One of my—I have got two concerns. One is the work and the progress that has been made with the electric grid, the education that's going, the economy, women going to school and being allowed to go to school.

To lose that, in your opinion, do you see if the Taliban gets—if we pull out and negotiate with the Taliban, are they going to continue that? Are they going to, go back to where they were with Sharia Law?

Ms. WELLS. The Taliban have said that they have learned from some of the mistakes they made in the past. But the Afghanistan that they are going to—the Afghans that they are going to sit across the table from in any negotiation are Afghans who have come of age also with these new freedoms and abilities to contribute to their society, whether it is women, whether it is minorities, and Afghans consistently in polls indicate that they do not want to give up these gains that they have made—the social and political gains that have been made over the last 18 years.

Mr. YOHO. Is the Taliban willing to do that?

Ms. WELLS. That is going to have to be negotiated between the two sides. I think what is interesting, are two points.

One, you see in Taliban-controlled areas that they are under pressure to open girls schools. In the most conservative areas there are still no schools and that can be true in government-controlled areas as well.

But there is a demand consistently among the Afghans for their daughters now to be educated. I think that is a new reality——

Mr. YOHO. Are those people at the table that are demanding that?

Ms. WELLS. They will be. I mean, the Afghan negotiators who will sit down across from the Taliban will be bringing these demands, I am sure, to the table.

Mr. YOHO. All right. And I hope as this winds down that it is understood that radical Islamic terrorists is not accepted anywhere in the world and especially if they mount attacks that come to America it will be met with severe vengeance.

As the ranking member in the Asia Pacific and Nonproliferation Subcommittee, I especially want to bring attention to the growing Chinese influence in Afghanistan via their high debt bad terms Belt Road initiative.

And just recently in Reuters the 16th of this month China signals veto standoff with the U.S. over Afghanistan because their feelings were hurt because the BRI was not brought up.

Have they—have the Chinese been in there influencing any of this either way or are they preventing a settlement?

Ms. WELLS. The Chinese have worked with Ambassador Khalilzad, as have other regional countries including Russia and the immediate neighbors on a way forward on peace.

And so there is constructive engagement with China on how do we prosecute peace. But I think it is fair to say that China has not contributed to the economic development of Afghanistan.

We have not seen any substantial assistance from China. The Belt and Road is a slogan. It is not any reality and, of course, we continue to warn our partners and would certainly warn the Afghan government about falling prey to predatory loans or loans that are designed to benefit only the Chinese State——

Mr. YOHO. But we know the way the Chinese work. I mean, with the corruption they will fall right into that. I mean, it is an easy road for them, and if they have not contributed to the peace process, if they have not contributed to the rebuilding of that nation, they should have no say in this. I feel that way, and I hope we stand strong on that because we have seen the effect of what China has done.

And, I want to—Ms. Freeman, I want to just point out to you that, with what you are doing with USAID and going in there and doing the work, you are in a tough neighborhood, and making the gains you are doing I appreciate that.

And with the rollout of the BUILD Act in October our goal is to establish, identify significant infrastructure developments, that we can go in and that we can go in as a trusted partner that we are going to do something that is best for the Afghan people to build their economy so that we can develop the jobs for them so that we have trading going on.

Do you have any thoughts on that of where we can look at?

Ms. FREEMAN. Thank you, sir.

First of all, let me just echo some of Ambassador Wells' thoughts on going forward. I think it is important to note that over the last 18 years the change in Afghanistan has been so great in terms of the laws, education, the development of a very active, a very vocal private sector, the increases in trade, the strengthening of civil society, and it is created a reflective demand in areas that can see what has happened.

In terms of infrastructure, we continue to work on—work with the government of Afghanistan to strengthen their ability to develop the infrastructure.

So I think what you will be seeing in terms of the core of USAID's program there is to involve the government and involve with private sector, and——

Mr. YOHO. Thank you. I am going to stop you there just because I am out of time, and thank you, ma'am.

Chairman ENGEL. Thank you, Mr. Yoho.

Mr. Sires.

Mr. SIRES. Well, good morning and thank you for being here, Ambassador and Ms. Freeman.

My district that I represent is across from the World Trade Center, and for months we watched the plume of smoke and so forth. It was beyond me what the thought process was to invite the Taliban to come to Camp David.

Can you tell me what—I mean, it was so insensitive and so—sensitive is mild for some of the people in my district. What was the thought behind that?

Ms. WELLS. Both the President—I think the President himself has spoken openly about his thought process on the Camp David invitation.

I would just underscore, it again shows that this is an administration that is willing to take risks to try to promote peace. But I appreciate your concerns.

Mr. SIRES. Yes, but I got—I have to say inviting the Taliban to Camp David, I mean, that is a little bit too much to swallow after—it was almost days before the towers came down.

So, to me, I hope that this idea is dead and you bring that back and say that many people not only thought it was insensitive but it is just not appropriate to bring the Taliban to America, to Camp David, to do a negotiation.

There are many places in the world that you can meet to negotiate. So I hope that thought is dead of bringing these people to America.

I keep reading that the Taliban has been very vocal about refusing to engage with the Afghan government, and previous attempts at inter-Afghan talks have failed.

So how are we going to be able to come to any kind of a peace if these people do not talk to each other? What are the prospects of peace? What are the prospects of them talking to each if they—if they keep being so vocal about it?

Ms. WELLS. The goal of the last round of or series of negotiations was designed to bring Afghans together to a negotiating table and, the conversations that we were having with the Taliban were the prelude to conversations that the Taliban would have with a, Pan-Afghan, national negotiating team that would include members of the government.

There was initial progress in that the informal dialog that took place in Qatar in July did include members of the Afghan government as part of the delegation meeting with the Taliban.

So, again, I think we have broken new ground as a result of this last series of negotiations that took place.

Mr. SIRES. What might some incentives be to the Taliban to engage in good faith dialog with the Afghan government? What can we offer them? What incentives will we give the Taliban?

Ms. WELLS. I do not think we need to talk about incentives. I think we need to talk about what are mutual interests, and there are—the Taliban have an interest, in being able to participate legitimately in a government that is recognized by the international community and to avoid the costs of war.

I think the Taliban appreciate, based on what they have said publicly, that there is a cost to Afghanistan's development by the ongoing war and they also see, frankly, the rise of other terrorist groups who pose a threat to themselves and to the future of Afghanistan.

If you look at a group like ISIS Khorasan, I mean, that is a terrorist group that does not recognize Afghanistan as a nation State.

This is a group that focuses on caliphate and borderless, territory under the organization's control. That is a deep threat to all—all people of Afghanistan including the Taliban.

Mr. SIRES. Are the Taliban stronger now than they were in 2001 militarily?

Ms. WELLS. Well, in 2001 the Taliban controlled, the entire country, so no. The Taliban do not control any provincial capital. They do not rule in any province of Afghanistan.

When they fight and then they have to leave because they cannot sustain control over the district centers or the provincial centers.

And so, the Taliban are very good at public diplomacy and messaging. But they are by no means, controlling Afghanistan. And I hesitate to get involved in the statistics on control of territory because they can be very misleading.

If you look at all of the urban centers of Afghanistan where a majority of the population now reside, this is under government control and benefiting from the investments and development of the last 18 years.

Mr. SIRES. My time is up. Thank you very much.

Chairman ENGEL. Thank you, Mr. Sires.

Mr. Kinzinger.

Mr. KINZINGER. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and I really do thank you both for being here and it means a lot that you are willing to take the time and talk about these tough issues.

I think, first off, we need a bit of a reset in the narrative from the Rand Paul endless wars narrative that we hear and look at where we are really at.

First off, I do want to say, though, I think the Camp David—I am going to add myself to the record. The Camp David meeting was an utter disaster and never should have happened, infuriated me and I think even people that wanted to get out of Afghanistan it ticked them off, too, and I have no clue how that could have gone through any kind of filter, not just of ideas but how we actually got to where it was going to freaking happen.

So I hope that never happens again. No terrorist should be allowed in the United States unless they are in chains and especially a terrorist that attacked the U.S. on 9/11—harbored the terrorists and especially on the anniversary of 9/11.

So I got that out. I do want to say, though, that I think the thing we have to keep in mind is this fight that we are fighting in terrorism is a generational battle.

It took us decades to basically overthrow the Soviet Union and that was not through fighting. This is a low-grade war version of that.

But it took that second and third generation of people behind the Iron Curtains to make the decision that they did not want to live like that, and that is what overthrew and torn down the Iron Curtain.

I think the same thing is going to happen in this battle. It i's going to be fighting terrorists where they exist but also, and this is where USAID and some of those initiatives come in especially important, giving hope and opportunity to a new generation of people so that they can see that there is an opportunity for a life outside of radicalization—that you can live past the age of 15 when

they strap a suicide bomb to you and tell you to walk into a crowded cafe or something like that.

Bringing hope and opportunity is how you are going to fix this gang situation in the United States and it is how you prevent people from recruiting terrorists and I think that is what we have to keep in mind.

Is this battle that we are fighting, though we would all love to be over with it, is not our choice? This is not our decision. We are not the ones that decided to radicalize and kill innocent people.

Instead, we are the ones that reacted and we reacted in a pretty fierce and intense way, and we need to understand that because I think if we leave Afghanistan under the wrong conditions, which I think, frighteningly, we are actually on track to do, we are going to be back here anyway.

And we talk about how this is the first time a kid is fighting the same war as his dad. I agree. But we are going to have a grandkid fighting the same war as his grandpa if we leave Afghanistan in a bad situation, because they are not going to quit trying to come here.

And the reason we are not thinking about terrorism as much as we have in the past is because we are being successful in fighting it.

We are fighting it over there. They are not able to train and recruit here as much as they used to be able to and we are keeping them on the—on the defensive.

So, Ambassador Wells, I have to ask you just a couple of quick questions. We killed a thousand Taliban. It may be a hundred. It may be a thousand. It may be a million. I do not know what it is.

But we did kill some Taliban after we pulled out of these negotiations. The question I have is does that mean we were not targeting Taliban at all and we were allowing them to regroup and retrain until this moment? Or have we been prosecuting that fight anyway?

Because I do not think if we had a Taliban target we probably would not take it out.

Ms. WELLS. We absolutely have been fighting and talking our way through the negotiations and the only distinction I would make, Congressman, is that I think we and the Afghan government and people distinguish between a Pashtun nationalist insurgency and a group like ISIS.

And so the ability to try to prosecute a peace settlement is to hive off that insurgency so that a consolidated Afghan government can focus on what is truly the generational threat to all of us—an organization like ISIS Khorasan.

Mr. KINZINGER. Thank you. But I also think Taliban was a threat but I understand your point. But, I think, frankly, if we want any favorable negotiation—this is above your pay grade but I will say it—if we want a favorable negotiation you do that through prosecuting the war against the Taliban and saying we are willing to have peace, but until we do it is going to be painful.

And you know what? Your kids and your grandkids may have to fight this but, hopefully, we can get to a peace settlement.

The other question I have—you know what? I am just going to make it as a statement. I am concerned that the President's state-

ments since he was in Canada and since he has been in office repeatedly declaring his desire to get out of Afghanistan, calling this, basically, a dumb war—whatever he has used, which, by the way, is brand new—this used to be a very bipartisan agreement on this fight—is only emboldening the Taliban in the discussion.

When you see the man making the call claiming he wants to leave, it is hard to give up a lot when you know that that is the end goal.

It was the same reason I was critical of the Iran nuclear deal, quite honestly, because I thought the Administration made too many statements about their desire to get to the end.

I want to say thank you to both of you for your good work and being here. Thanks for your service to your country.

And, Mr. Chairman, I yield back.

Chairman ENGEL. Thank you, Mr. Kinzinger.

Mr. Bera.

Mr. BERA. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and I also want to reiterate what my colleague from Illinois just said.

Ambassador Wells, Ms. Freeman, thank you for your service and thank you to the service of our diplomats and our aid and development workers around the world every day representing the United States.

Obviously, this is a very complicated region and with the blood and monetary investments that we have made over the last 18 years in the region we want to give Afghanistan the best possibility of success and it is not going to be easy.

So I commend both of you and the negotiators to try to find that path forward and, obviously, we have got a fatigued American public as well as a fatigued military that will always do the mission but also wants to come home.

Knowing that and knowing we want to give Afghanistan the best chance of success, I would like to focus on some of the countries within the region, notably, India and Pakistan, again, two countries that are not having the best relationship right now but both that are going to be vitally important to Afghanistan's success.

Perhaps, Ambassador Wells we see the tensions in Kashmir right now. You hear conversations from the Indians at times with some concern that America's desire to get a deal then in Afghanistan potentially has them negotiating with Pakistan and Kashmir is part of that.

Do you see any evidence of that and just from your perspective?

Ms. WELLS. What we see are two countries—India and Pakistan—that both have national security interests in Afghanistan and both countries will benefit by an Afghanistan that is truly at peace and stable.

I think the principle that has to undergird relations between all the countries in the region is the respect for territorial integrity and sovereignty that no militant proxies, no nonState actors are acceptable and in being used as a lever of influence or pressure against another.

And so in our diplomacy to the region that undergirds our approach. How do we have the region all reap the benefits of peace?

If you look at, for instance, Afghanistan being a blocking point now between the flow of trade including energy, energy is ten times

more expensive in South Asia than it is in Central Asia. But you cannot get it there because of the instability in Afghanistan.

So how do we frame an outcome where everybody palpably benefits by being able to create stable and enduring political structures.

And so I think that there is a conversation that absolutely all countries in the region need to have and have to have, and that certainly has guided Ambassador Khalilzad's approach as he has built out his conversations on peace with the regional actors.

Mr. BERA. So as we kind of take that multilateral approach—again, a complicated region—I would agree with you that you do need the players in that region who are closest to Afghanistan to be sitting at the table helping negotiate that peace deal.

Obviously, as we start to withdraw, with that comes a lot of resources that we have dedicated to—and there are few countries in the region that—India has dedicated billions of dollars to construction and investment. The hope would be that China in a responsible way potentially helps out there as well. Again, very complicated as we move forward here.

Ms. Freeman from the USAID perspective, obviously, we have made investments in Afghanistan as well trying to educate girls, you know, and trying to give them the best chance of success.

What would you say our focus ought to be, again, working with the other countries in that region as well?

Ms. FREEMAN. I think that one of the shifts that we saw in our most recent strategic review has been one that really focuses much more on the private sector, much more on exchange and really looking at the realistic flow throughout the region, be that the strengthening of the electrical grid that connects the region or extending trade throughout the region.

We have had a number of highly successful—in fact, there is another one coming up next week—trade fairs in which we engage the Indians and others in the region.

We have helped the government of Afghanistan to strengthen its air corridors so that it can trade more rapidly within the region. So those—that connectivity really does follow trade and we have worked very hard to increase the ease of that trade and the ease of the negotiation within the region.

Mr. BERA. Well, again, thank you for—both of you for your service, and with that I will yield back.

Chairman ENGEL. Thank you, Mr. Bera.

Mr. Zeldin.

Mr. ZELDIN. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member. Thank you for the witnesses for both being here.

First off, with regards to the Camp David meeting, echoing sentiment that I have heard from colleagues on both sides of the aisle. I certainly share it myself.

I am glad that meeting with the Taliban at Camp David was canceled. I believe that that should not have been scheduled in the first place and I would not want to see the Taliban back at Camp David in the future, especially on the anniversary of September 11th, 2001.

Now, this is not simple. If this was all simple this would have been resolved a long time ago. On September 11, 2001, al-Qaida terrorists murdered thousands of innocent Americans and countless

first responders have died since because of exposure to toxic chemicals at Ground Zero in the days, the weeks, the months that followed September 11th, 2001.

Our decision to go to Afghanistan was correct and legitimate. I am glad that we made that decision when we did to deliver justice to defend America.

It has been at great cost here in our own country. Justice has been delivered overseas. Osama bin Laden is dead. There are many others who have followed his fate. There is great cost, the greatest cost at attacking U.S. interests as we saw on September 11th, 2001.

So while we mourn the loss of life here in the United States, what should not go unnoticed for our adversaries abroad is the unlimited amount of resolve and will of our country to deliver justice to anyone who seeks harm to us.

There are terrorists there—terrorist groups—who are in and around Afghanistan who would like to continue to kill Americans. They would like to continue to target U.S. interests.

And here we are. It is 18 years later. Many in the United States want to end the war in Afghanistan. Quite frankly, every American should want to end any war, whether it is in Afghanistan or anywhere. We should not want war in the first place.

But as I said, in Afghanistan our decision to go in was correct and legitimate. The Taliban wants us out. I want to be able to ask you a question with regards to what the Afghanistan government wants and how we deal with it.

I think it is naive to think that we just leave Afghanistan today and everything just works itself out on its own. I believe strongly that the vacuum is not successfully filled at this moment by good people in Afghanistan government—not right now.

So how do we get to the result that we want? This morning this committee met with Ambassador Khalilzad. I thought it was a good meeting. I am not allowed to—we are not allowed to get into it because it was a classified briefing.

I will just say I believe it was very helpful for that meeting to take place. I believe that that should happen again. I believe that we should be spending more time together.

It is good for us here on this committee to hear from him in that setting and I also think it is good for the State Department to hear from us to get fresh eyes, to get other perspectives.

And that brings me back to my question. In our time left and in an unclassified setting, can you speak to where we are at with the Afghanistan government—what they desire as far as the American presence and how do we get the Afghanistan government in a place where we can leave and the good guys in Afghanistan's government fill that vacuum so that we are in a position to leave?

Ms. WELLS. I think the critical point is that we do not want to leave or abandon Afghanistan at all. I mean, what we want is to have a sustainable enduring partnership with Afghanistan.

Currently, with this Afghan government we have a bilateral security arrangement. We have a myriad of MOUs that bind us together as partners and allies.

And I think the Afghan government very much wants to see that partnership with the American people and the American private sector and the American government to continue.

Our provision of support—right now, we provide about 80 percent of support for the security sector is absolutely essential.

So I think we have to build confidence that in Afghans as they sit down at a table with the Taliban that the—that the international community is not looking to run away.

And so today, for instance, in London there was a meeting of donors to discuss how—what would we do in the event of a peace treaty—how do we respond to peace—how do we create economic programs that will help a new Afghanistan government get on its feet and succeed as a nation State.

And so through doing this kind of an organization, through engaging the Afghan government and ultimately the Taliban, I think we need to signal very clearly that the objective is not to walk away.

Mr. ZELDIN. I appreciate that answer, Ambassador Wells. Specifically with regards to military presence, I think it is important to note that the days of the United States military having the amount of numbers that we have now is not one that we want to be continuing indefinitely.

So that was specifically what I was getting at. I very much appreciate your answer and for being here.

I thank the chair for hosting today's hearing. I yield back.

Chairman ENGEL. Thank you, Mr. Zeldin.

Mr. Cicilline.

Mr. CICILLINE. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Thank you to our witnesses.

Ambassador Wells, what is the current state of the relationship between the Taliban and al-Qaida and what, if anything, did the Taliban agree to with respect to that relationship in this framework, if they did?

Ms. WELLS. The Taliban have never repudiated their relationship with al-Qaida and so that is the fundamental crux of the issue.

And in the—what has been said publicly about the conversations and negotiations that have taken place with the Taliban is that in this conditions-based framework we were looking to the Taliban to cutoff all sanctuary, the ability of any al-Qaida members to reside there, to recruit there, to fundraise there—operate.

And so it was a complete commitment to eliminate ties and presence of al-Qaida.

Mr. CICILLINE. And with respect to terrorism, broadly, is there—is there a framework about the commitments that the Taliban makes with respect to terrorism in this proposal?

Ms. WELLS. I cannot—it is not for me and certainly not in this setting to go into the details of the—of what was negotiated. I was not part of the negotiating team.

But what animates the approach of the Administration is that we—the peace agreement must be founded on the principle that American security is not in peril—that we continue to ensure that Afghanistan not become a platform—that we have confidence that Afghanistan is not going to become a platform.

So I can assure you that these concerns are at the very top of the negotiating agenda, as was evidenced over the last nine rounds of talks.

Mr. CICILLINE. And, Ambassador Wells, what mechanisms will be available to the United States if it draws down its military presence and the Taliban fails to live up to the commitments it makes?

Are we working with international partners who are interested in supporting the Taliban or ensuring that the Taliban meets its obligations?

Or what is the enforcement mechanism, because how do we avoid getting back into the situation where they make a commitment, it does not happen, and we are back again to some suggestion that we need to increase military engagement in a place we have been for 18 years?

Ms. WELLS. Again, I cannot prejudge what a peace agreement would produce. But I will just cite the secretary's comments on this and that is we have a very powerful and capable military and we are confident that we are able to prosecute and protect our interests.

Mr. CICILLINE. But my question really is what mechanisms do we have to ensure that the Taliban complies with an agreement that we may reach with them?

Ms. WELLS. I cannot prejudge what will come out of and what will be finally negotiated in a political framework agreement.

Mr. CICILLINE. OK. Do you think it is important that the agreement be reached between the Afghan government and the Taliban prior to any decision on a withdrawal by U.S. military personnel and what are the risks if our troop withdrawal precedes that or precedes even a countrywide cease-fire?

Ms. WELLS. All I can say is that publicly we have underscored the expectation that an inter-Afghan dialog would be taken—would be undertaken in good faith and quickly.

Mr. CICILLINE. And finally, Ambassador Wells, how should the United States and our international partners enforce any Taliban commitments on human rights, of course, particularly with respect to the progress for minorities, women, and girls.

I mean, do we have—what is your view on how we can most effectively enforce commitments that are made and what is the role of our partners in the international community? This is an area of deep concern, I think, to many members of this committee.

Ms. WELLS. I think it is very important that donors speak with one voice about the importance we attach to the values enshrined in the Constitution and particular respect for the rights of women and girls to education, to work outside the home, protection for minorities.

And, again, today in London there will be a meeting of donors where one of the central goals is just to underscore this common commitment that we have.

So if the Taliban wants to be or if a government that includes the Taliban wants to be a legitimate member of the international community that is going to be the expectation of the international community.

Mr. CICILLINE. And are there women engaged in the actual negotiations that have been underway actually at the negotiating table?

So in addition to issues related to women and girls are there women who are participating in this process?

Ms. WELLS. At the inter-Afghan talks that took place in Doha, 25 percent of the non-Taliban participants were women. Women are members of the High Peace Council. In Afghanistan, President Ghani has given public assurances that of his intent to have Afghan women on any Pan-Afghan negotiating team.

Afghan women are certainly a critical audience for us as we engage with stakeholders across Afghanistan to both explain our approach and to understand their concerns.

Mr. CICILLINE. Thank you. I yield back, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman ENGEL. Thank you very much, Mr. Cicilline.

Mr. Perry.

Mr. PERRY. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Thank you for your attendance today. Seems to me that the enemy is not leaving anytime soon.

Whether it is al-Qaida, ISIS, Taliban elements, Haqqani, you name it, they are all either operating, increasing operations or waiting to fill the vacuum and we do not, certainly, want to abandon the Afghan people or our very, very significant investment in the stability and peace in Afghanistan.

That having been said, I just wonder—I think you said that we are providing 80 percent—is that right—80 percent of the strong support in the strong support role for Afghan security forces?

Ms. WELLS. That is right, and 25 percent of economic and humanitarian assistance.

Mr. PERRY. Based on that, it just seems—when will they be able to sustain themselves? I mean, I think—look, America and Americans, I think, are rightly weary of the—of the treasure both in lives and that continues, and economically that Afghanistan has cost our country with, I would say, I think, in a lot of people's minds marginal results for so long a slog here, and we are trying to figure out, I think, as many American citizens how much longer will it be.

And it almost seems like—I know they are trying to develop capability but they have an incentive to not develop capability as long as we are willing to be there at 80 percent, and it has got to come—it has got to come down and they are going to have to—they are going to have to take on more of the role and, quite honestly, some of the neighbors in the area that have a vested interest in Afghanistan's safety and security have got to take a bigger role.

Will the Afghan government, as far as you know, allow American basing as a part of any negotiated deal and settlement that has a diminution of activity or forces and strong supportive security forces over the long haul? Will they allow us to stay in some regard?

Ms. WELLS. We cannot know or predict what is going to come out of a negotiation between Afghans and the Taliban. What I would stress——

Mr. PERRY. I am talking about the Afghan government and the United States—the negotiations between the United States. I know the Taliban does not want us there. That is part of the problem. But the Afghan——

Ms. WELLS. But with the Afghan government we do have a bilateral security arrangement. We reside on Afghanistan bases. We

have a military presence on Afghanistan bases and very much our support for the Afghan government is premised on Afghanistan's sovereignty.

But I agree, sir, and the President and the secretary have spoken forcefully about the $30 billion or so a year that we spend to maintain the operations in Afghanistan.

So we are looking to reduce those numbers by trying to rationalize our presence and our approach to the battle in Afghanistan.

We have actively and successfully increased the amount of burden sharing by our donors and I think if you point to the economic section that is very——

Mr. PERRY. I do not mean to interrupt you, ma'am. I think I just want to make sure that—just we consider Japan and Germany sovereign nations but we—but we are afforded basing in those countries over the long term and it seems to me that Afghanistan should be in the same position.

But they need to secure their own country, their own sovereign nation and not depend on 80 percent—an 80 percent solution set from the United States in that regard.

Because of the neighborhood that Afghanistan resides in, I have been to Kabul. It looks indefensible to me, as a military—as a military guy, and I wonder if you can assess if we are going to remain in Afghanistan for America's interests, even if it might not be for the sake of the security forces of Afghanistan and their—and supporting them at 80 percent or anything close to that.

But are we going to remain for our own national interest and national security interests so that we can operate in Afghanistan as necessary when al-Qaida, ISIS, Khorasan, whoever, pops their head up?

What is the best defensible position geographically that we can also sustain, understanding that Pakistan is on one side, you got China up there, you got Iran around the southern and western side? Is it Tajikistan? Is it on the border with Uzbekistan?

If we were going to remain there indefinitely like we have in Germany and Japan for our own national security, what is the best geographic location, in your assessment, to do that?

Ms. WELLS. We are not looking for permanent basing in Afghanistan and to the contrary, we would like to be able to create the conditions for our troops to come home.

But in the absence of the conditions allowing that, if there continues to be——

Mr. PERRY. The enemy is going to remain, as you know.

Ms. WELLS. If you posit that the enemy is going to remain, I mean, certainly, we would welcome the opportunity to have a counterterrorism relationship with whatever government emerges in Afghanistan.

I cannot predict or conclude what is going to be the case at the end of a negotiation. But when it comes to the 80,000 figure, I would just add I think everyone agrees, including Afghan officials, that the—the size of the Afghan army now is not sustainable. It is a function of the war that is being fought in partnership with us.

But, a sustainable Afghanistan and Afghan government that can support its own economic development and support its own security forces would look very different.

Mr. PERRY. My time has expired. I yield.

Chairman ENGEL. Thank you, Mr. Perry.

Ms. Titus.

Ms. TITUS. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I was just kind of surprised to hear you, Ambassador, say Belt and Road is a slogan, not a reality. We've been hearing an awful lot about the reality of infrastructure projects across Africa, reports ranging from Sri Lanka to Lima. I think it is more than a slogan.

Second, I appreciate Mr. Cicilline bringing up the point about women. I do not think I share your optimism that we can trust the Taliban to negotiate in good faith with the Afghan government and protect the gains that have been made by women over the last 18 years because they are really not at the table and they are not part of the negotiating process.

But what I want to ask you about is something we had not talked about and that is the poppy trade. Opium poppies are Afghans' most valuable cash crop. They brought in $863 million last year.

Afghanistan is the largest global producer. It accounts for 82 percent of the world's production. We know how many lives have been lost as a result of being addicted to heroin. Afghanistan's production reached record highs over the last 2 years except for a small dip because of the drought.

And all our efforts over there have been unsuccessful. The special inspector general found that our alternative development programs were too short. They did not bring about lasting reductions in the cultivation.

Sometimes they contributed to increased production. The DOD also ended a military counter narcotics campaign in 2017 that failed to yield results.

Could you talk about how this played into the negotiation? What are our efforts now and what do they plan to be? Was poppy cultivation part of the conversation at all and why was this so unsuccessful?

Ms. WELLS. Quickly, just to clarify, Belt and Road is very real but in Afghanistan it is a slogan. The Chinese simply have not put money. They have just tried to lock down lucrative mining contracts but not follow through with investment of real resources.

We share your concern on poppy, how it has criminalized the economy, the expanding role of opium production in undermining governance and transparency. It is fundamentally, though, I think an issue that is tied to security.

Eighty to 85 percent of opium in Afghanistan is produced in areas that are controlled or under the contested or influenced by the Taliban.

Ms. TITUS. Right.

Ms. WELLS. That has been what has, I think, prevented the much more sustainable approaches to eliminating opium production including alternative livelihoods, crops—high-value crops that are more valuable than opium.

Where we have had some success is in establishing some of the structures—the laws, the regulatory structures, the special police units, whether it is the counter—under the counter narcotics police.

We have a sensitive investigation unit and the national interdiction unit. They are doing real seizures. But this is in the context of something that really fundamentally has to come out of an improved security environment that we do not have right now.

Ms. TITUS. Was this part of any of the negotiation with the Taliban? And this is their main source of revenue? What are we going to do about that in the future or are we just going to turn a blind eye to it?

Ms. WELLS. I cannot speak to what was said during the course of the negotiations but the Taliban have been very public about saying and pointing to their past record of having eliminated opium production. And so——

Ms. TITUS. But we know that is not true.

Ms. WELLS. They, for complex reasons immediately right before their downfall they did issue a fatwa against opium production that effectively reduced opium production in the areas that they controlled.

We would welcome the Taliban issuing a fatwa today saying that opium production should be banned——

Ms. TITUS. I am sure we would.

Ms. WELLS [continuing]. In the areas that they control, which they have not done. So, this is all very cynical. But I do not want to suggest that it is only a Taliban problem. Drug money in Afghanistan is everywhere. It permeates everywhere. It criminalizes the broader economy. It is a distorting factor in Afghanistan's ability to develop as a self-sustaining nation.

Ms. TITUS. Do you want to speak to that from your point of view?

Ms. FREEMAN. Well, from a development point of view, one of the alternatives is to look at creating a reflection, and what USAID has sought to do is to create improved markets, improved access, look at value chains, try to extend from out into the—into the rural areas an ability to produce legitimate crops and get those to market in a timely fashion.

Ms. TITUS. Has that been successful?

Ms. FREEMAN. That has been very successful. Whether it is drawing away from——

Ms. TITUS. How do you measure that success? How do you measure that success?

Ms. FREEMAN. Whether it is drawing away from the opium trade, that I cannot tell you. In terms of improving livelihoods and improving people's incomes, yes.

Ms. TITUS. Thank you. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman ENGEL. Thank you, Ms. Titus.

Mr. Lieu.

Mr. LIEU. Thank you, Mr. Chair. Thank you, Ambassador Wells and Ms. Freeman, for being here. None of my comments or questions are meant in any way to criticize your dedicated and lengthy public service.

We have had bipartisan failure in Afghanistan for over 18 years across administrations. The Trump Administration is continuing that failure.

I understand you are simply executing orders of the President. But I do want to get some facts out here to the American people.

Ms. Wells, approximately how many U.S. service members and U.S. civilians have died in the Afghan war?

Ms. WELLS. About 2,400.

Mr. LIEU. OK. With civilians, it's over 4,000. Is that correct?

Ms. WELLS. I actually do not have that statistic. But I take your data.

Mr. LIEU. OK. About how many U.S. service members have been wounded in the Afghan war?

Ms. WELLS. Twenty-six thousand, sir.

Mr. LIEU. So correct, over 20,000 at least. How many U.S. troops are currently in Afghanistan?

Ms. WELLS. Around 14,000.

Mr. LIEU. In 2016, before Donald Trump took office, how many U.S. troops were in Afghanistan?

Ms. WELLS. Eighty-six hundred or 8,400.

Mr. LIEU. So Donald Trump ran on a campaign of getting the U.S. out of endless wars, of getting us out of dumb wars in the Middle East. He has failed to deliver on that promise.

In fact, he has increased troops in Afghanistan by approximately 70 percent. Do you know what the cost of how much the U.S. has spent in Afghanistan, Ms. Wells?

Ms. WELLS. I do not have an exact figure. I do not think we have been able to produce an exact figure. We talk about $30 billion a year total in Afghanistan now.

Mr. LIEU. Thank you. So according to Washington Post, it has been over $1 trillion. There is an article in the Washington Post saying Trump's Afghanistan troop increase adds to $1 trillion in war costs, and we have very little to show for this.

We are still in a stalemate. There is no indication if we stay another 18 years that we are going to achieve any sort of victory.

In fact, what ends up happening is because we keep killing civilians and other folks in Afghanistan, it makes terrorist recruiting that much easier.

So I want to ask you about a Reuters article that came out today documenting that yesterday a U.S. drone strike in Afghanistan killed at least 30 civilian farmers. Are you aware of that drone strike?

Ms. WELLS. I have seen press reports that an Afghanistan strike may have produced civilian casualties. That is being investigated and looked into by Resolute Support Mission.

If true, it would be very tragic. I would note that again, the civilian attacks or civilian casualties are made—happen more easily because of the fact that ISIS and Taliban immersed themselves in the civilian population, do not distinguish how they dress and themselves directly target civilians.

Mr. LIEU. Thank you for that. We do have complete air superiority in Afghanistan, correct?

Ms. WELLS. Yes.

Mr. LIEU. OK. And our drones can linger over a target for a fair amount of time, correct?

Ms. WELLS. Sir, I do not know whether the report that your mentioning is a drone attack. The reports I have seen have suggested

that this was something that was—I do not know the details of the incident so I do not want to comment on it.

Mr. LIEU. Sure. When I served on active duty U.S. military, one thing is I did is I briefed commanders on the law of armed conflict. As you know, intentionally targeting civilians is a war crime.

It is also a war crime if it is a disproportionate use of force. So if you were to think that there may be one or two terrorists there and you are going to end up killing 30 civilians, you cannot launch that strike either.

So I look forward to the Administration providing us information as to if in fact this strike killed at least 30 civilians what their purpose of that strike was and how this has happened when we have complete air superiority and our air assets can linger over targets for a fair amount of time.

And all of this does bring me to how do we now conclude our failure in Afghanistan. So when is the next meeting that the Administration is going to have with the Taliban? Has that been scheduled?

Ms. WELLS. No. The talks are paused at this stage.

Mr. LIEU. So not only——

Ms. WELLS. Excuse me. Suspended.

Mr. LIEU [continuing]. Have we now had over 4,000 U.S. service members and civilians killed in Afghanistan, by your estimate 26,000 service members wounded, over $1 trillion spent on this war in Afghanistan, we are in a stalemate and the Administration has now zero strategy, zero scheduled talks, no ability to get us out of this quagmire—it is time to bring our troops home.

I yield back.

Chairman ENGEL. Thank you, Mr. Lieu.

Is Ms. Wild here? Ms. Wild.

Ms. WILD. I have questions for each of you. I only have 5 minutes, as you know. I am going to be a little quick and just ask that you be circumspect in your answers.

Ms. Freeman, to start, the United States has invested an enormous amount of human life, money, and time into the conflict and attempted peace building process in Afghanistan, as we all know.

Since 2002, Congress has appropriated more than $132 billion in aid for Afghanistan. More than 2,000 U.S. troops have lost their lives in Afghanistan and currently we have 14,000 troops there.

My question to you is this. How is the Trump Administration working to ensure that the investments the U.S. has made in Afghanistan, like building hospitals, schools, supporting NGO's, and advancing women's rights, is not lost if we withdraw from the country?

And I ask that in the context of this. Particularly because the Trump Administration has not included the Afghan government in peace negotiations, how are we making sure that the progress we have made in Afghanistan will be maintained long term?

Ms. FREEMAN. Thank you. I think that the most succinct answer to your question is the broad programming of sustainability and working on systems, which I was trying to highlight in my own testimony.

It is not a matter of just the number of students that are trained. It is the infrastructure that is built. That infrastructure may be

physical or it may be institutional in strengthening the systems within the government and I think we have a great deal of success to be shown in terms of strengthening internal systems to advance Afghanistan's own ownership of its development.

The other area that I would point to in terms of sustainability is the development of stronger voices in Afghanistan to sustain themselves, going forward. The voices of women, the voices of the private sector, the voices of educators that will carry forward through time in terms of their expectations.

Ms. WILD. Thank you. I am deeply concerned and I appreciate your response, and I think it is a good one. But I hope we do not negate the progress that we have helped build in that country and the sacrifices, particularly that our troops have made by pulling out with a plan in place to create and sustain lasting peace.

I would like to turn to Ambassador Wells, and my question to you is this. We know that in July 2018 in an unprecedented move the Trump administration entered into direct high-level negotiations with the Taliban and without Afghan government representatives, and in doing so the Administration reversed longstanding U.S. position that any peace process would have to be Afghan owned and Afghan led and this, of course, hearkens back to the questions that I was asking Ms. Freeman.

From close to a year the Administration held almost continuous meetings with Taliban representatives, and I am not going to go through what happened on September 11th because some of my colleagues have and we all know.

But we know also that for decades the Taliban carried out violence against women and egregiously violated women's human rights.

Afghanistan is ranked the worst place in the world to be a woman. Eighty-seven percent of their women are illiterate. Seventy to 80 percent of them are in forced marriages and 90 percent have experienced domestic abuse.

So, our President loves to refer to himself as a great negotiator and a great deal maker. But we have not seen any successful deals on behalf of the American people yet.

And I am wondering—my question to you is this. When the Trump Administration engages in high-level talks for almost a year with the Taliban and without the Afghan government, how do we expect these negotiations to ultimately be successful and bring long-term peace?

Ms. WELLS. Congresswoman, I think it is a mischaracterization. We have been—we are in constant contact and constant engagement with the government of Afghanistan.

We were working in parallel tracks as we discussed issues with the Taliban. We were discussing the same issues with the Afghan government in coming up with an agreed upon approach under this political framework.

Ambassador Bass is there every day. General Miller is there every day. Ambassador Khalilzad has spent more week in Afghanistan over the last eight or 9 months, than I can calculate.

And so we are very committed because the outcome of this initial set of conversations was to get to an inter-Afghan dialog—a negotiation, was to get the Afghans to sit down at the table, which the

Taliban have refused to do over the last 18 years. And we started to see that breakdown with the inter-Afghan discussion that took place in Doha in July.

So this was not about ignoring the government of Afghanistan, freezing it out of negotiations. To the contrary, it was creating the preconditions that would allow Afghans finally to sit down and begin to find the appropriate compromises to move forward to a unified government and peace.

Ms. WILD. Thank you. My time is up. I just reiterate I hope we do not lose the progress that has been made by excluding important parties.

Chairman ENGEL. Thank you, Ms. Wild.

Mr. Burchett.

Mr. BURCHETT. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thank you for allowing me to speak.

Given that the Pakistani inter-service intelligence has long given support to the Taliban, is there a role that Pakistan must play in the negotiations with the Taliban and, if so, would Prime Minister Khan have trouble getting the Pakistani military to help?

Ms. WELLS. Pakistan does have a very important role in ensuring that negotiations both take place and are successful, and we have seen constructive support by Pakistan in helping to ensure that there was an authoritative negotiating team.

Pakistan released Mullah Baradar from prison where they were holding him, and he then took over leadership of the Taliban negotiating group.

We are working closely with Pakistan and Ambassador Khalilzad's consultations very much include and are based on the expectation that Pakistan will provide this support.

Prime Minister Khan publicly has been forward leaning in his support for peace in Afghanistan. We appreciate the steps that he has taken and members of his government have taken to try to improve relations with Afghanistan, because improved Afghanistan-Pakistan relations are also going to be critical to a sustainable peace. But this is an area where we will continue to have expectations and asks of Pakistan.

Mr. BURCHETT. Thank you, ma'am.

In the 1990's, the Taliban—I believe they said that bin Laden and al-Qaida were not a threat to the U.S. How can we trust them now when they say that they will not allow foreign terrorist organizations on Afghan soil?

Ms. WELLS. There is no intention to trust and I think any peace agreement or any negotiations with the Taliban will be conditions based, and the United States will have to have confidence that our security will not be imperilled.

Mr. BURCHETT. Say that again about trust. What was the wording?

Ms. WELLS. The agreement cannot be based on trust. It has to be based—conditions based and where we have confidence through verification, through means that our security is not being eroded as a result of a peace agreement.

Mr. BURCHETT. So it is not really trust but verify. It is not really trust but verify.

[Laughter.]

Ms. WELLS. Verify.

Mr. BURCHETT. Yes, we need to verify. Yes, ma'am. Thank you.

Given all the uncertainty with the Taliban negotiations, should the Afghan Presidential elections still be held or postponed?

Ms. WELLS. The Afghan elections are proceeding on September 28th. We have long argued that the government of Afghanistan and the electoral bodies need to do everything possible to ensure that they are transparent and credible to the Afghan people.

The United States has provided support for the elections through funding of the U.N. mission in Afghanistan. We have also provided technical assistance through USAID in developing protocols.

I think certain steps have been taken that will—could improve some of the technical aspects of the elections this time around, including polling center-based registration lists which will make it less possible for industrial fraud.

But at the same time, you have fewer polling stations that will be opening in this election compared to 2014 and, certainly, the Afghanistan electoral institutions are going to have to be able to respond to Afghans' concerns of the misuse of government resources and other efforts to influence elections.

Mr. BURCHETT. OK. What are some ways to incentivize the direct Taliban Afghan government talks?

Ms. WELLS. I think that the—both sides have an interest in peace and what is remarkable is despite the incredible violence and just indiscriminate violence against civilians that has been inflicted by the Taliban, the Afghan people remain committed to trying to find a way forward and remain committed to a peace negotiation.

Because as long as Pakistan is wracked by violence, you cannot achieve the security to create a normal state that is self-sustaining.

And the Taliban—their interests, as I said before, I think, are motivated by desire to be seen as legitimate, to be able to engage on—in a way that they have not with the international community, to participate in a functioning government and in a country that is economically more prosperous.

Mr. BURCHETT. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman ENGEL. Thank you, Mr. Burchett.

Ms. Spanberger.

Ms. SPANBERGER. Thank you to the chair. Thank you to our witnesses today.

Ambassador Wells, I would like to start with a question for you. After 18 years of U.S. military involvement in Afghanistan, the country stands in a bloody stalemate.

Thousands of American service members have lost their lives. Talks with the Taliban have broken down and the American public is war weary.

As reconciliation and security efforts advance, I am particularly concerned that Afghanistan will again be used by international terrorist groups such as al-Qaida or Islamist State Khorasan to launch and plan attacks on the United States or our allies.

As you have already discussed, if the previous rounds of talks had continued as planned, the Taliban was going to agree to preventing terrorist groups from using Afghanistan to plan and launch attacks.

Yet, it is not clear that the Taliban would follow through on this pledge or even have the ability to rein in the numerous terrorist organizations.

They have made and failed to keep similar pledges before. And so my question is what do you see as a realistic path forward to ensuring that Afghanistan is not right for terrorist groups to plan and launch cross-border terrorist attacks and how can we proceed with enforcing any agreement related to that type of promise?

Ms. WELLS. Again, I would say I think it is a bit of a mischaracterization to say that it is only been a bloody stalemate. I mean, we have a situation now where the Afghans are doing the overwhelming majority of the fighting.

We have a situation where the Taliban do not control provincial capitals. They are not in control of the country or in control of the people.

We have a situation where we have succeeded in ensuring that Afghanistan has not been used as a platform against us again. And so the baseline goal and reason why we went into Afghanistan I think we have upheld.

America's security is going to be the foremost objective of any peace negotiation that we support and the President has spoken to that. The secretary has spoken to that. And that is why any peace agreement needs to be conditions based.

I cannot give specifics now and I would leave it to further briefings if and when a peace negotiation resumes. But I think that the Afghan people and the Taliban and we agree that this is not a conflict that is going to be won militarily.

So the question of how we get back to a sustainable peace process is one that is under active review by the Administration.

Ms. SPANBERGER. And how much do you think the fact that Afghanistan has not been used as a platform to launch additional attacks against us or U.S. interests outside of Afghanistan—how much do you think that that is a result of the presence of our forces, my question being specifically if we were to move toward removing U.S. forces how does that significantly change the dynamic that has allowed us to achieve some of the stability that you just discussed?

Ms. WELLS. In the context of an active war against the Taliban, the presence of American and international forces has been critical.

Ms. SPANBERGER. OK. And so then in thinking through a—the type of agreement that we could make with the Taliban and looking at what sort of enforcement would be possible, what do you see as potential levers for negotiation or potential successes for the type of enforcement that would allow us to ensure that Afghanistan cannot devolve into a place where terrorist networks are able to find save haven again and, potentially, plot against the United States?

Ms. WELLS. I think, as has been said publicly in a conditions-based agreement, what the Taliban want is the removal of forces and to be able to achieve a removal of forces there would have to be confidence on our part that the undertakings were being upheld by the Taliban and its members.

I cannot hypothesize about what may or may not come out of a future agreement and what specific measures will be included.

But I would just go back to the basic point the United States has the most capable and powerful military in the world. We are committed to protecting our citizens' interests.

We are not without options.

Ms. SPANBERGER. The challenge that I see, though related to the conditions-based discussions is if the Taliban want U.S. departure from Afghanistan then what is the next step that we take when in fact they are not complying with negotiated terms?

As you see it, what would be our response if we have in fact removed forces? Where do we go from there?

Ms. WELLS. I cannot hypothesize about that scenario.

Ms. SPANBERGER. Thank you for your time.

Mr. Chairman, I yield back.

Chairman ENGEL. Thank you, Ms. Spanberger.

Mr. Levin.

Mr. LEVIN. Thank you so much, Mr. Chairman.

According to the United Nations' assistance mission in Afghanistan there were more civilian casualties in 2018 than in any other year since they began counting, and it was also reported that for the first time since the United Nations began documenting civilian casualties in Afghanistan more civilians were killed by Afghan government and American forces than by the Taliban and other insurgents.

I do not think there can be a clearer sign that the U.S. military intervention there has failed to secure the Afghan people.

Ambassador Wells, it is good to see you again. I want to ask you why should we expect that doing more of the same thing that we have done for the last 18 years will lead to a different and better outcome than these statistics suggest?

Ms. WELLS. First, I want to say that the U.S. military does everything possible to avoid civilian casualties. Nobody is more meticulous in its planning and as thoughtful in its efforts, and I contrast that to the enemy that we face that deliberately targets civilians, and we have seen that over this bloody last week of targeting of hospitals, targeting of election workers. And so the——

Mr. LEVIN. Yes, it is horrifying. But do you dispute the statistics from 2018?

Ms. WELLS. I think, as I mentioned earlier in another response, we do question some of the methodology. I think this is an aberration and the——

Mr. LEVIN. I hope you are right.

Ms. WELLS [continuing]. And the approach of the forces could not be more different. And so, I am very—I think we can have confidence and respect for the U.S. military's efforts to reduce civilian casualties and reduce the Afghan forces' civilian casualties.

This is not a static or this is—this is not a static situation. There has been significant change over the last 18 years and one of those significant changes is the fact that it is the Afghan forces who are doing the fighting and dying.

We still suffer tragic losses and we suffered a tragic loss last week. But the numbers bear no resemblance to the beginning of this conflict and the height of this conflict.

And, as time goes by what we have seen are more capable Afghan forces, more educated Afghanistan citizens, higher life expectancy, a more sophisticated population.

Those are trend lines that absolutely work in our favor and speak very highly of our own values approach to supporting Afghanistan.

Mr. LEVIN. All right. I want to talk about the non-State militias in Afghanistan like the Khost Protection Force that are trained, equipped, and funded by the CIA.

These militias were the subject of a New York Times report in December that I would like to quote from. It said that the CIA-funded militias have, quote, "operated unconstrained by battlefield rules designed to protect civilians, conducting night raids, torture, and killings with near impunity in a covert campaign that some Afghan and American officials say is undermining the wider American effort to strengthen Afghan institutions."

In July, Ambassador Khalilzad said that militias would be addressed in a peace deal. So, Ambassador Wells, I want to ask you did the proposed U.S. troop withdrawal from Afghanistan include withdrawing U.S. support for non-State militias funded by the CIA?

Ms. WELLS. I cannot speak to that, sir.

Mr. LEVIN. Well, in an interview with the BBC this week the Taliban's chief negotiator said that the negotiation was, quote, "the only way for peace in Afghanistan"—quote, "from our side our doors are open for negotiations and we hope the other side also rethinks their decision regarding negotiation." If we are not talking about these things do you think we can achieve a sustainable solution?

Ms. WELLS. There is agreement that there is not a military solution. There is an agreement that there needs to be a politically negotiated solution.

But there also has to be confidence that the Taliban, after the nine rounds of negotiations, are acting in good faith. And so as has been said publicly by the President and the secretary currently the talks are suspended. The Administration is reviewing options for moving ahead.

Mr. LEVIN. And so just as a final question, it is sometimes hard to explain to my constituents what is going on in this complicated situation.

How would you suggest that I explain to them why the President suspended negotiations at this point? What would—what is the reason for it?

Ms. WELLS. We saw behavior that was inconsistent with the substance and conduct of the negotiations that have taken place over the last nine rounds and it was that inconsistent behavior that led to the decision.

We would like to see the Taliban take actions that would—that would make it possible to return to political negotiations.

Mr. LEVIN. All right. Thanks. I yield back, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. KEATING [presiding]. Thank you.

Mr. Malinowski.

Mr. MALINOWSKI. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I want to—I want to thank you both for stepping up and being here. But I also want to say, quite bluntly, that it does not absolve Ambassador Khalilzad, who has been negotiating with—who has been talking to the Taliban for the last year and refusing to speak to the U.S. Congress, and I do not believe that a classified briefing meets his responsibility to explain to the American people what we are doing here.

With that, let me ask you a few questions. The Taliban operates both in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Is that correct?

Ms. WELLS. Taliban has sanctuary in Pakistan.

Mr. MALINOWSKI. And yet, there is nothing in the draft agreement that commits the Taliban to break with al-Qaida or any other terrorist group that it may be cooperating with in Pakistan or, in fact, any of the 20 or so other FTOs beyond al-Qaida and ISIS such as Lashkar-e-Taiba, the Haqqani network that operate in both Pakistan and Afghanistan. Is that correct?

Ms. WELLS. I cannot speak to the details of the—of the text. All I cannote is that it is conditions based with preeminence given to ending ties to terrorist organizations.

Mr. MALINOWSKI. Well, the only terrorist organizations that have been mentioned are those two and everything you have said suggest that their responsibility ends on Afghan soil. So, in fact, this does not really force the Taliban to break with terrorists.

There is no cease-fire contemplated, no nationwide cease-fire contemplated by the agreement. So apart from a few named places, under what was contemplated the Taliban would be able to continue terrorizing the Afghan people.

And yet, as I understand it, we may go—were this process to continue, we could go below 8,600 troops. We could go all the way to zero troops in Afghanistan, even if there is no final inter-Afghan agreement, so long as we have, and if I may quote you, "confidence that our security is not impaired." Is that a fair assessment?

Ms. WELLS. Again, I cannot speak to the details of the agreement that was being discussed or the political framework that was being discussed.

All I can address are the principles that drove it and the foremost principle is American security. But that has to be also sustainable. What we are looking for is a sustainable solution, a sustainable peace in Afghanistan.

Mr. MALINOWSKI. Well, those are two very different things. If the condition is American security as narrowly defined by do not cooperate with al-Qaida or ISIS, then what that suggests is that what happens to the Afghan people in that scenario is immaterial.

So long as we have that minimal commitment from the Taliban we could go to zero, which puts us in a position where we cannot even monitor or enforce that minimal commitment.

You said we have been in constant contact with the Afghan government on this question. I am sure that is true. I know that is true.

But any of us who have spoken to the Afghan government know that they do not agree with the basic framework of this agreement for precisely that reason, because it leaves them to the mercy of the Taliban so long as we are assured that they are not going to be co-

operating with two of the 20 or more terrorist organizations that have safe haven in Afghanistan.

My understanding is we are not willing to say—you are not willing to say to the Taliban right here right now that we will not go to zero if there's no inter-Afghan agreement. Is that correct? You cannot say that categorically.

Ms. WELLS. I am not here to comment on the specifics of a negotiation that I was not a part of. All I can discuss are the principles, and again, the principles are not—I think you are mischaracterizing the approach of the Administration to what we seek to achieve.

Mr. MALINOWSKI. Well, I am quoting—this is what I have heard from the Administration. And, again, if you are not able to speak to the agreement then that is exactly why Ambassador Khalilzad should be sitting in that chair right now. After 1 year of talking to terrorists he should be willing to talk to the U.S. Congress.

Look, all I am asking for here is honesty. There are different views about whether we should stay, whether we should go on both sides of the aisle.

But what we are being sold here is not a potential peace agreement. What we are being sold here is a bedtime story to make us feel better about leaving Afghanistan.

We are talking about this as if it is supposed to bring peace when in fact we know that the Taliban intends on continuing to fight, because their aim is not legitimacy.

Their aim is power in Afghanistan, which they are not willing to share with the Afghan government as they have told us many times. We are being that this is about bringing our troops home when in fact those troops are not coming home. They will go to the Gulf.

They will go to bases, potentially, in Central Asia so that we can maintain a forward presence in the region to continue to strike terrorists in Afghanistan.

We will continue drone strikes but from a further distance, which means there will be more civilian casualties, and if we conduct counterterrorism raids, if we do it from a further distance it will be more dangerous to our troops.

So I am asking for honesty. If we are going to leave let us be—let us simply say we do not have an interest in investing in Afghanistan anymore and we are going to leave them to the tender mercies of the Taliban.

If we believe that is not right let's say to the American people that we have a long-term commitment here like we have in South Korea and Germany and other places.

Pick one, and let's stop telling bedtime stories about what this is going to bring.

Ms. WELLS. I am delighted that there was an opportunity this morning for the committee to be briefed by Ambassador Khalilzad.

Mr. MALINOWSKI. But not the American people.

Ms. WELLS. This is not a negotiation of a withdrawal. It is a peace agreement, and I think what we are losing sight of is the overwhelming majority of Afghans who very much want to see America involved in supporting a peace process.

Afghans do not want to fight to the last Afghan. They seek peace. And so this Administration is—has been creatively working toward that goal.

Mr. MALINOWSKI. They have no say in this process and you know perfectly well that they are terrified—the vast majority of Afghans—about where this is going.

I yield.

Ms. WELLS. This is the only process that is producing a potential of direct conversations between the Taliban, Afghan government, and Afghan stakeholders.

Mr. MALINOWSKI. I yield.

Mr. KEATING. Mr. Phillips.

Mr. PHILLIPS. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and to our witnesses.

I want to start by echoing the sentiment of my colleague, Mr. Malinowski, relative to the lack of an appearance by Mr. Khalilzad. Terribly disappointing, and I hope that is something we can quickly rectify.

Former diplomat and senior fellow at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Dr. Ashley Tellis, recently said, quote, "Any attempt at reconciliation through a negotiated bargain centered on the formal exchange of obligations as opposed to the quiet and progressive defection of insurgents would fail to deliver stability that the U.S. seeks."

Do you agree with that statement? I ask that of both of you.

Ms. WELLS. The Administration is exploring or has been exploring whether or not you can create a political framework that that produces the dialog that gives confidence that American security will be met.

So I, obviously, would not preemptively agree with Dr. Tellis.

Mr. PHILLIPS. So why would we choose to enter negotiations with such little progress on the battlefield strategically? Is that something—is not that a question we should be asking?

Ms. WELLS. This is not a conflict that is going to be solved on the battlefield, and you have seen over the last 10 years the number of troops and soldiers go up and go down.

What has not been able to move forward is the conversations that need to take place between the parties—the government, stakeholders throughout Afghanistan society, which is a very complex one, and the Taliban.

The assessment is that the Taliban are different than ISIS, that this has been a Pashtun nationalist insurgency whose, obviously, their tactics have become increasingly concerning over the last several years but that they yet remain committed to in Afghanistan and are prepared to engage in negotiations.

That needs to be tested. And so with the work that has been done has been done to create the conditions where Afghans can actually for the first time sit down and begin to have those conversations.

Mr. PHILLIPS. Can you think of a precedent in which we ha've been successful applying this type of strategy?

Ms. WELLS. I think every war is unique. But, certainly, the American role is critical and essential in driving any process forward.

And so I would focus on the fact that America has received the support of the—the neighboring countries for the most part.

We have certainly been able to work productively with our like-minded partners. Ambassador Khalilzad has been able to work with Russians and the Chinese because, fundamentally, this is about interests and the region does have, to greater or lesser degrees an interest in Afghanistan stabilizing.

Mr. PHILLIPS. Let's speak about interests. You speak of Russian and Chinese interests. How would you articulate those relative to Afghanistan right now?

Ms. WELLS. I think both countries are concerned by the prospect of the terrorist situation in Afghanistan worsening and, to that extent, we can have a focussed conversation about how to move forward in advancing peace.

I am not going to suggest that they do not have other motivations. But, again, being able to be able to exploit the fact that both countries are concerned about what ISIS represents, that the problem in Afghanistan can get worse as well as get better, is what allows us to and what has allowed us to organize very dynamic productive international gatherings and diplomatic architecture in support of a peace process.

Mr. PHILLIPS. So you consider the Chinese and Russians at this stage to be part of the solution?

Ms. WELLS. I think that if important regional countries do not support peace it will be hard to achieve a peace agreement.

Mr. PHILLIPS. Well, but that is different than being part of the solution are they currently——

Ms. WELLS. We have been working with the countries because we do believe that their support will be helpful in advancing a peace agreement.

Mr. PHILLIPS. OK. Thank you, Ambassador.

I yield back my time.

Mr. CONNOLLY. Actually, would my friend yield to me for a second?

Mr. PHILLIPS. Yes, I absolutely would, Congressman.

Mr. CONNOLLY. I thank my friend.

Ambassador Wells, this eerily has the resonance of the Paris negotiations between Henry Kissinger and Le Duc Tho on the end of the—on China negotiating the end of the Vietnam War.

And pledges were made. That was a peace agreement, too, allegedly. Pledges were made not to—for the North Vietnamese not to invade the south. Promptly ignored, and we turned a blind eye to it, making it look like what Mr. Malinowski indicated—a bedtime story, not even a fig leaf.

Can you assure us that is not what we are looking at here—that this is different?

Ms. WELLS. President Trump is seeking peace—a negotiated political settlement. He is not seeking a withdrawal agreement.

Mr. CONNOLLY. That is a heck of a reassurance. I am sure every American can take that to the bank and feel comforted.

[Pause.]

Mr. KEATING. Does the gentleman yield back?

Mr. CONNOLLY. Oh, sorry. It was—it was Mr. Phillips' time and——

Mr. PHILLIPS. And I do yield back.

Mr. CONNOLLY. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. KEATING. Thank you.

Just briefly, we have discussed at different times the role of women in negotiations. The Afghan government is not involved. Women are not part of that.

We know that the Afghan government, to my knowledge, is trying to include in the information that is relayed to them women as part of that agreement.

But where do you envision going forward? The role of women, even in negotiations such as they are, not directly, but also going forward should we move forward with this agreement, really trying to put something in the agreement that guarantees so many of the gains of women in society that have been there since our involvement in Afghanistan and also considering the view that the Taliban has to women?

Ms. WELLS. How Afghans govern themselves needs to be determined by Afghans and so, obviously, what we hear from the Afghan government and from non-Taliban members of Afghanistan society is their commitment to the gains of the last 18 years—the importance they attach to the constitutional rights including the rights of women and girls—and that's backed up by polling, which consistently shows every year an increasing number of Afghans who support education, who support women's participation in the work force, who support women's voting. A third of all candidates in the parliamentary elections were women.

So I think we have profoundly influenced the development of Afghanistan society in a very positive way and those gains—Afghans are going to have to fight and preserve those gains in a dialog or in a negotiation with the Taliban.

What we can be very crystal clear about, and I think you will see this in the donor meeting that is happening in London and other sessions that will happen with international donors is that for Afghanistan to enjoy the support, to receive the benefits of being a member of the international community it will have to uphold these fundamental rights and that's the power, I think, that we have or the greatest power that we have is that you are not going to get assistance, you are not going to get foreign direct investments, you are not going to get the respect of the international community if you seek to repress or put women back in the home and out of schools.

Mr. KEATING. I have sponsored legislation that, hopefully, will soon be coming forward, to say that if there are other types of resources, going forward, that the U.S. is going to supply to the Afghan government that those guarantees for women remain in place. Is that something you agree with?

Ms. WELLS. All of our programs have embedded in them women's participation and support for women's rights in Afghanistan. It's an operating principle. I think Karen can speak to that.

Mr. KEATING. Yes, Ms. Freeman?

Ms. FREEMAN. Thank you. I have been waiting for that moment for a long time.

Yes, in every single program that we have there is—there is a requirement for the inclusion of women in those programs. In par-

ticular and with respect to the current question at hand, we have been actively working with civil society and women's business chambers, et cetera, to help them to improve their negotiating skills, to help them to hone their messages, their expectations, to be realistic and pragmatic about the way forward, and to ensure that when and if they do have the place at that—at that meeting that they will be ready for it.

Thank you.

Mr. KEATING. Well, thank you, and I hope that this committee, moving forward very shortly, will be able to go forward with that and put additional safeguards to protect the gains the women and girls have certainly been advantaged from in Afghanistan.

I would like to thank you and I would like to thank the panel for what was a very lengthy hearing this morning, and thank you for taking the time to do that.

We will pause just briefly so that the staff can reset the witnesses for the second panel. Thank you again.

[Pause.]

Mr. KEATING. The committee will reconvene. I would like to introduce our second panel and thank them for their patience this morning, which, indeed, was, after a very extensive first panel hearing.

Ambassador James Cunningham is a senior fellow at the Atlantic Council's South Asian Center and an adjunct faculty member at Syracuse University's Maxwell School.

He served at the State Department for decades in a wide range of roles, capping his distinguished career with his time as Ambassador to Afghanistan from 2012 to 2014.

He is a member of the Council on Foreign Relations, the Asia Society, and the American Academy of Diplomacy. Thank you for being here, Ambassador.

Ms. Laurel Miller is the director of the Crisis Group's Asia Program, where she leads the organization's research, analysis, and policy advocacy dealing with that region.

From 2013 to 2017 she was the deputy and then acting special representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan in the State Department. In her previous service at the department worked on numerous issues including peace negotiations in Bosnia. She also served in the staff of the National Security Council. Welcome, and thank you again, Ms. Miller.

Mr. Thomas Joscelyn is a senior fellow at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies and the senior editor of FDD's Long War Journal.

He was—he has worked as a trainer for the FBI's counterterrorism division and he has written wildly on counterterrorism and issues related to counterterrorism.

I would like to welcome to you all. Without objection, the witnesses' prepared testimony will be made part of the record and I will know allow the witnesses to testify for 5 minutes each to summarize their testimony.

Let's start with Ambassador Cunningham.

STATEMENT OF THE HONORABLE JAMES B. CUNNINGHAM, NONRESIDENT SENIOR FELLOW, SOUTH ASIA CENTER, ATLANTIC COUNCIL

Mr. CUNNINGHAM. Thank you, sir. I appreciate the opportunity to be here today.

While the specifics of the deal negotiated by U.S. Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation Khalilzad remain unknown, its apparent elements raise serious concern about failure and its application.

Now that President Trump has called a halt to the discussions with the Taliban, the opportunity exists, if the Administration will take it, to course correct and seek a better deal that will lead to a political agreement ending the conflict, the goal which President Trump correctly set 2 years ago.

A flawed deal on withdrawal of U.S. forces—one not grounded in the context of an actual peace agreement—risks the collapse of Afghanistan into chaos, the return of the oppressive and extremist Taliban emirate, and the growth of the Islamist terrorist threat to Western security and values.

The American Afghan peoples and our many international partners in Afghanistan deserve better.

One side negotiating against a deadline is at a severe disadvantage when the other is not and Ambassador Khalilzad had been operating under extremely complex conditions.

But an agreement which fails in fact to open the way to peace for Afghanistan will be a defeat for U.S. leadership and values and sacrifice unnecessarily U.S. and Afghan interest in stability and security in that troubled region.

Certainly, a discussion with the Taliban about ending the conflict is to be welcomed. But hope for an inter-Afghan dialog is not a strategy and there is little to suggest that a Taliban version of peace would be acceptable to the vast majority of Afghans or to the international community.

Taliban representatives have told other Afghans that the United States is defeated and that they will restore the Islamic Emirate.

While they suggest that the Emirate would be less severe and barbaric, there is little doubt what that would mean for today's Afghanistan nor of the risks that outcome would pose for outcome women.

Negotiations should be resumed as soon as possible but on a different basis geared to actually ending the conflict. A sound deal with the Taliban will involve the Afghan government. It will as a first step end the violence by making the discretion of U.S. withdrawal contingent upon a cease-fire which ends the killing of Afghans.

While forces can be reduced based on conditions as a cease-fire takes hold, it will make a durable peace agreement between the universally recognized Afghan government and the Taliban, the sine qua non for the ultimate withdrawal of international forces.

That negotiation, in turn, must take into the account the reality, as demonstrated by the horrific ISIS bombing of a Kabul wedding hall last month, that future Afghan governments will likely require international assistance in combating terrorism.

They will also without doubt require significant international donor support for a peace agreement. A new Taliban emirate will be deserving of neither.

There has been much discussion in the past weeks about the futility of continued U.S. engagement in Afghanistan and American fatigue, and calls for withdrawal often without addressing the consequences.

Peace negotiations on the terms we, most Afghans, and our international partners would seek will be difficult but not impossible to create.

We have not adequately tested the proposition which requires a complex, diplomatic, and military effort and continued support for the Afghan Security Forces.

We have long recognized that a military solution is not in the offing, but a peace process does require an adequate military instrument in support of a multilateral multifaceted high-level diplomatic campaign to set the conditions for negotiations.

The irony of where we are today is that President Trump's South Asia strategy announced 2 years ago corrected the shortcomings which handicapped President Obama's efforts to withdraw U.S. forces and establish a peace process.

Knowing that President Obama had a time line for bringing our troops home, the Taliban had no incentive to negotiate.

In 2017, President Trump agreed to restore military capabilities needed to strengthen the American train and assist and counterterrorism missions and to focus on creating conditions for negotiations.

This strategy for peace correctly aligned three elements for getting the Taliban to genuine negotiations: bolstering the Afghan Security Forces, basing the reduction and eventual withdrawal of military forces on conditions and not artificial deadlines, and focusing on Afghanistan's regional context, particularly on ending the nefarious role of Pakistan.

That strategy was aimed at success, a political settlement including respect for the Afghan constitution and its protections for human rights, women, and a free media. It appears to be coming apart.

The reestablishment of unrealistic U.S. deadlines will again undercut the Afghan Security Forces, deadlines, and the ever present threat of withdrawal absent an agreement, encourage Taliban intransigence, speculation about an interim government which, hopefully, is now moot risked the demise of democracy in Afghanistan.

Washington appears yet again to have allowed Pakistan to avoid concrete action to change the calculations of the Taliban leadership in Pakistan.

Afghanistan is neither a failed state nor to be dismissed as a forever war. Afghanistan is a struggling democratic Islamic partner in the generational conflict between extreme Islamist ideology and terrorism, and the civilized world to which most people, including Muslims, aspire.

Our 18-year effort in Afghanistan has had several distinct phases and mistakes have surely been made. But yielding to fatigue rather than correcting our strategy would be the greatest mistake of all.

The costs of engagement in Afghanistan are much lower than in the past, can be lower yet, and are sustainable. As with the cold war, staying power will be required to win the ideological conflict with Islamist extremism in which Afghanistan is a chapter.

We can certainly be smarter and more effective. But as with Iraq, the cost of premature withdrawal from Afghanistan with the prospects of peace unsecured will be much higher.

Among the more important of those costs will be the accelerated erosion of the notion that the United States is a reliable and durable partner when there is a price to be paid for leadership and defense of U.S. values.

Thank you.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Cunningham follows:]

Statement of Ambassador James B. Cunningham, Nonresident Senior Fellow at the Atlantic Council and former U.S. ambassador to Afghanistan, Israel and the United Nations

House Committee on Foreign Affairs, "The Trump Administration's Afghanistan Policy," September 19, 2019

While the specifics of the deal negotiated by US Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation Khalilzad remain unknown, its apparent elements raise serious concern about failure in its application. Now that President Trump has called a halt to the discussions with the Taliban, the opportunity exists, if the administration will take it, to course correct and seek a better deal that will lead to a political agreement ending the conflict – the goal which President Trump correctly set two years ago. A flawed deal on withdrawal of US forces, one not grounded in the context of an actual peace agreement, risks the collapse of Afghanistan into chaos, the return of the oppressive and extremist Taliban Emirate, and the growth of the Islamist terrorist threat to Western security and values. The American and Afghan peoples, and our many international partners in Afghanistan, deserve better.

One side negotiating against a deadline is at a severe disadvantage when the other is not, and Ambassador Khalilzad has been operating under extremely complex conditions. But an agreement which fails in fact to open the way to peace for Afghanistan will be a defeat for US leadership and values, and sacrifice unnecessarily US and Afghan interests in stability and security in that troubled region.

Certainly a discussion with the Taliban about ending the conflict is to be welcomed. But hope for an "intra-Afghan dialogue" is not a strategy, and there is little to suggest that the Taliban version of peace would be acceptable to the vast majority of Afghans or to the international community. Taliban representatives have told other Afghans that the United States is defeated and that they will restore the Islamic Emirate. While they suggest that the Emirate would be less severe and barbaric, there is little doubt what that would mean for today's Afghanistan, nor of the risks that outcome would pose for Afghan women.

Negotiations should be resumed as soon as possible, but on a different basis, geared to actually ending the conflict. A sound deal with the Taliban will involve the Afghan government. It will as a first step end the violence by making the discussion of US withdrawal contingent upon a ceasefire which ends the killing of Afghans. While forces can be reduced based on conditions as a ceasefire takes hold, it will make a durable peace agreement between the universally recognized Afghan government and the Taliban the sine qua non for the ultimate withdrawal of international forces. That negotiation in turn must take into account the reality, as demonstrated by the horrific ISIS bombing of a Kabul wedding hall last month, that future Afghan governments will likely require international assistance in combatting terrorism. They will also without doubt require significant international donor support for a peace agreement. A new Taliban Emirate will be deserving of neither.

There has been much discussion in the past weeks about the futility of continued US engagement in Afghanistan and American fatigue, and calls for withdrawal – often without addressing the consequences. Peace negotiations, on the terms we, most Afghans and our international partners would seek, will be difficult but not impossible to create. We have not adequately tested the proposition, which requires a complex diplomatic and military effort and continued support for the Afghan security forces. We have long recognized that a military solution is not in the offing. But a peace process does require an adequate military instrument in support of a multilateral, multifaceted, high level diplomatic campaign to set the conditions for negotiations.

The irony of where we are today is that President Trump's South Asia strategy, announced two years ago, corrected shortcomings which handicapped President Obama's efforts to withdraw U.S. forces and establish a peace process. Knowing that President Obama had a timeline for bringing our troops home, the Taliban had no incentive to negotiate. In 2017, President Trump agreed to restore military capabilities needed to strengthen the American Train and Assist and counterterrorism missions, and to focus on creating conditions for negotiations. His strategy for peace correctly aligned three key elements for getting the Taliban to genuine negotiations: bolstering the Afghan security forces; basing the reduction and eventual withdrawal of military forces on conditions and not artificial deadlines; and focusing on Afghanistan's regional context, particularly on ending the nefarious role of Pakistan in providing safe haven to the Taliban.

That strategy was aimed at success – a political settlement, including respect for the Afghan constitution and its protections for human rights, women and a free media. It appears to be coming apart. The re-establishment of unrealistic US deadlines will again undercut the Afghan security forces. Deadlines and the ever-present threat of withdrawal absent an agreement encourage Taliban intransigence. Speculation about an interim government, which hopefully is now moot, risked the demise of democracy in Afghanistan. Washington appears yet again to have allowed Pakistan to avoid concrete action to change the calculations of the Taliban leadership in Pakistan.

Afghanistan is neither a failed state, nor to be dismissed as a "forever war." Afghanistan is a struggling democratic, Islamic partner in the generational conflict between extreme Islamist ideology and terrorism and the civilized world to which most people, including Muslims, aspire. Our 18-year effort in Afghanistan has had several distinct phases, and mistakes have surely been made. But yielding to fatigue rather than correcting our strategy would be the greatest mistake of all. The costs of engagement in Afghanistan are much lower than in the past, can be lower yet, and are sustainable. As with the Cold War, staying power will be required to win the ideological conflict with Islamist extremism, in which Afghanistan is a chapter. We can certainly be smarter and more effective. But as with Iraq, the costs of premature withdrawal from Afghanistan, with the prospects of peace unsecured, will be much higher. Among the more important of those costs will be the accelerated erosion of the notion that the United States is a reliable and durable partner when there is a price to be paid for leadership and defense of US values.

Mr. KEATING. Thank you, Ambassador.

Ms. Miller.

STATEMENT OF MS. LAUREL MILLER, PROGRAM DIRECTOR, ASIA, CRISIS GROUP, FORMER STATE DEPARTMENT ACTING SPECIAL REPRESENTATIVE FOR AFGHANISTAN AND PAKISTAN

Ms. MILLER. Thank you, Congressman Keating, for your endurance today and my thanks to the committee for inviting me to this important hearing.

I have been asked to assess the Administration's efforts to secure a peace deal. I will summarize my written statement, briefly reviewing U.S. policy options and explaining why the negotiations President Trump declared dead last week should be revived.

Those talks produced a draft U.S.-Taliban agreement that, according to both sides, was ready to be signed. The U.S. has three basic options.

First, the withdrawal option. The U.S. could plan and execute a pullout of all U.S. forces. The conflict would continue and it would probably intensify and become more chaotic.

There is a strong chance the anti-Taliban side would fracture. How quickly that would happen would depend on whether the government in Kabul continued to receive the foreign funding on which it very heavily depends.

Second, the stay the course option. The U.S. could keep the current or somewhat reduced number of troops, continue fighting the Taliban alongside the government, continue operations against the Islamic State branch, and occasionally other terrorist groups from within Afghanistan.

The war, currently the deadliest in the world, would remain the bloody stalemate that it is today and that many senior American military officers have said it is, one that has been eroding in the Taliban's favor over several years.

Keeping U.S. troops in Afghanistan would continue feeding the Taliban narrative of foreign occupation that they use to recruit. Staying the course means perpetuating the conflict with no foreseeable end.

Third, the negotiation option. The U.S. could try to negotiate an end to the war and to the U.S. military presence. American diplomats have engaged in about 9 years of waxing and waning efforts to launch a peace process. But only this year did the U.S. put pursuing a peace deal at the center of its policy.

The third option is the only one with the potential to reduce violence in Afghanistan and enable the U.S. troops to withdraw in permissive conditions.

It is also the option with the best chance of preserving Afghanistan's social and development gains. To be clear, none of these options has the realistic potential to result in military victory for the U.S. and its Afghan allies. Neither of the first two options would enable the Afghan government to become self-sustaining in its fight against the Taliban at any foreseeable time and only the negotiation option aims for a reduction of violence.

Some have criticized the Administration for negotiating exclusively with the Taliban, supposedly cutting out the Afghan govern-

ment. It's understandable this approach is deeply frustrating to many Afghans and, frankly, it's distasteful to many in Washington.

The U.S. decision to negotiate first with the Taliban prior to talks among Afghans was a concession to the Taliban's stubborn insistence on that sequence.

The U.S. for many years resisted that sequencing and the cost was no peace process. It is worth underscoring that the U.S. already tried and failed to deliver the more desirable kind of peace process with the Afghan government at the table from the outset and with an early cease-fire.

No evidence suggests the Afghan government on its own could launch this preferred form of peace talks. Certainly, the U.S. has not stood in the way.

But it is crucial to recognize what a U.S.-Taliban deal would and would not be. It would cover a limited set of issues—the withdrawal of U.S. troops in exchange for Taliban commitments to prevent Afghanistan being a safe harbor for terrorist groups.

The deal would not be a peace agreement. There is no deal between the U.S. and Taliban that could bring peace or address governance, women's rights, and other issues.

The deal would be the first step toward peacemaking. It would condition a gradual U.S. withdrawal, which the Taliban want, on the Taliban entering negotiations with the Afghan government and other power brokers.

The reward is clear. The deal would open the door to an Afghan peace process. Afghan talks, once started, might stall or fail for many reasons. The gap between the parties' political visions might prove too great.

Internal divisions on each side might prove too difficult to overcome. If negotiations fail, the U.S. will still be in a position to choose either of the first two policy options I described earlier.

After nearly 18 years of prioritizing military action and failing to defeat the Taliban, the U.S. has spent only 1 year putting peace efforts at the forefront, and in that time it appears to have come close to clinching a deal that would lead to an Afghan peace process and allow for the withdrawal of U.S. troops. The U.S. should not abandon this effort now.

[The prepared statement of Ms. Miller follows:]

WRITTEN STATEMENT

Laurel E. Miller
Director, Asia Program
International Crisis Group

Hearing Before the
U.S. House of Representatives
Committee on Foreign Affairs

"The Trump Administration's Afghanistan Policy"

September 19, 2019

Good morning, Chairman Engel, Ranking Member McCaul, and distinguished members of the Committee. Thank you for the invitation to testify at this important hearing on the Trump Administration's Afghanistan policy. I have been asked to assess the Administration's efforts to secure a peace deal with the Taliban and to facilitate a reconciliation process between the government of Afghanistan and the Taliban. I have been further asked to address the prospects for peace in Afghanistan and the potential risks and rewards of a deal with the Taliban.

I will begin by briefly reviewing the policy options that realistically are—and are not—available to the United States with respect to Afghanistan. I will then evaluate the Administration's approach to seeking a negotiated settlement of the conflict, and the prospects for that approach to lead to durable peace. Finally, I will explain my recommendation that the negotiating process that had been underway until being declared "dead" by President Trump last week should be revived as quickly as possible. Over the course of more than eight months of talks, that process had produced a draft U.S.-Taliban agreement which, according to negotiators on both sides, was ready to be signed once President Trump gave his final assent.

What are U.S. Policy Options for Afghanistan?

The United States has three basic policy options for Afghanistan:

First, the U.S. could set and execute a plan for near-term withdrawal of all U.S. forces. Other NATO forces would certainly withdraw within the same timeframe. Without the U.S. military presence, the sustainability of the U.S. Embassy in Kabul would be questionable, particularly because of the Embassy's reliance on the military for evacuation, which can only be done by air. Any U.S. counter-terrorism operations would need to be conducted from locations outside Afghanistan or through proxy forces within the country.

The conflict would continue without U.S. direct involvement. Indeed, in the aftermath of a U.S. withdrawal the conflict would likely intensify and become more chaotic. Moreover, there is a strong chance that anti-Taliban political and security elements would fracture, particularly if U.S. funding and diplomatic engagement diminish. The speed of fracturing would likely depend on the extent to which the government in Kabul continues to receive foreign donor resources and be in a position to distribute them; the government is currently heavily dependent on such resources for its operations and especially its security forces.[1] If the anti-Taliban alliance does fracture, the conflict could begin to resemble the multi-sided civil war of the early to mid 1990s, which led to the emergence of the Taliban.

If the U.S. chooses this course of action, it does not need to negotiate an agreement with the Taliban, though it may want one largely for the purpose of securing a commitment to safe passage for departing U.S. troops. Any assurances from the Taliban that they will break with or counter trans-national terrorist groups—such as the assurances reportedly included in the deal the Administration has been negotiating over the last year—would likely be unreliable in

[1] According to the World Bank, "Public expenditure in Afghanistan is at high and unsustainable levels. Grants finance more than 75 percent of total expenditures. Total expenditures are equal to around $11 billion, while government own-revenues are around $2.5 billion." Roughly half of all on- and off-budget spending is devoted to security. *Afghanistan: Public Expenditure Update*, July 29, 2019, https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/afghanistan/publication/afghanistan-public-expenditure-update.

circumstances in which U.S. policy is one of disengagement from Afghanistan, although the Taliban has its own reasons to counter at least the Islamic State branch in the country.

The U.S. could, while withdrawing, renegotiate its security partnership with the government in Kabul, narrowing the relationship to funding and other material support that could be provided to an extent and in ways not requiring a military presence in the country. However, if the U.S. decided to continue supporting the Afghan government absent an intra-Afghan peace agreement involving that government, the Taliban and other Afghan powerbrokers, then it would remain in an adversarial stance vis-à-vis the Taliban, which might then be unwilling to provide or adhere to any safe passage and counter-terrorism assurances. In other words, U.S. forces in this scenario—assuming the U.S. is still supporting and partnering with Afghan government forces—would probably need to fight their way to the exits.

Second, the U.S. could continue its current policy of fighting the Taliban alongside the Afghan government and conducting operations against the Islamic State and, occasionally, other terrorist groups—with its current or a somewhat reduced force level. U.S. officials have stated that the draft U.S.-Taliban agreement provides for a draw-down of U.S. forces from about 14,000 to about 8,500 (that is, to the force level at the start of the Trump Administration) over a 135-day period; nothing has been stated publicly about the negotiated conditions or timeline for further reduction. This suggests that at least some within the Administration see 8,500 as an adequate persistent steady-state for the existing mission.

'Staying the course,' as this approach is often characterized, would mean that the conflict remains the bloody stalemate that it currently is, one that has been eroding in the Taliban's favor over several years. U.S. officials, including senior military officers, have long described the conflict as stalemated and have acknowledged that military victory by either side is implausible.[2] Maintaining the U.S. military presence would continue feeding the Taliban narrative of foreign occupation that they use to recruit and justify their fight. Staying the course, in other words, would mean perpetuating the current conflict dynamics with no foreseeable end.

In 2018, Afghanistan was the world's deadliest conflict, measured by those killed directly in fighting.[3] This fact signifies the high cost of the conflict to Afghans but does not fully encompass the human and other costs.[4] Among those other costs, Afghanistan, so long as the conflict rages, will be unable to achieve self-sustaining economic growth[5] and will under-spend on

---

[2] At his confirmation hearing to become head of U.S. Central Command, Marine Lt. Gen. Kenneth McKenzie told the Senate Armed Services Committee regarding Afghanistan, "I believe that the operational military situation is largely stalemated." Ellen Mitchell, "Afghanistan War at a Stalemate, Top General Tells Lawmakers," *The Hill*, December 4, 2018. General Joseph Dunford, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, has said that there is no "military solution" on its own to end the war in Afghanistan. Jamie Crawford, "Top U.S. Military Officer Says Taliban Are 'Not Losing'," *CNN*, November 17, 2018, https://www.cnn.com/2018/11/17/politics/joseph-dunford-taliban-afghanistan/index.html.

[3] Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project, "ACLED 2018: The Year in Review," https://www.acleddata.com/2019/01/11/acled-2018-the-year-in-review/. Afghanistan is also on track to be the country with the greatest number of conflict-related fatalities in 2019. Uppsala Conflict Data Program, UCDP Bulletin, 2019, "Afghanistan in the First Half of 2019," https://www.pcr.uu.se/digitalAssets/806/c_806526-l_1-k_afghanistan---ucdp-bulletin.pdf.

[4] Recent Gallup polling found that "[f]or the second consecutive year in 2018, no Afghans rated their current and future lives positively enough to be considered 'thriving.' At the same time, the percentage who rated their lives so poorly that they are considered "suffering" shot to a record-high 85%. This is a new record not only for Afghanistan, but also for the world." Steve Crabtree, "Inside Afghanistan: Nearly Nine in 10 Afghans Are Suffering," Gallup, September 16, 2019, https://news.gallup.com/poll/266825/inside-afghanistan-nearly-nine-afghans-suffering.aspx.

[5] In 2018, Afghanistan's GDP growth was 1.0 percent (0.8 percent after adjustment for inflation). Its population growth in 2018 was 2.4 percent. World Bank, "Afghanistan Country Profile,"

development in favor of its enormous security spending. Moreover, even with continued U.S. support, the ability of Afghan security forces to sustain their capabilities over a long haul is deeply challenged by their heavy losses and high turn-over.[6]

Third, the U.S. could seek an end to the war and an end to the U.S. military presence in Afghanistan through a negotiated settlement. In early 2011, after two years of laying groundwork, the U.S. unveiled what appeared to be an unambiguous policy of pursuing peace negotiations; then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton announced that the U.S. was "launching a diplomatic surge to move this conflict toward a political outcome."[7] Nearly a decade ago it had already been apparent that a military victory for the U.S. and its Afghan allies was not on the cards. Nevertheless, the U.S. did not put pursuit of a negotiated political settlement at the center of its Afghanistan policy until 2019, after an uptick in the military effort in 2017-2018 failed to produce any positive change in the trajectory of the conflict.

This option is the only one of the three that has the potential to reduce violence in Afghanistan and enable the U.S. military to withdraw in permissive conditions. Because it holds the promise of violence reduction, it is also the option that—if successful—would best preserve Afghanistan's social and economic development gains of the last 18 years.

Success is not guaranteed, however; the Taliban, Kabul, and to some extent other Afghan powerbrokers, have votes over whether a political settlement of their conflict can be achieved. The influence of external backers—all the Afghan parties have relations with foreign governments—may not be enough to deliver those votes, even assuming all those backers press for a settlement. Giving this option the best chance for success would require the U.S. to accept some uncertainty about the timeline of its military withdrawal, though domestic political factors likely will militate against an open-ended presence and though the U.S. could start withdrawing at least some forces once it has reached its own agreement with the Taliban. Still, U.S. engagement in Afghanistan—both its military presence and its financial assistance—is the main source of U.S. leverage to push forward a negotiation. Some level of U.S. military presence during a reasonable time period, even if that presence is reduced, would give intra-Afghan negotiations the best prospects for success. Should the U.S. conclude that those negotiations will not succeed in the foreseeable future, it could reconsider the viability of its continued military presence.

Despite the uncertainty, this option is superior to the first two not only because it may lead to reduced violence but also because it does not close off either of the other options. As a negotiation proceeds and the prospects for its conclusion become clearer, the U.S. could still decide whether to stay or go.

To summarize the key points, none of these options has the potential to result in military victory for the U.S. and its Afghan allies; neither of the first two would enable the Afghan government to become self-sustaining in its fight against the Taliban in any foreseeable timeframe; and only the third option aims for reduction of violence.

---

https://databank.worldbank.org/views/reports/reportwidget.aspx?Report_Name=CountryProfile&Id=b450fd57&tbar=y&dd=y&inf=n&zm=n&country=AFG.

[6] In January of this year, Afghan President Ashraf Ghani said that 45,000 security force personnel had been killed since he took office in late 2014. BBC News, 25 January 2019, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-47005558. U.S. military officials have called these losses unsustainable. See, e.g., Idrees Ali, "Afghan Security Forces' Deaths Unsustainable: U.S. Military Official," Reuters, December 4, 2018, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-afghanistan-military/afghan-security-forces-deaths-unsustainable-us-military-official-idUSKBN1O32CS.

[7] Secretary of State Hillary Clinton speech before the Asia Society, February 18, 2011, https://2009-2017.state.gov/secretary/20092013clinton/rm/2011/02/156815.htm.

Why is the U.S. Negotiating with the Taliban, and Only the Taliban?

Even among those who accept the desirability in principle of a negotiated settlement, many have criticized the Administration for negotiating exclusively with the Taliban, cutting out (so the argument goes) the Afghan government, and failing to secure an early ceasefire. This approach is seen as dismissive of the long-standing U.S. rhetoric that a peace process should be "Afghan-led and Afghan-owned." Understandably, the Administration's approach is deeply frustrating to many Afghans opposed to the Taliban who feel that their fate is being determined without the involvement of those who represent their interests and who want to see a rapid reduction in violence.

The Administration's decision to negotiate bilaterally with the Taliban about the terms for a U.S. military withdrawal and a narrow set of other issues prior to peace negotiations among Afghans was indeed a concession to the Taliban. The Taliban has long insisted that it would engage in a peace process only by negotiating first with the U.S. regarding its highest-priority demand (a U.S. withdrawal), and later with other Afghans on other issues including the shape of a future Afghan governance structure. There is no mystery as to why the Taliban has stubbornly stuck to this position: In this way, the Taliban may win a major negotiating victory up-front and then enter talks with the government and other Afghans with its leverage and appearance of legitimacy significantly enhanced and its rank-and-file assured that it is making gains at the table. The Taliban has also long rejected an early ceasefire because they see their actions on the battlefield as the source of their leverage and a means of maintaining their group cohesion.

Of course, these benefits for the Taliban have equal and opposite costs for Kabul. And for that reason, the U.S. for many years resisted the Taliban's demand. The cost of that resistance was no peace process. With no sign that the Taliban would relent and in light of the priority the Administration has placed on pursuing negotiations since late 2018, the U.S. relented instead. The benefit has been opening the first real opportunity to move toward a negotiated settlement.

To be clear, the U.S. has tried and failed to deliver the kind of peace process that critics of the Administration's approach would prefer. That more-desirable approach would involve including the Afghan government at the table from the start of the process; putting the U.S. troop presence on the table but not front-loading it in negotiations; and securing a ceasefire early in the process. From the perspective of U.S. interests and those of its Afghan allies, this approach would unquestionably be a better option. But it is one that is not now realistically available. The Taliban's refusal has proven non-negotiable. If it was ever potentially negotiable in the past decade (which is uncertain), President Trump's often-expressed desire to withdraw U.S. troops from Afghanistan has likely reinforced the Taliban's refusal.

No evidence suggests that the Afghan government on its own could launch its preferred form of a peace process. Certainly, the United States has not stood in the way over the last decade and, indeed, has long urged Kabul to take the necessary predicate step for any peace process of building a cohesive and consensus-based negotiating team and platform supported by the main anti-Taliban political forces. That predicate step appears to still be a work-in-progress. Informal contacts and dialogue between the Taliban and anti-Taliban political figures, including government officials, have taken place over many years, but these have not proven convertible into substantive negotiations.

Those who advocate that the U.S. should adopt the more-desirable approach I described overstate American leverage and ignore the actual history of failed U.S. efforts to pursue that

approach. U.S. leverage does still exist, but it is no greater now and will be no greater in the future than before U.S. diplomats conceded to the Taliban's insistence on bifurcating and sequencing negotiations into a U.S.-Taliban track followed by an intra-Afghan track.

U.S. negotiating leverage includes the pacing and conditioning of a U.S. military withdrawal, the prospect of continued financial assistance for Afghanistan from the U.S. and from other donors who follow the U.S. lead, and the potential normalization of the foreign relations of a government that includes the Taliban, which the Taliban appear to value. The Taliban have made clear that, rather than once again leading an assistance-starved pariah state, they prefer to be part of an internationally legitimized government that continues to enjoy receipt of external resources—Afghanistan being a poor, land-locked country that throughout its history has required such resources.

To what extent the Taliban will compromise in order to achieve this preferred outcome is not yet clear and will not become clear until negotiations among Afghans are well underway. What is evident, however, is that this preference and the prospect of negotiating a U.S. military withdrawal have not been strong enough incentives to motivate the Taliban to enter into a negotiating process that brings the Afghan government to the table from the outset and that includes an opening-stage ceasefire.

What Are the Potential Risks and Rewards of a U.S.-Taliban Deal?

Any evaluation of the substance of the draft agreement that the Administration has negotiated with the Taliban must be caveated by acknowledging that the text has not been made publicly available and Administration officials have said little about its content. The few details that have emerged include that the text provides for an initial phase of U.S. military draw-down of approximately 5,500 troops over 135 days. The trigger for starting the draw-down and what happens after the initial phase have not been revealed. Further details include that the Taliban has committed to breaking ties with Al Qaeda and denying safe haven to any terrorist groups that might threaten the United States, though the specific phrasing of these commitments has not been made public. Finally, officials have indicated that the agreement would lead to the opening of "intra-Afghan negotiations" among the Taliban, Afghan government, and other Afghan power-brokers, but what, if any, specific wording on this point is included in the text has not been stated publicly.[8]

Taking at face-value the public statements that the U.S.-Taliban deal, if finalized, would lead immediately to intra-Afghan negotiations, and noting that preparations for such negotiations appeared to be underway, *the main reward for such a deal is clear: the launch of an Afghan peace process*. It is important to recognize that a U.S.-Taliban deal would not itself be a peace agreement. There is no deal to be made only between those two parties to the conflict that could bring peace to Afghanistan. Rather the value of the deal lies in its being a prelude to a negotiating process among Afghans that could, if successful, bring peace to Afghanistan. As explained earlier, no other attempted means of putting such a process in motion has succeeded.

For this reward to be fully realized, it will be important for the U.S.-Taliban agreement to make clear that it is connected to and contingent on both the start and the Taliban's good-faith continuation of intra-Afghan negotiations. An *explicit* Taliban commitment to peace negotiations should be required. Even with such a provision in the deal, muscular American

[8] Secretary of State Mike Pompeo with Margaret Brennan, CBS "Face the Nation," September 8, 2019; Peter Baker, Mujib Mashal and Michaelf Crowley, "How Trump's Plan to Secretly Meet With the Taliban Came together, and Fell Apart," *New York Times*, September 8, 2019.

diplomacy and a continued financial commitment will be needed to keep both the Taliban and Kabul committed to negotiations for the duration. But if either side fails to follow through on its commitment, the U.S. will remain in a position to exercise either of the first two policy options I described earlier.

A further reward for the U.S.-Taliban deal, assuming it leads to an Afghan peace process, is that it might enable a U.S. military withdrawal that does not leave an intensified civil war in its wake. A withdrawal under those circumstances could be seen as best honoring the American and Afghan sacrifices in the war. In addition, the Taliban's counter-terrorism assurances could become meaningful insofar as the Taliban becomes part of the legitimate governing structures of Afghanistan as a result of a peace process. In those circumstances, the Taliban would have a stake in keeping Afghanistan attractive to foreign donors and investors.

A U.S.-Taliban deal poses two main risks. The first is that by front-loading an important negotiating victory for the Taliban the group may enter intra-Afghan talks excessively emboldened and inclined to over-play its hand. As a result, its willingness to compromise may be insufficient for intra-Afghan agreements to be reached. Whether this risk materializes and its magnitude if it does will only be known once intra-Afghan talks are underway. The U.S. would need to elicit help from regional powers with influence over the Taliban to mitigate this risk.

The second risk is a political one here in Washington. By setting out a timeline and process for U.S. withdrawal—if indeed that is what the deal does—already-existing momentum toward withdrawal *regardless of* an Afghan peace process might be accelerated and the leverage the U.S. currently enjoys might not be translated into concessions by parties in intra-Afghan talks. I discount what would seem the obvious additional risk that the Taliban does not follow through on any counter-terrorism assurances it makes as part of the deal because, as noted earlier, those should be considered unreliable in any event unless the U.S. stays engaged in promoting a peace process and the Taliban becomes part of legitimate Afghan governance.

Can the Taliban be Trusted?

A question frequently asked in the public sphere as the U.S.-Taliban negotiating process has been underway is whether the Taliban can be trusted to fulfill any commitments. This is the wrong question to ask. Peace processes intended to resolve active conflicts are not premised on pre-existing trust, they are premised on the idea that, through negotiations, enough overlap in interests can be identified or forged that the resultant agreement is one the parties will have sufficient incentives to implement. *Put simply, peace negotiators make deals on the basis of interests, not trust.*

This point will be as valid for intra-Afghan negotiations as it is for U.S.-Taliban deal-making. In both cases, whether there are, in fact, sufficiently overlapping interests can only be tested through talks. It can be hoped that trust will be built in the course of intra-Afghan negotiations—and it is difficult to foresee effective implementation of any Afghan political settlement without some measure of trust—but mechanisms for monitoring, verification and external support for implementation will be needed regardless.

Some also raise the question whether the Taliban can be trusted not to take Afghanistan back to the days of its harsh rule as the Islamic Emirate in the latter half of the 1990s until the U.S. overthrow of the regime in 2001. In this regard, the particular question is raised whether gains of the last 18 years for women's and minorities' rights will be compromised through a peace deal. Again, the Taliban's ex ante trustworthiness is not the pertinent issue. Rather, the

question is whether the government, other anti-Taliban power-brokers, and the Taliban can reach agreement on terms for political and social life in Afghanistan that they all can sufficiently accept. The answer is not certain to be 'yes,' but the possibility of 'yes' can only be tested through negotiations.

How Likely is an Afghan Peace Process to Lead to Durable Peace?

A necessary preface to evaluating the likelihood that an Afghan peace process succeeds is recognition that the U.S. has failed to defeat the Taliban militarily for 18 years[9] and has only spent one year so far putting peace efforts at the forefront of U.S. policy.

That said, there are many reasons why an Afghan peace process might stall or ultimately fail regardless of how energetically the U.S. works toward its success. First and foremost, the substantive gaps between the parties' visions for a settlement might prove too great. Whether this will prove to be so is, at this stage, very difficult to assess. The Taliban side has yet to fully develop or articulate a political platform for negotiations. The Kabul side can be expected to assert positions that involve as little change to the current system as possible, but it has not yet pulled together a fully developed and consensus-based set of positions either.

Second, internal divisions on each side may prove too difficult to overcome. As noted earlier, Kabul has not yet built a cohesive negotiating team or secured consensus on the decision-making structure to guide such a team. On the other side, because the Taliban has not yet elaborated its political vision, the group has not tested its own ability to develop negotiating positions and potential compromises that can win sufficient support within the movement itself.

For these and other reasons an Afghan peace process will take time—perhaps more time than American patience will allow. A third reason for failure could be that the U.S. does not preserve enough of its leverage to see the process through, if not to the end, at least to somewhere well along the way.

In addition to the exercise of U.S. leverage, a successful peace process is implausible without neutral facilitation by a non-party to the conflict. The difficulty of getting all the Afghan parties to the table suggests that, once there, they will be unable to reach agreements without facilitation. A facilitator would be positioned to guide the parties to agreement through proximity talks at moments when direct talks become unproductive, and to table suggested compromises. The U.S., as one of the main antagonists in the conflict with its own interests at stake and as an active supporter of one of the Afghan sides, is ill-suited to play this role.

Whether an Afghan peace process is likely to succeed in establishing durable peace in Afghanistan is a different question than whether it is likely to produce a peace agreement. The former goal is the larger and more difficult one. This is why a distinction is often drawn between peace negotiations and peace-building, the latter being a longer-term and more complex process. No matter how comprehensively an Afghan peace agreement responds to the grievances and power struggles driving conflict, it can only be a partial solution. After more than four decades of conflict, of which the post-2001 conflict is the latest phase, a settlement that focuses on the interests of the latest configuration of conflict actors is necessary but probably insufficient. Furthermore, any peace agreement is a limited vehicle for conflict resolution; but an agreement and the process of compromise and consensus-building that

[9] The Taliban appeared to be defeated in 2002 but, after re-grouping from safe havens in Pakistan, re-emerged as an insurgency around 2005.

produces it can set a foundation for peace. Ultimately, the will of the parties to make an agreement stick and to resolve inevitable disputes over implementation will determine whether the foundation holds or crumbles, and therefore whether the opportunity will exist for longer-term peace-building.

Can and Should the U.S. Resume Talks with the Taliban?

Because peace negotiations are the best of the three options available to the United States and because, as explained earlier, a U.S.-Taliban deal is now a necessary step toward such negotiations, the deal-making process should be resumed. President Trump's failed attempt to use a meeting at Camp David to seal the deal—and perhaps to try to better the terms his negotiators had already initialed—disrupted the process, but probably not fatally. The Taliban has indicated that it is prepared to pick up where the process left off, at the verge of signature.[10]

One of the achievements of chief U.S. negotiator Zalmay Khalilzad since his appointment a year ago has been establishing the credibility of the U.S. commitment to negotiating a settlement of the conflict. Throughout the years of waxing and waning U.S. effort to launch negotiations, this commitment had been doubted not only by the other conflict parties but, importantly, by the key regional powers. Over the last year, Pakistan, China, and Russia in particular all appear to have become supportive—if not enthusiastically, at least sufficiently—of U.S. deal-making with the Taliban. Of course, this support is based on their own interests in seeing the U.S. withdraw its forces, but not too-rapidly (this is an interest shared by another key regional actor, Iran). Nonetheless, their support will be important for concluding and ultimately implementing an Afghan peace agreement.

The recent disruption of the negotiations has undoubtedly damaged U.S. credibility. That damage could be repaired, however, if the process resumes quickly, before momentum is lost, and if the U.S. does not now over-reach by trying to raise the bar for agreement. Concerted diplomatic outreach to the regional players to reassure them of U.S. commitment to negotiating will be needed. If the U.S. instead abandons negotiations in favor of an indefinite military presence, it should be prepared for the regional powers' opposition to a permanent-seeming U.S. military presence to materialize in the form of stepped-up support for the Taliban.

***

No one on this Committee, and no one who wishes to see the United States pursue an effective policy in Afghanistan can be pleased with the set of options available to policy makers. It is long past the time when U.S. policymakers could credibly claim to be firmly on the road to producing desirable outcomes in Afghanistan. However, there is a narrow opening through which the U.S. could thread its way to ending its longest war without leaving an intensified civil war in its wake. The U.S. has only been prioritizing the pursuit of a negotiated settlement for the last year and yet appears to have come close to reaching an agreement with the Taliban that would allow for the withdrawal of U.S. forces. It should not abandon those efforts now. Such a deal with the Taliban will be distasteful to some here in Washington and perhaps more in Afghanistan. But it's a deal that comes with a prize: the chance to start a peace process that might end the Afghans' even longer war.

---

[10] See interview with Taliban negotiators in Moscow, September 13, 2019, available at https://www.rt.com/news/468745-taliban-war-hundred-years/.

Mr. KEATING. Mr. Joscelyn.

STATEMENT OF MR. THOMAS JOSCELYN, SENIOR FELLOW, FOUNDATION FOR DEFENSE OF DEMOCRACIES, SENIOR EDITOR, FDD'S LONG WAR JOURNAL

Mr. JOSCELYN. Thank you for having me here to testify again today. I am going to just go through this very quickly.

I agree that one of the main critiques of the process that the Trump Administration went through in these talks basically excluded the Afghan government.

You can see in a tweet I reproduced in my written testimony that on March 12th of this year Ambassador Khalilzad said explicitly that once a deal is finalized, exchanging a troop withdrawal for these supposed counterterrorism assurances from the Taliban, then the inter-Afghan negotiations process would start. That is a crucial mistake.

Obviously, if you are going to—if you are going to try and actually launch a peace process, having American troops in country are your biggest bargaining chip to try and get that launched. Giving it away at the outset in exchange for the Taliban's words makes no sense to me.

And I want to talk a little bit today about why the Taliban's words should not be trusted when it comes to counterterrorism assurances.

There was some skepticism on the earlier panel on this regard and I wholly endorse that skepticism. I am going to run through five key issues in that regard, very quickly.

First, the Taliban has not come clean about its past at any point in time. In July, the Taliban released a video in which they said that 9/11 was a heavy slap on their dark faces. It was the consequence of their interventions policies and not our doing.

In other words, they were justifying 9/11. They did not blame al-Qaida. They did not renounce their decision to harbor al-Qaida prior to 9/11. They said it was a result of our policies, which is a talking point they have had since 2001.

In addition, in August, Suhail Shaheen, who has participated in the talks in Doha as a chief Taliban negotiator, said he did not know who did 9/11. He did not know, and if we have evidence of this then maybe we can bring that forward and we can try and prosecute it.

Well, I will just say this. We know who did 9/11, right, and you can see in my testimony—and I have excerpted quite a few parts of this report—the 9/11 Commission Report—showing the Taliban's complicity and safe haven for al-Qaida and how crucial that was for al-Qaida in the runup to 9/11, and there is a number of reports and citations in my written testimony to this in that regard. So we do not need Suhail Shaheen to tell us we do not know who did it.

But the key point there is if they are not willing to come clean about the past, why are you willing to believe what they are saying about the future? Why are you willing to believe that their assurances, going forward, are really firm?

Second point—in July 2016, Ambassador Khalilzad testified before this committee and during that hearing he actually highlighted the fact that Ayman al-Zawahiri, the head of al-Qaida, had

sworn his personal allegiance to Haibatullah Akhundzada, who is, basically, the supreme leader and they call him Amir of the Faithful for the Taliban.

And Ambassador Khalilzad said that that showed that the relationship continues. We agree. I had reported on that about a week or two earlier.

And as far as I can tell, there is no evidence that Akhundzada to date is going to renounce Zawahiri's oath of allegiance or al-Qaida.

And as part of any talks that—you heard a lot in the first panel about how there's assurances from the Taliban about breaking with al-Qaida and restraining them and that sort of thing.

Well, here is a very concrete example of what the Taliban could do in that regard and should do in that regard if you are going to actually start to believe them, which is that their leader, Haibatullah Akhundzada, should disown Zawahiri's oath of allegiance.

Very quickly, third point—the No. 2 of the Taliban is a guy named Sirajuddin Haqqani, and we have tracked Siraj Haqqani for a long time and it took a number of years to get the Haqqani Network designated as a terrorist organization by the U.S. Government.

That network was designated in part because the Haqqani Network remains closely allied with al-Qaida throughout its history, going back from the 1980's to this day.

Siraj Haqqani is not only the number-two in the Taliban but actually oversees the Taliban's war machine across Afghanistan. There is a lot of evidence in my written testimony about how the Haqqanis are intertwined with al-Qaida. There is a lot more I could say in that regard.

I have seen no evidence that Siraj Haqqani was going to break with al-Qaida or anybody in the Haqqanis—where he is going to do that.

No. 4, al-Qaida in the Indian Subcontinent—this is highlighted in my testimony as well—was created in 2014. There is plenty of evidence that AQIS, as it is known, is fighting alongside the Taliban's members throughout the country.

Al-Qaida and AQIS members serve as religious and military instructors for the Taliban. They remain embedded in the Taliban. In fact, a Special Inspector General Report submitted to Congress earlier this year highlighted the fact that actually many—according to this report, many al-Qaida members are actually dual al-Qaida and Taliban members. That is how integrated they are.

And so a lot of times you cannot even tell who is an al-Qaida guy and who is a Taliban guy. Believe me, I am a nerd who tracks this stuff. That is true. Sometimes you cannot tell who is who. But that is how intertwined they are.

And fifth, in terms of counterterrorism assurances from the Taliban, there are—there is a sort of a constellation of Central Asian, Uighur, and Pakistani jihadi groups fighting under the Taliban's banner in Afghanistan.

I see no reason to believe the Taliban has agreed to restrain them in any meaningful way. We are talking about Uzbek groups like Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, Islamic Jihad Union. We are

talking about the Turkistan Islamic Party, which fights in Syria and Afghanistan.

We are talking about Lashkar-e-Taiba. The U.N. reports I cite in my testimony all document their presence in Afghanistan under the Taliban's banner, and I find it hard to believe that the Taliban will restrain all of them.

Thank you.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Joscelyn follows:]

CONGRESSIONAL TESTIMONY: FOUNDATION FOR DEFENSE OF DEMOCRACIES

House Committee on Foreign Affairs

The Trump Administration's Afghanistan Policy

THOMAS JOSCELYN

Senior Fellow
Foundation for Defense of Democracies

Senior Editor
FDD's Long War Journal

Washington, DC
September 19, 2019

FDD
FOUNDATION FOR DEFENSE OF DEMOCRACIES

www.fdd.org

Chairman Engel, Ranking Member McCaul, and other members of the committee, thank you for inviting me to testify today concerning the Trump administration's Afghanistan policy.

Until recently, the administration's approach has been centered on the effort to negotiate a deal with the Taliban. President Trump walked away from these talks earlier this month and it appears that they will not be resumed, but that may still be a possibility. My own view is that America's policy with respect to Afghanistan should not hinge on what the Taliban's political delegation says in Doha. The Taliban's actions speak volumes. Even as the U.S. pursued an agreement, the Taliban attacked a non-governmental organization in Kabul, kidnapped and murdered a human rights worker, terrorized schools, released a video justifying the 9/11 hijackings, and dispatched its suicide bombers throughout the country, often killing civilians.

The negotiations also took place on the Taliban's terms. The Taliban demanded that the government of Afghanistan be excluded from formal talks, and the U.S. acquiesced. Some Afghan officials were reportedly allowed to attend sessions in a personal capacity, but not as representatives of Afghanistan's legitimate, internationally recognized government. The Taliban has repeatedly described the Afghan government as a "puppet" of the U.S. and therefore not a truly sovereign entity. The Trump administration's unilateral negotiations with the Taliban bolstered this allegation. Meanwhile, the Taliban used the talks in Doha and Moscow to enhance its own standing. Thus, the administration's approach to these talks undermined our ally while legitimizing the Taliban – that is, the Taliban's Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan – as a political entity. It is difficult to see how this approach could possibly lead to peace.

Indeed, it appears the talks would have resulted in a withdrawal agreement, not a peace accord. Most of the details concerning the draft agreement between the Taliban and the U.S. remain hidden from the public. Therefore, I applaud this committee's effort to perform oversight. But in my testimony today I would like to focus on one aspect of these negotiations that has been reported on in the press, albeit with some noteworthy discrepancies. Namely, my testimony is intended to serve as a rebuttal to the idea that the Taliban could act as a de facto counterterrorism partner.

Early on, Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation Zalmay Khalilzad said he was satisfied with the Taliban's counterterrorism assurances. On March 12, 2019, Khalilzad tweeted: "When the agreement in draft about a withdrawal timeline and effective counterterrorism measures is finalized, the Taliban and other #Afghans, including the government, will begin intra-Afghan negotiations on a political settlement and comprehensive ceasefire."[1] That is, the U.S. was willing to bargain a withdrawal timeline for the Taliban's supposed counterterrorism guarantees before the Taliban had even met with the Afghan government. It is not even clear if the Afghan government would have been recognized as a formal entity in these "intra-Afghan negotiations," and of course the mere prospect of further talks didn't guarantee any real progress toward peace between the warring Afghan parties.

[1] @US4AfghanPeace, "(3/4) When the agreement in draft about a withdrawal timeline and effective counterterrorism measures is finalized, the Taliban and other #Afghans, including the government, will begin intra-Afghan negotiations on a political settlement and comprehensive ceasefire." *Twitter*, March 12, 2019. https://twitter.com/US4AfghanPeace/status/1105513781705302016

Moreover, there is no good reason, as far as I can tell, to think that the Taliban is trustworthy when it comes to restraining international terrorists. The Taliban has openly lied about the presence of al-Qaeda and foreign fighters on Afghan soil for years. They lied before 9/11. They lied after 9/11. It is difficult to imagine what verification measures could be put in place to ensure they are not lying now. This is especially true given that the administration may have been prepared to withdraw all American forces as part of the deal. The U.S. has a difficult time tracking al-Qaeda and the Islamic State with over 14,000 troops in country right now. That mission would only get more difficult with fewer, or zero, troops in Afghanistan. The so-called Haqqani Network was designated as a terrorist organization in 2012 in part because of its close ties to al-Qaeda. As I discuss more below, the Haqqani Network has now consolidated its influence within the Taliban. So a major component of the Taliban is an al-Qaeda allied, designated terrorist organization.

Four reports submitted to the United Nations Security Council since last year have documented the ongoing alliance between al-Qaeda and the Taliban. The monitoring team that authored these reports has stated: Al-Qaeda is "closely allied" with the Taliban, and the group's "alliance with the Taliban and other terrorist groups in Afghanistan remains firm";[2] al-Qaeda's relationship with the Taliban is "long-standing" and "strong";[3] al-Qaeda "has grown stronger operating under the Taliban umbrella across Afghanistan and is more active than in recent years";[4] the Taliban is the "primary partner for all foreign terrorist groups operating in Afghanistan, with the exception of" the Islamic State's Khorasan branch;[5] al-Qaeda "members continue to function routinely as military and religious instructors for the Taliban";[6] and al-Qaeda "considers Afghanistan a continuing safe haven for its leadership, relying on its long-standing and strong relationship with the Taliban leadership."[7]

In August, the UN monitoring team told Melissa Skorka, a former strategic adviser to the commander of International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan, the following:

> There is no evidence that the Taliban have broken or will in [the] future break their intrinsic relationship with the Haqqani Network and Al-Qaida. Recent reporting would suggest that these connections are actually stronger than at any time in the past 18 years. Calculations over withdrawal from Afghanistan should take account of the risk of

---

[2] "Twenty-second report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team submitted pursuant to resolution 2368 (2017) concerning ISIL (Da'esh), Al-Qaida and associated individuals and entities," June 27, 2018, pp. 3, 15. (https://undocs.org/S/2018/705)

[3] "Twenty-third report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team submitted pursuant to resolution 2368 (2017) concerning ISIL (Da'esh), Al-Qaida and associated individuals and entities," December 27, 2018, p. 16. (https://www.un.org/sc/ctc/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/N1846950_EN.pdf)

[4] "Tenth report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team submitted pursuant to resolution 2255 (2015) concerning the Taliban and other associated individuals and entities constituting a threat to the peace, stability and security of Afghanistan," April 30, 2019, p. 9. (https://www.undocs.org/S/2019/481)

[5] Ibid.

[6] "Twenty-fourth report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team submitted pursuant to resolution 2368 (2017) concerning ISIL (Da'esh), Al-Qaida and associated individuals and entities," June 27, 2019, pp. 15-16. (https://undocs.org/S/2019/570)

[7] Ibid.

> undermining prospects for a durable peace by empowering and emboldening these groups.[8]

Bill Roggio and I have come to the same conclusion repeatedly over the past decade, as we have written at *FDD's Long War Journal* and elsewhere. In my testimony today, I will outline just some of the reasons why.

The Taliban hasn't accepted responsibility – let alone apologized – for harboring Osama bin Laden and his international terrorist operation prior to 9/11.

It is difficult to see how the Taliban could be telling the truth about terrorism now, when it has not even come clean about events that occurred 18 years ago. Just this past July, the Taliban released a video justifying the 9/11 hijackings and other attacks in the West. The Taliban did not blame al-Qaeda, the actual perpetrator of the hijackings, or renounce its decision to harbor Osama bin Laden and his men. Instead, the Taliban blamed America. As images of the 9/11 attack were played on screen, the Taliban's narrator said: "This heavy slap on their dark faces was the consequence of their interventionist policies and not our doing."[9] Then, in August, the lead Taliban spokesman in Qatar claimed that we still don't know who carried out the 9/11 hijackings. "Still it is not known who was behind that," Suhail Shaheen said.[10] "If there is proof given to us, we are ready to try (the person responsible)."[11] Shaheen later tried to clarify his remarks on Twitter, but even then he did not offer a forthright admission that al-Qaeda was responsible.[12]

If the Taliban cannot even publicly admit that al-Qaeda was responsible for 9/11, then I do not see how anyone can put much stock in what they say in private. Some history further illuminates the problem.

The Taliban has been allied with al-Qaeda since the mid-1990s. The close-knit relationship between al-Qaeda and the Haqqani Network, which is an integral part of the Taliban, stretches back even further, into the 1980s. Osama bin Laden quickly began working with Taliban leaders upon his return to Afghanistan in 1996. According to the 9/11 Commission, "Pakistani intelligence officers" introduced bin Laden to "Taliban leaders in Kandahar, their main base of power, to aid his reassertion of control over camps near Khowst, out of an apparent hope that he would now expand the camps and make them available for training Kashmiri militants."[13] By late 1996, bin Laden had "cemented his ties with" the Taliban's leadership.[14]

---

[8] Melissa Skorka, "Afghanistan Endgame, Part One: Is Sirajuddin Haqqani Ready for Peace?," *Asia Unbound*, a blog maintained by the Council on Foreign Relations, August 14, 2019. (https://www.cfr.org/blog/afghanistan-endgame-part-one-sirajuddin-haqqani-ready-peace)

[9] Thomas Joscelyn and Bill Roggio, "Taliban justifies 9/11 attack, blaming America's 'interventionist policies'," *FDD's Long War Journal*, July 23, 2019. (https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2019/07/taliban-justifies-9-11-attack-blaming-americas-interventionist-policies.php)

[10] *CBS News*, "Taliban says ending the war in Afghanistan is 'very necessary'," August 22, 2019. (https://www.cbsnews.com/news/taliban-say-ending-the-war-in-afghanistan-is-very-necessary/)

[11] Ibid.

[12] https://twitter.com/suhailshaheen1/status/1164630577716350976

[13] The 9/11 Commission Report, pp. 64-65.

[14] The 9/11 Commission Report, p. 65.

Though the Taliban may have had misgivings about bin Laden's rhetoric at a time when the group was trying to consolidate its control over much of the country, this did not stop the two sides from working together. Bin Laden "eventually enjoyed a strong financial position in Afghanistan," leveraging his network of "Saudi and other financiers associated with the Golden Chain."[15] Bin Laden spent "large amounts of money to help the Taliban."[16] "Through his relationship with Mullah Omar – and the monetary and other benefits that it brought the Taliban – Bin Laden was able to circumvent" any "restrictions" placed on his speech, and he enjoyed a "freedom of movement" in Afghanistan that he was not afforded in his previous safe haven, Sudan.[17] Indeed, "Mullah Omar would stand by" bin Laden "even when other Taliban leaders raised objections."[18]

Al-Qaeda benefited greatly from the Taliban's sanctuary in the years leading up to 9/11. "Al Qaeda members could travel freely within the country, enter and exit it without visas or any immigration procedures, purchase and import vehicles and weapons, and enjoy the use of official Afghan Ministry of Defense license plates," the 9/11 Commission found.[19] Al-Qaeda "also used the Afghan state-owned Ariana Airlines to courier money into the country."[20] Crucially, the Taliban had an open-door policy for international jihadists. The Taliban's safe haven allowed al-Qaeda "to train and indoctrinate fighters and terrorists, import weapons, forge ties with other jihad groups and leaders, and plot and staff terrorist schemes."[21] U.S. intelligence officials have estimated that between 10,000 and 20,000 fighters "underwent instruction in Bin Ladin-supported camps in Afghanistan from 1996 through 9/11."[22] Not all of those fighters formally joined al-Qaeda. Most were trained in guerrilla warfare, while a smaller set of trainees were selected to take part in high-profile terrorist attacks, such as the 9/11 hijackings.

Using these Taliban-hosted training camps, bin Laden and his men built a rolodex of personnel that would be invaluable for their organization for years to come. The bonds formed in Taliban-controlled Afghanistan are still relevant today. In fact, veterans of these pre-9/11 facilities in Afghanistan continue to hold leadership positions within al-Qaeda around the globe. For instance, al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula's (AQAP) leadership includes at least several veterans of these camps. Earlier this month, the State Department announced a reward of up to $5 million for information on the whereabouts of Faruq al-Suri, an al-Qaeda veteran who "was a senior paramilitary trainer … in Afghanistan in the 1990s."[23]

Al-Suri's nom de guerre was likely earned during his time at al-Qaeda's al-Faruq camp, where he served as a trainer. The "Taliban granted al Qaeda permission to open the al Faruq camp in

---

[15] The 9/11 Commission Report, p. 66.
[16] The 9/11 Commission Report, p. 110.
[17] The 9/11 Commission Report, p. 66.
[18] Ibid.
[19] Ibid.
[20] Ibid.
[21] Ibid.
[22] 9/11 Commission Report, p. 67.
[23] See the Rewards for Justice page for Faruq al-Suri: https://rewardsforjustice.net/english/faruq_al_suri.html. Al-Suri's role as a trainer at al-Qaeda's Al Faruq camp has been confirmed in official jihadist biographies. See, for example: Thomas Joscelyn, "Al Nusrah Front video features veteran al Qaeda military leader," *FDD's Long War Journal*, March 24, 2014. (https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2014/03/_works_for_top_al.php)

Kandahar," according to the 9/11 Commission.[24] New recruits began their introductory instruction there. Al-Qaeda's leadership identified Hani Hanjour as a "trained pilot" during his time at al-Faruq, and he was then given specialized training for his role in the 9/11 hijackings.[25] Hanjour was not the only hijacker who started down the path to 9/11 at al-Faruq. "At least seven of the Saudi muscle hijackers took this basic training regime at the al Faruq camp near Kandahar."[26] The 9/11 Commission found that al-Faruq "appears to have been the preferred location for vetting and training the potential muscle hijackers because of its proximity to" bin Laden and "senior al Qaeda leadership."[27] Indeed, Bin Laden visited al-Faruq often. During one speech at the camp, he "exhorted trainees to pray for the success of an attack involving 20 martyrs."[28]

Throughout the pre-9/11 period, the U.S. government repeatedly attempted to convince the Taliban to sever its relationship with al-Qaeda. The 9/11 Commission later explored these attempts, which it described as a "hopeless effort to persuade the Taliban regime in Afghanistan to deport" Bin Laden.[29] In April 1998, the U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, Bill Richardson, visited South Asia. Ambassador Richardson "asked the Taliban to expel" bin Laden. The Taliban's representatives "answered that they did not know [bin Laden's] whereabouts" and, in any event, bin Laden "was not a threat to the United States."[30] This was an obvious lie. Bin Laden had declared his war on the West repeatedly, including just two months prior, in February 1998. And al-Qaeda struck the U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania four months later, in August 1998. Saudi Arabia's Prince Turki met with Mullah Omar and "received a commitment that Bin Laden would be expelled, but Mullah Omar did not make good on his promise."[31] That is, the Taliban had lied again.[32]

The Clinton administration sought other avenues to pressure the Taliban, but "Mullah Omar's position showed no sign of softening."[33] In fact, one U.S. intelligence report "quoted Bin Laden as saying that Mullah Omar had given him a completely free hand to act in any country, though asking that he not claim responsibility for attacks in Pakistan or Saudi Arabia."[34]

---

[24] 9/11 Commission Report, p. 157.
[25] The 9/11 Commission Report, p. 226.
[26] The 9/11 Commission Report, p. 234.
[27] Ibid. Three other hijackers received training at the Khaldan camp, which was "another large basic training facility located near Kabul."
[28] The 9/11 Commission Report, p. 251.
[29] The 9/11 Commission Report, p. 93.
[30] The 9/11 Commission Report, p. 111.
[31] The 9/11 Commission Report, p. 115.
[32] See also: The 9/11 Commission Report, pp. 121-122. In retaliation for the U.S. Embassy bombings, the Clinton administration conducted airstrikes in Afghanistan. On August 22, Mullah Omar reportedly "told a working-level State Department official that the strikes were counterproductive but added that he would be open to dialogue with the United States on Bin Laden's presence Afghanistan." During a meeting with the U.S. Ambassador to Pakistan, William Milam, "Taliban delegates said it was against their culture to expel someone seeking sanctuary but asked what would happen to Bin Laden should he be sent to Saudi Arabia." However, when Prince Turki asked Mullah Omar in September 1998 "whether he would keep his earlier promise to expel Bin Laden, the Taliban leader said no." This led to a shouting match between the two, Mullah Omar denounced the Saudi government, and "Riyadh then suspended its diplomatic relations with the Taliban regime."
[33] The 9/11 Commission Report, p. 123.
[34] Ibid.

Other measures, including UN sanctions, were tried. But "none of the outside pressure had any visible effect on Mullah Omar, who was unconcerned about commerce with the outside world."[35] The U.S. "learned that at the end of 1999, the Taliban Council of Ministers unanimously reaffirmed that their regime would stick by Bin Laden."[36] Even though relations "were sometimes tense" between the two sides, the "foundation was deep and personal."[37] Mullah Omar even "executed at least one subordinate who opposed his pro-Bin Laden policy."[38] Similarly, an arms embargo that took effect in December 2000 "had no visible effect on Omar."[39]

After the 9/11 hijackings, the Bush administration demanded that Mullah Omar and the Taliban turn Bin Laden over. Of course, they refused. And Omar was especially obstinate.

Shortly after 9/11, an interviewer with *Voice of America* asked Omar why he did not just expel bin Laden. Mullah Omar responded: "This is not an issue of Osama bin Laden. It is an issue of Islam. Islam's prestige is at stake. So is Afghanistan's tradition."[40] Omar explained that he trusted the promises of Allah over those of President Bush:

> I am considering two promises. One is the promise of God, the other is that of Bush. The promise of God is that my land is vast. If you start a journey on God's path, you can reside anywhere on this earth and will be protected... The promise of Bush is that there is no place on earth where you can hide that I cannot find you. We will see which one of these two promises is fulfilled.[41]

The Taliban founder argued that America deserved to be struck on 9/11:

> ... Americans will not be able to prevent such acts like the one that has just occurred because America has taken Islam hostage. If you look at Islamic countries, the people are in despair. They are complaining that Islam is gone. But people remain firm in their Islamic beliefs. In their pain and frustration, some of them commit suicide acts. They feel they have nothing to lose.
>
> ... America controls the governments of the Islamic countries. The people ask to follow Islam, but the governments do not listen because they are in the grip of the United States. If someone follows the path of Islam, the government arrests him, tortures him or kills him. This is the doing of America. If it stops supporting those governments and lets the people deal with them, then such things won't happen. America has created the evil that is attacking it. The evil will not disappear even if I die and Osama dies and others die. The

[35] 9/11 Commission Report, p. 125.
[36] The 9/11 Commission Report, p. 125.
[37] Ibid.
[38] Ibid.
[39] The 9/11 Commission Report, p. 126.
[40] *Voice of America*, "Mullah Omar – in his own words," September 26, 2001. A transcript is available via *The Guardian* at: https://www.theguardian.com/world/2001/sep/26/afghanistan.features11
[41] Ibid.

> US should step back and review its policy. It should stop trying to impose its empire on the rest of the world, especially on Islamic countries.[42]

Of course, this is exactly the same rationale Osama bin Laden offered for attacking America. Bin Laden argued that America controlled governments throughout the Muslim-majority world and, therefore, the jihadists needed to strike the "head of the snake." And just as Omar blamed America's "policy" in September 2001, the Taliban continues to blame America's "policies" for 9/11 today. As I noted above, this is exactly the message contained in the Taliban's July 2019 video. This does not inspire confidence in any commitments made by the Taliban's political office in Doha.

Mullah Omar remained defiant well after losing his Islamic Emirate in Afghanistan. In May 2002, a Saudi-owned newspaper quoted Omar as saying that America faced "fire, hell and total defeat" in Afghanistan.[43] Omar reiterated his justification for 9/11, saying there "were reasons behind these great deeds" and the U.S. should "seek to remove these reasons," meaning its policies.[44] Omar added: "Sheikh Osama is, thanks be to God, still alive, to the horror of Bush."[45]

It is no wonder that al-Qaeda continues to honor Mullah Omar to this day.

The head of al-Qaeda has sworn a blood oath to the Taliban's leader. The Taliban has not rejected his fealty.

Ayman al-Zawahiri, the head of al-Qaeda's global enterprise, has sworn his allegiance to the Taliban's top leader, Haibatullah Akhundzada. There is no public indication that Akhundzada was prepared to disavow Zawahiri and his blood oath as part of any deal between the U.S. and the Taliban. The importance of this oath was recognized by Ambassador Khalilzad during a July 2016 hearing held by this same committee. Ambassador Khalilzad noted that "even recently the leader of al-Qaeda, Zawahiri, pledged allegiance to the new leader of the Taliban."[46] Khalilzad added: "So the relationship continues."[47]

Indeed, it does. Zawahiri, it should be noted, did not express any alarm throughout the entirety of the talks between the U.S. and the Taliban. To the contrary, the al-Qaeda chieftain portrayed the negotiations as a sign of America's weakness. "The Islamic Emirate dealt severe blows to America," Zawahiri said during his 9/11 anniversary address earlier this month. "This is why the Americans showed keenness to negotiate with them a withdrawal from Afghanistan." Of course, we do not know what Zawahiri had to say about the talks behind closed doors. But there is no public indication that al-Qaeda's oath to the Taliban was in jeopardy. And this *bayat* (or pledge of fealty) is an underestimated part of al-Qaeda's organizational scheme.

---

[42] Ibid.
[43] *BBC News*, "Mullah Omar 'gives interview'," May 17, 2002. (http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/1993137.stm)
[44] Ibid.
[45] Ibid.
[46] https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-114hhrg20742/html/CHRG-114hhrg20742.htm
[47] Ibid.

Al-Qaeda's top leaders have been loyal to the Taliban's emir since well before 9/11. In al-Qaeda's view, the Taliban's Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan was the only religiously legitimate state in the world at the time of the hijackings. Al-Qaeda deemed Mullah Omar to be the Amir al-Mu'minin, or the "Emir of the Faithful," an honorific usually reserved for the Muslim caliph. (ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi adopted the same title in 2014, after the Islamic State declared its caliphate in Iraq and Syria.) As a result, bin Laden swore his fealty to Omar and encouraged other Muslims around the world to do the same.

Bin Laden was killed in 2011. Mullah Omar is thought to have passed away sometime in 2013. The Taliban essentially played "Weekend at Bernie's" with Omar, pretending that he was alive for the next two years. The Taliban's political arm in Doha did not tell the State Department that Omar was dead, even as the U.S. was preparing a statement in his name in mid-2013. Nor did the Taliban tell many other jihadists. This is another outward sign of the Taliban's deceitful behavior.

Al-Qaeda continued to market its loyalty to Mullah Omar until 2015, when the Taliban finally admitted that its founder had passed away two years earlier. Osama's son and heir, Hamza bin Laden, reiterated his own oath to Omar in his first public address in August 2015. By then, the Taliban had named Mullah Mansour, a powerful figure who considered al-Qaeda's men to be the "heroes of the current jihadist era," as its leader. Bin Laden's successor, Zawahiri, quickly swore his fealty to Mansour, and Mansour publicly accepted Zawahiri's allegiance. After Mansour was killed in a U.S. drone strike in May 2016, the Taliban named Akhundzada as its emir. Zawahiri fell in line once again – publicly declaring that Akhundzada was the new "Emir of the Faithful."[48]

At least some of al-Qaeda's branches outside of Central and South Asia have recognized Akhundzada as the "Emir of the Faithful" as well. Earlier this year, Ali Mahmoud Rage, who serves as a spokesman for al-Shabaab in Somalia, honored Akhundzada in a speech delivered on the occasion of Eid al-Fitr. "At the outset, I send my salutations and greetings to the Ummah of Islam everywhere, on top of them the Emir of the Believers Maulvi Haibatullah (may Allah preserve him and protect him) and our Emir Sheikh Ayman al Zawahiri (may Allah preserve him), and the emirs of the jihadi fronts, and Muslims in general everywhere," Rage said.

In early 2017, al-Qaeda stood up a new group in West Africa known as Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM), or the "Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims." The head of JNIM, a veteran Tuareg jihadist named Iyad Ag Ghaly, issued a statement in which he said: "On this blessed occasion, we renew our pledge of allegiance [*bayat*] to our honorable emirs and sheikhs: Abu Musab Abdel Wadoud, our beloved and wise sheikh Ayman al Zawahiri and … the emir of the Islamic Emirate in Afghanistan Mullah Haibatullah, may Allah protect them and support them."

[48] Passages in this paragraph and elsewhere throughout this testimony were adapted from a piece I co-authored earlier this year. See: Thomas Joscelyn and Bill Roggio, "Trump's Bad Deal with the Taliban, *Politico*, March 18, 2019. (https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2019/03/18/donald-trump-afghanistan-zalmay-khalilzad-225815)

Other al-Qaeda groups continue to honor the Taliban, too. For instance, AQAP's Khalid Batarfi described Mullah Omar as the "Emir of the Faithful" in a video released by the Taliban in Dec. 2016. In that same production, Batarfi praised Omar for sheltering bin Laden and other jihadist figures. An al Qaeda group in Syria, Tanzim Hurras al-Din, has similarly held up the Taliban as a model for all jihadists.

All of this is an indication that Zawahiri's pledge of allegiance to Akhundzada is an important matter for the jihadists. This is even more true in the context of the competition between al-Qaeda and the Islamic State. Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's men describe him as the one true caliph, the "Emir of the Faithful." For al-Qaeda, only Akhundzada deserves that title. Zawahiri has also declared that the Taliban's Islamic Emirate will be the "nucleus" of a new global caliphate, which al-Qaeda's men are fighting to reestablish. There are also hints that, from an ideological perspective, al-Qaeda relies on the Taliban emir's tacit endorsement of its global operations.[49]

Thus, if Akhundzada formally rejected Zawahiri's blood oath and denounced al-Qaeda's global operations, then it would undermine al-Qaeda's foundational mythology. It is important to learn whether such a disavowal was part of the deal envisioned by the State Department. I suspect it was not. But I have not seen the draft text of the agreement, so I cannot say for certain. I do, however, think it is doubtful that Akhundzada, who sacrificed his own son in a suicide bombing, would be willing to renounce al-Qaeda's terrorism.

Sirajuddin Haqqani, the Taliban's top deputy emir (or #2 leader), is a longtime al-Qaeda ally. There is no public indication that Haqqani or his network are prepared to truly renounce al-Qaeda.

While al-Qaeda has an ideological commitment (at a minimum) to the Taliban's top leader, it has an operational relationship with the Taliban's #2: Sirajuddin Haqqani. I very much doubt that the decades-long partnership between al-Qaeda and the Haqqani Network will be severed. The Haqqani Network is core part of the Taliban and has conducted many of the worst terrorist attacks inside Afghanistan.

Sirajuddin is the son of Jalaluddin Haqqani, a powerbroker along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border who was one of bin Laden's earliest allies. Jalaluddin's eponymous network welcomed the first generation of Arab foreign fighters to the region during the 1980s jihad against the Soviets. Some of al-Qaeda's initial leaders were trained in the Haqqanis' camps.[50] The Haqqani Network has maintained close relations with al-Qaeda in the decades since.

For instance, a key document recovered in Osama bin Laden's compound shows that al-Qaeda's men continued to cooperate with Sirajuddin in Afghanistan years after the U.S.-led war began.[51]

---

[49] Thomas Joscelyn, "Well-connected jihadist tweets, then deletes, explanation of al Qaeda's oath to Mullah Omar," *FDD's Long War Journal*, July 30, 2014. (https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2014/07/well-connected_jihad.php)

[50] For a discussion of these historical ties and more, see: Vahid Brown and Don Rassler, *Fountainhead of Jihad: The Haqqani Nexus, 1973-2012* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013).

[51] Thomas Joscelyn and Bill Roggio, "Osama Bin Laden's Files: 'Very strong military activity in Afghanistan'," *FDD's Long War Journal*, February 27, 2015. (https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2015/02/osama-bin-ladens-files-very-strong-military-activity-in-afghanistan.php)

In December 2016, the Haqqanis' media arm released a lengthy video celebrating the unbroken bond between the Taliban and al-Qaeda. After the Taliban announced Jalaluddin's death in September 2018, al-Qaeda issued a glowing eulogy, emphasizing the elderly Haqqani's brotherhood with bin Laden. Al-Qaeda's central leadership said it took "solace in the fact" that Sirajuddin was now "deputy of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan's Emir of the Faithful," describing both Sirajuddin and Akhundzada as "our emirs."

In May of this year, Zawahiri eulogized Jalaluddin in a lengthy video, describing the senior Haqqani as a "hero" and the "eminent sheikh." Zawahiri also offered his condolences on behalf of the entire al-Qaeda organization to the "Emir of the Faithful" Haibatullah Akhundzada, the Taliban's highest shura (or consultative) council, all of the Islamic Emirate's "officials and mujahideen," as well as Haqqani's family. The al-Qaeda leader specifically prayed that Sirajuddin, whom Zawahiri honored as his "eminence," would enjoy comfort and "patience."

The Taliban has repeatedly honored Jalaluddin. One of Taliban's own video eulogies featured commentary from jihadists in Syria, including an al-Qaeda-linked cleric from Saudi Arabia who has been designated as a terrorist by the U.S.

Sirajuddin is an internationally wanted terrorist, with a $10 million bounty on his head. The U.S. and the United Nations have sanctioned the Haqqani Network and multiple members of the group. These legal measures are backed by abundant evidence. Not only have the Haqqanis conducted some of the most devastating terrorist attacks in Kabul and elsewhere in Afghanistan, they have also harbored al-Qaeda's internationally-focused operatives along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border. The U.S. and its allies traced a series of global terror plots to the Haqqanis' strongholds in northern Pakistan.

I am not aware of any evidence showing that Sirajuddin Haqqani or his men are willing to renounce al-Qaeda.

Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) is fighting to resurrect the Taliban's Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan.

In 2014, Zawahiri announced the formation of al-Qaida in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS), which operates throughout South Asia. AQIS brought together various al-Qaeda-allied groups, or parts of them, under its banner. AQIS's first major terrorist plot was an attempted hijacking of two Pakistani frigates. The jihadists intended to fire the ships' missiles at Indian and American naval vessels, possibly sparking an even more deadly international conflict. The plot was thwarted by Pakistani officials, but only after AQIS came close to taking control of the ships.

While AQIS' audacious terror schemes remain a concern, the group's primary mission is to help the Taliban resurrect its Islamic Emirate. AQIS has made this clear in its "code of conduct," which stresses AQIS's loyalty first to Zawahiri and then to Akhundzada. AQIS retains a significant footprint in Afghanistan. In 2015, for instance, American and Afghan forces

raided two large AQIS training camps in the Shorabak district of the southern Kandahar province. U.S. military officials revealed that one of the camps was nearly 30 square miles in size, making it probably the largest al-Qaeda training facility discovered post-9/11.[52] The Shorabak camps were hosted by the Taliban and intelligence recovered in the facilities showed that AQIS's tentacles stretch from Afghanistan into other nearby countries, including Bangladesh. Many al-Qaeda and AQIS members belong to both the Taliban and al-Qaeda, making it difficult to know how many al-Qaeda fighters there really are in Afghanistan. This problem was reflected in a recent report submitted to Congress. The report's authors noted "many al-Qaeda members belong to both groups simultaneously," meaning both the Taliban and al-Qaeda.[53] In addition, with respect to the Taliban, "al Qaeda runs training camps, helps plan and fund attacks, and creates and disseminates propaganda highlighting attacks by other groups."[54]

AQIS's first leader, Asim Umar, has already declared that America's defeat in Afghanistan is imminent. In a tract released in April 2017, Umar argued that Trump's "America First" policy really meant that the U.S. would "give up the leadership of the world." Umar exaggerated America's weakness, but he clearly saw a retreat from Afghanistan as a victory for al-Qaeda.

Commented [JH1]: Source?

Other al-Qaeda-linked jihadists, including Central Asian, Uighur and Pakistani groups, are fighting on behalf of the Taliban as well.

The UN Security Council reports I mentioned above outline the presence of various other al-Qaeda-linked groups in Afghanistan. I am not aware of any evidence indicating that the Taliban is going to renounce any of them.

[52] Dan Lamothe, "'Probably the largest' al-Qaeda training camp ever destroyed in Afghanistan," *The Washington Post*, October 30, 2015. (https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/checkpoint/wp/2015/10/30/probably-the-largest-al-qaeda-training-camp-ever-destroyed-in-afghanistan/)
[53] Operation Freedom's Sentinel, "Lead Inspector General Report to the United States Congress," January 1, 2019 – March 31, 2019, p. 26. (https://media.defense.gov/2019/Aug/05/2002166644/-1/-1/1/Q2FY2019_LEADIG_OFS_REPORT.PDF)
[54] Ibid., p. 25.

Mr. KEATING. Thank you.

Mr. Phillips.

Mr. PHILLIPS. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and to our witnesses.

Mr. Joscelyn, I will start with you. Clearly, from your testimony, you have little faith or confidence in the Taliban being trustworthy, for good reason.

So what should we do, in light of the fact that they are not, in your estimation? What would be in our best interests?

Mr. JOSCELYN. I have no problem with trying to bolster a process that includes the Afghan government in the talks and insisting on that from the go.

My main problem with what happened here was, one, I think there was a lot of credulity when it came to the Taliban's words on counterterrorism assurances from Ambassador Khalilzad and others, and two, the Afghan government, clearly, did not have a formal seat at the table.

You heard Ambassador Wells talk about how some members of the Afghan government were able to take part in talks but what in a personal capacity, not as formal representatives of the U.S.-backed internationally legitimate Afghan government.

So if you are going to go down that path, then it is fine, but as long as you are insisting that the Afghan government is part of any legitimate peace process.

Mr. PHILLIPS. OK. Thank you.

Ms. Miller, I know you have been involved in peace negotiations in Bosnia, Kosovo, and Macedonia. In general terms, what does a good peace negotiation look like and what does a good agreement look like?

Ms. MILLER. It would have been my preference and my recommendation that the peace process should have included the Afghan government, the U.S., and the Taliban at the table simultaneously from the start.

However, that was the format that the United States long tried to pursue. I was personally involved in efforts to try to get the peace process started that way.

But it did not work. The Taliban refused and it is a sad fact that the Taliban has leverage in this equation. So as I said in my statement, it was a concession and it was—but I think an unfortunately necessary concession to split the peace talks into two separate tracks—a U.S.-Taliban track followed by an intra-Afghan track as it is now called.

In terms of what a peace agreement could actually look like, the preliminary agreement between the U.S. and the Taliban is only setting the stage for a potential peace agreement and a peace process.

An actual peace agreement among the Afghan parties is going to have to address a wide range of issues including political arrangements for Afghanistan, security arrangements for Afghanistan, implementation measures, verification measures.

And so it will be complex and it will take time to negotiate that. And, frankly, the U.S.-Taliban agreement is only useful insofar as you actually get to that second stage. It does not, as I said, bring peace to Afghanistan nor is it actually necessary for the United States to negotiate with the Taliban the terms of its withdrawal.

If all the U.S. wants to do is withdraw, it does not need to negotiate that with anyone and I would agrue that counterterrorism assurances in that context are meaningless.

Those only become meaningful if you have the second stage of a peace process and you are able to form a consolidated Afghan government that brings the Taliban into the political fabric.

I would just add to that I think we have a little—to be a little bit cautious in painting—I have no disagreement with the negative characterizations on the whole of the Taliban. But I think we need to be careful not to paint this in black and white terms.

There are plenty of non-Taliban Afghans including some who are closely aligned with the Afghan government who also have very conservative viewpoints on social issues and, frankly, who have a past history of very close involvement with al-Qaida. With al-Qaida, I repeat.

It is a very—it is a complicated picture that is not just a pure black and white situation. I hope I answered your question.

Mr. PHILLIPS. And with—in your past negotiations are there any that are analogous to this current dynamic that we have in Afghanistan that you can point to?

Ms. MILLER. I would say the—in general terms, yes. But I do not think that there is a clear and obvious template for this and I have looked at—I have done research on a sort of comparative analysis of other peace agreements and peace processes around the world compared to the situation in Afghanistan and there is no one situation you can point to.

I think what you can say is that one of the factors that makes peacemaking in Afghanistan much more difficult than in other circumstances is that it is a stalemate—that you do not have—this is not Colombia where the government was overwhelmingly more powerful than the FARC.

This is not a situation like Bosnia where the outside powers that were backing the inside powers really had the say and decided they were going to go with a peace process and NATO was able to apply overwhelming force to the situation.

This is more complicated because—because it is a stalemate and neither side has truly come to terms with their own ability to succeed or fail militarily.

Mr. PHILLIPS. Indeed. I am out of time but I know there is not a long line behind me. Maybe I will have another chance in a few moments.

Thank you.

Mr. KEATING. Thank you, Mr. Phillips.

President Trump said the peace talks are dead. Do you believe they are dead, Ambassador?

Mr. CUNNINGHAM. I believe they are not dead and they should not be dead.

Mr. KEATING. Ms. Miller, do you believe the President when he says the peace talks are dead?

Ms. MILLER. I believe that President Trump has shown remarkable agility in being able to change his positions rapidly and so I think it certainly—there is a lot of opportunity here to resuscitate the peace process. It may take a little time and some face saving in order to do it.

Mr. KEATING. Mr. Joscelyn, do you think that—do you agree with the President, that the peace talks are dead?

Mr. JOSCELYN. I do not know. All I can say is that I know from the outset I think it was very clear the President has wanted a full withdrawal or something close to it and that sort of was the framework for the entirety for the talks.

Mr. KEATING. I would say the fact that any of you or Members of Congress cannot answer that question presents a problem with the talks. We do not even know if they are dead or not or if they are there. So that is the status of it.

Let's assume we go forward, whether they are suspended, whether we begin anew at some time.

Ambassador, I thought you brought a very important point forward. If that is going to happen and we—whatever term you want to use—Lazarus appears and these are no longer dead, the importance of while these negotiations are going on being able to maintain a cease-fire I think is critical. What is your opinion?

Mr. CUNNINGHAM. I would—I would think it is important to get to a cease-fire as quickly as possible, particularly given the ongoing campaign against Afghan civilians being waged by the Taliban as we are talking about creating a peace process.

This is, obviously, leverage for the Taliban. They will try to use military force and terrorism to enhance their position.

But as we go about resetting this, I would hope that there would be a serious effort to draw a clearer line between this discussion and the actual negotiation of peace than I think exists—you have a better understanding now of the agreement than we do because you have been briefed and we have not. But there are several——

Mr. KEATING. Well, we do not know if the agreement's alive.

[Laughter.]

Mr. CUNNINGHAM. The agreement needs to be adjusted, I think. But the goal needs to be kept in mind. The agreement is really—as Laurel said, the agreement is kind of a key to getting into a peace negotiation.

My problem is it is not clear that that key is going to work and that it is strong enough.

Mr. KEATING. Right. Well, here is another point, and Mr. Joscelyn mentioned the Haqqanis. Ambassador, you mentioned Pakistan. I mean, it seems like these factors may not be front and center in some of these negotiations and with that kind of discussion, how inhibited is our ability to proceed?

Mr. CUNNINGHAM. I think our ability is gravely inhibited.

Mr. KEATING. Mr. Joscelyn.

Mr. CUNNINGHAM. The U.S. has a key role to play here.

Mr. JOSCELYN. I would suggest you look at Ambassador Khalilzad's personal Twitter account before he became a Special Representative and you will see that he was very forthright about Pakistan's role in harboring and sponsoring Haqqanis and others who are directing the attacks in Afghanistan, and that is an issue that I do not think is going to be solved.

Mr. KEATING. And I would just suggest one other thing. If we are going to reset or whatever might happen, words count when you are dealing diplomatically in negotiations.

And I personally think—and if you have any comments in this regard—instead of talking about a U.S. withdrawal we should be talking about Afghan and—the Afghan government being able to negotiate our presence involved. It might sound like semantics but I do not think it is.

Ambassador.

Mr. CUNNINGHAM. I think that is a good point, and I do not exclude at the end of this process, which will take a lot longer than anybody would want—I would not exclude that there would be an agreement on an enduring U.S. presence—military presence in Afghanistan, a much lower level that would be focused on a counterterrorism mission.

There is no reason—as I hinted at in my statement, there is no reason to think that a future Afghan government, even if constituted under a peace agreement, is going to have the capability on its own to deal with terrorism within Afghanistan and the region.

Mr. KEATING. OK. I only hope that any further negotiations have the tenacity of Mr. Phillips. He is still here, and he wanted to—I will allow him to have the last few minutes to ask some more questions.

Mr. PHILLIPS. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Ambassador Cunningham, you have said that if there's going to be any negotiation between the Taliban and the Afghans that the Afghans will need a legitimate political authority to have that discussion.

So perhaps you could apprise us as to the status of elections in Afghanistan and what we, Congress and the United States, can do to strengthen and secure democratic elections.

Mr. CUNNINGHAM. Another problem with the way these discussions have been conducted up to now is that among other things, it created a series of rumors within Afghanistan about what the American attitude was toward elections and whether they would be held or not, and that created a lot of uncertainty, obviously.

Now it looks like they will be held. They are scheduled. The apparatus is in place. They will be flawed, as they have been. I lived through the last elections. It was a most unpleasant experience. They will be flawed again.

But they will be—I think they will be successful in establishing—reestablishing a legitimate political authority in Afghanistan as a result of the exercise of the voting franchise by the Afghan people.

One thing we do know about Afghanistan is that Afghans like to vote even if it is dangerous for them to do so. I expect and hope that that would be the case again this time and I hope very much so that the election results will be clear enough that it will not lead to a series of protracted disputes as it did the last time around.

Mr. PHILLIPS. And is there anything that we or the international community can and should be doing proactively to——

Mr. CUNNINGHAM. Provide political support and economic support to the actual negotiations themselves. Messaging the Afghan political class that they have a responsibility not to allow this to degenerate into a political conflict as it did before and providing encouragement for them that when they have a political outcome that it will be supported by the United States and our partners.

Mr. PHILLIPS. Thank you.

And then a final question for each of you. I asked this of the last panel. I will repeat it. Dr. Ashley Tellis, senior fellow at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, said recently, "Any attempt at reconciliation through a negotiated bargain centered on the formal exchange of obligations as opposed to the quiet and progressive defection of insurgents would fail to deliver stability that the U.S. seeks."

So on the subject of defection of insurgents, I would love your thoughts, respectively, on strategies that we should be considering to inspire that—the defection of the insurgents that we are battling.

Anyone who wants to start. Ms. Miller.

Ms. MILLER. There have been a number of strategies that have been implemented over the years aimed at that, aimed at trying to split the Taliban or encourage defections.

They are all—almost entirely failures, and I do not expect that there are any strategy that can succeed in that.

There is a lot of talk about the fractures in the Taliban, lack of cohesion within the Taliban. A lot of that is, frankly, wishful thinking and propaganda.

Yes, there are—I am not saying they are an entirely monolithic organization. But let's face it, they have remained more unified and more cohesive than the other side has in this—in this conflict and they have been very careful to protect their cohesion including through harsh measures of imposing ultimate sanctions on those who have sought to defect from the group because they have been cognizant of the fact that cohesion—sufficient cohesion has been their comparative advantage.

So there is no quiet defection strategy to resolving this conflict.

Mr. PHILLIPS. Mr. Joscelyn.

Mr. JOSCELYN. I have a very grim view of the answer to your question. I think—I wrote last year that I think in terms of where this war is headed we have already lost the game all out, especially with President Trump's commitment to withdrawing troops.

I think that he basically—I find it very hard to believe that there is going to be some turnaround now here militarily.

My issue is that, going forward, and I agree totally and I have said this to myself publicly, if you're going to withdraw troops I have no reason to absolve the Taliban on the way out the door on counterterrorism issues.

It does not make any sense to me, especially when you are not getting any sort of real firm commitments that they are going to actually sit down for real talks with the Afghan government or anything along those lines.

But I do not think there is a turnaround strategy at this point. There is no silver bullet, unfortunately.

Mr. PHILLIPS. OK. Ambassador.

Mr. CUNNINGHAM. I agree. I do not think there is a strategy of attrition or withdrawal that will work in any timeframe that we would want to see, certainly.

That attrition will take place over time, hopefully in the context of a political agreement that does establish protections and rights and obligations.

And there are serious issues that need to be addressed like the status of the Afghan constitution and the role of women and other things that we have been talking about that have—education—all those things that have made today's Afghanistan so different from what it was 18, 19, 20 years ago.

Those things need to be built into a fabric that provides a solution. It cannot be kind of left to drift along. That will not happen, in my opinion.

Mr. PHILLIPS. And one final question—just a yes or no from each of you. Is it—in your estimation, starting with you, Mr. Ambassador, do you think that the Taliban would be willing to agree to just about anything that would ultimately lead to the withdrawal of our troops, anticipating that we would be hesitant to ever return?

Mr. CUNNINGHAM. Whether they would be willing to agree to almost anything I doubt. But they certainly have an incentive to—depending on, again, the crucial question what the time line is.

They want us out. They will be willing to do what is necessary to get us out. The question is will that be at the end of a peace agreement or before there is a peace agreement.

One thing I think can count on is that they will not have any compunction about taking advantage of a situation in which we are not there and the Afghans are weak.

Mr. PHILLIPS. Ms. Miller.

Ms. MILLER. They have their red lines and they—regardless of anything that President Trump or President Obama said about desiring to get out of Afghanistan, they know for a certainty that America will not be in Afghanistan forever and they will.

Mr. PHILLIPS. Mm-hmm. I will say.

Mr. Joscelyn.

Mr. JOSCELYN. I do not think they would agree to say or do anything. But, basically, the point of my testimony is that if you are going to believe them on counterterrorism assurances, I have given you five different things that you have to look for in terms of any sort of agreement in that regard.

Obviously, the agreement looks moribund right now. But with officials saying that they believe in the Taliban's counterterrorism assurances, I say, OK—well, then show me the following.

Mr. PHILLIPS. Very good. Thank you all for being here, for your testimony and counsel. Appreciate it.

I yield back.

Mr. KEATING. Well, thank you. Thank you for being here.

This is an extremely important issue. It does not receive perhaps the greatest public attention that it deserves.

I echo the sentiments that some of my colleagues said—we should have had better representation. Not that you are not great but people that are directly involved in the negotiations currently here informing us and the American public what goes on.

We should do that for the families and friends of loved ones that lost their lives, both on the military side and civilian side, in this long, long war.

We should do that for the military and civilian and their families and loved ones that are currently there in that region.

And as I conclude, I think of one story. When I was there a few years ago visiting our troops and getting briefed, I often asked our military—brave military soldiers—if there is anything we can—I can ever do or we can do for you, let us know, and on this occasion they asked us, yes, there is. There is someone we would like you to meet and thank.

And they took us to the marketplace and there we met a civilian from Afghanistan. I will not mention even what province, although I suspect he is not alive at this point. But he had been risking his life providing information to our troops about where IEDs were placed, about other tactics where undoubtedly he was saving lives.

And they had asked us and myself to just go to this man and thank him—that it would mean a lot. And when I had that opportunity I asked him why he was risking his life doing that, and at that point he went from behind him and pulled out his 8-year-old son, and he said, because I would love him to have a chance in life—a chance he does not have under the current conditions and I hope that this intervention—this action by America will give him that chance.

So I hope that we do the most in these negotiations, as difficult as they are, not just for those who have sacrificed so much and continue to for our country, but for those people as well.

With that thought, I will call the hearing and adjourn.

Thank you.

[Whereupon, at 1:05 p.m., the committee was adjourned.]

APPENDIX

FULL COMMITTEE HEARING NOTICE
COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
WASHINGTON, DC 20515-6128

Eliot L. Engel (D-NY), Chairman

September 19, 2019

TO: MEMBERS OF THE COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS

You are respectfully requested to attend an OPEN hearing of the Committee on Foreign Affairs to be held in Room 2172 of the Rayburn House Office Building (and available live on the Committee website at https://foreignaffairs.house.gov/):

DATE: Thursday, September 19, 2019

TIME: 10:00 a.m.

SUBJECT: The Trump Administration's Afghanistan Policy

WITNESSES:

Panel I
The Honorable Alice G. Wells
Acting Assistant Secretary
Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs
U.S. Department of State

Ms. Karen Freeman
Assistant to the Administrator
Office of Afghanistan and Pakistan Affairs
United States Agency for International Development

Panel II
The Honorable James B. Cunningham
Nonresident Senior Fellow, South Asia Center
Atlantic Council
(Former United States Ambassador to Afghanistan)

Ms. Laurel Miller
Program Director, Asia
Crisis Group
(Former State Department Acting Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan)

Mr. Thomas Joscelyn
Senior Fellow, Foundation for Defense of Democracies
Senior Editor, *FDD's Long War Journal*

By Direction of the Chairman

The Committee on Foreign Affairs seeks to make its facilities accessible to persons with disabilities. If you are in need of special accommodations, please call 202/225-5021 at least four business days in advance of the event, whenever practicable. Questions with regard to special accommodations in general (including availability of Committee materials in alternative formats and assistive listening devices) may be directed to the Committee.

COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS

MINUTES OF FULL COMMITTEE HEARING

Day *Thursday* **Date** *09/19/2019* **Room** *2172 RHOB*

Starting Time *10:00 a.m.* **Ending Time** *1:05 p.m.*

Recesses [0] (____to ____) (____to ____) (____to ____) (____to ____) (____to ____) (____to ____)

Presiding Member(s)
Chairman Eliot Engel, Rep. William Keating

Check all of the following that apply:

Open Session [✓]
Executive (closed) Session [ ]
Televised [✓]

Electronically Recorded (taped) [✓]
Stenographic Record [✓]

TITLE OF HEARING:
The Trump Administration's Afghanistan Policy

COMMITTEE MEMBERS PRESENT:
See attached

NON-COMMITTEE MEMBERS PRESENT:
N/A

HEARING WITNESSES: Same as meeting notice attached? Yes [✓] **No** [ ]
(If "no", please list below and include title, agency, department, or organization.)

STATEMENTS FOR THE RECORD: *(List any statements submitted for the record.)*
SFR - Connolly, Yoho

IFR - Omar

QFR - Engel, Omar, Allred

TIME SCHEDULED TO RECONVENE _____
or
TIME ADJOURNED *1:05 p.m.*

Evan Burz

Full Committee Hearing Coordinator

HOUSE COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS

FULL COMMITTEE ATTENDANCE

PRESENT	*MEMBER*
X	Eliot L. Engel, NY
X	Brad Sherman, CA
	Gregory W. Meeks, NY
X	Albio Sires, NJ
X	Gerald E. Connolly, VA
X	Theodore E. Deutch, FL
X	Karen Bass, CA
X	William Keating, MA
X	David Cicilline, RI
X	Ami Bera, CA
	Joaquin Castro, TX
X	Dina Titus, NV
X	Adriano Espaillat, NY
X	Ted Lieu, CA
X	Susan Wild, PA
X	Dean Phillips, MN
X	Ilhan Omar, MN
X	Colin Allred, TX
X	Andy Levin, MI
X	Abigail Spanberger, VA
X	Chrissy Houlahan, PA
X	Tom Malinowski, NJ
X	David Trone, MD
X	Jim Costa, CA
	Juan Vargas, CA
	Vicente Gonzalez, TX

PRESENT	*MEMBER*
X	Michael T. McCaul, TX
X	Christopher H. Smith, NJ
X	Steve Chabot, OH
	Joe Wilson, SC
X	Scott Perry, PA
X	Ted Yoho, FL
X	Adam Kinzinger, IL
X	Lee Zeldin, NY
	James Sensenbrenner, Jr., WI
	Ann Wagner, MO
X	Brian J. Mast, FL
	Francis Rooney, FL
X	Brian K. Fitzpatrick, PA
	John Curtis, UT
X	Ken Buck, CO
	Ron Wright, TX
X	Guy Reschenthaler, PA
X	Tim Burchett, TN
X	Greg Pence, IN
X	Steve Watkins, KS
X	Michael Guest, MS

STATEMENTS FOR THE RECORD FROM COMMITTEE MEMBERS

Statement for the Record from Representative Gerry Connolly
The Trump Administration's Afghanistan Policy
September 19, 2019

In August 1969, Le Duc Tho and Henry Kissinger began secretly negotiating for peace in Vietnam without the knowledge of the South Vietnamese government. At the same time, President Richard Nixon declared that peace was "at hand." Less than six years later, a handful of U.S. Marines and innocent Vietnamese clung to the skids of a helicopter as the final piece of American-held territory was forcibly taken by the North during an invasion that Le Duc Tho promised would never occur. American sympathizers who did not make it out of the South were victims of purges and re-education labor camps, where many were worked to death. The Trump Administration's attempt at a "cut and run deal" with the Taliban in Afghanistan is "de ja vu" for the United States and we must course correct before history repeats itself.

For 17 years, the United States and our NATO allies have sacrificed thousands of lives and nearly $1 trillion in the longest war in American history. Despite these heavy costs, the Taliban currently controls 47 percent of Afghanistan's territory and 30 percent of the population – more than at any other point during the U.S. intervention. Our military and foreign assistance strategies must reflect the reality that there cannot and will not be an overwhelming U.S. military presence in Afghanistan in perpetuity. However, the Taliban refuses to talk directly to the Afghan national government, calling it a "puppet" of the West. This insolence speaks volumes to their true stance on negotiations, which likely serve as lip-service to force a poorly negotiated U.S. withdrawal.

The Taliban uses barbaric and cruel methods to control its own people through fear. Public executions, torture, and mutilation are common practice. Gender-based violence and sexist policies subjugate women and deprive them of autonomy. A Taliban-ruled Afghanistan would be a gender apartheid state marked by forced marriages, denial of education for women and girls, physical abuse, and honor killings. The Taliban purveys violent sharia rule and seeks to extinguish other cultures, as evidenced by its destruction of 1,700-year-old UNESCO artifacts in the Hindu Kush Mountains in 2001. Since the 19980s, the Taliban has been fighting to for control in Afghanistan, and to believe this time is different would be foolish.

Ensuring the best possible outcome for Afghanistan requires the engagement of the international community and a security conditions-based withdrawal. We owe it to our men and women in uniform that our strategy does not compromise the security gains and human rights for which they bravely sacrificed. We owe it to our NATO Allies and the coalition forces who have stood shoulder-to-shoulder with U.S. soldiers in Afghanistan for nearly two decades. We owe it to the Afghans who assisted us as interpreters and logisticians and to the members of Afghan National Defense and Security Forces who continue to support our efforts to provide a better future for Afghanistan. And we owe it to the women and girls of Afghanistan to ensure their lives are not in peril under Taliban rule.

Security self-sufficiency must be among our primary goals for the Afghan national government. Domestic and foreign threats to Afghan stability and hindrances to effective reconstruction threaten our mission and our personnel that remain in the country. The Taliban continues to stage daily attacks on U.S. forces. Yet, President Trump invited Taliban leaders to Camp David the week of September 11th and just a few hours away from all four sites of the September 11th terrorist attacks. His invitation was un-American and profoundly disrespectful to those who lost their lives on 9/11. We cannot trust the Taliban to prevent Afghanistan from becoming a haven for terrorism and to preserve democratic freedoms and rights for women and girls.

There are no good options in Afghanistan. However, handing over the country to the Taliban would condemn millions of Afghans to a terrible fate. We need new approaches that engage the international community in seeking a broad-based settlement that restores peace to the Afghan people and allows the United States to withdraw. This requires thoughtful diplomacy and continued assistance from our partners. If we continue down the path of appeasing the Taliban, we will see an Afghanistan that neither serves U.S. national security interests nor safeguards the human rights we have sacrificed so much to defend.

ADDITIONAL MATERIALS SUBMITTED FOR THE RECORD

June 3, 2019

How US "good guys" wiped out an Afghan family

By Jessica Purkiss , Mateen Arian

https://www.thebureauinvestigates.com/stories/2019-06-03/us-bomb-kills-afghan-family

It was 4am when Masih Ur-Rahman Mubarez's wife Amina called, an unusually early time for their daily chat. When he picked up the phone, he could hear the panic in her voice.

Amina was calling from the Afghan province of Wardak, where she brought up their children while he worked over the border in Iran to support them. She told him that soldiers were raiding their village. Some of them were speaking English. Amina was told to turn off her phone but Masih asked her not to - how would he know they were ok?

The call ended with Masih saying he would call again when things had calmed. But at 9am, when he dialled his wife's number, her phone was off. He tried again at 9.30am. Still off. Through the whole of that day and the next, he repeatedly called. But Amina's phone remained off.

It took another day for him to the learn the truth. Relatives avoided his calls or gave vague replies to his questions, until finally his brother broke the news. "He tried to avoid telling me the whole story, but I insisted that he tell me the truth," Masih recalled in a wavering voice. "He told me to have patience in God - no one is left."

An airstrike on Masih's house had killed his wife and all his seven children, alongside four young cousins. His youngest child was just four years old.

In the following weeks, as grief consumed Masih, so did an intense need for answers. Who had killed his family and why?

His journey to find out would last more than eight months, pit him against military and government officials, and see him face obfuscation and denials. It would lead him to work alongside the Bureau and journalists from The New York Times, putting together a puzzle piece by piece. Ultimately it would lead to one definitive conclusion - the US military had dropped the fatal bomb.

His story is one window into the struggles faced by families across Afghanistan every day. Airstrikes are raining down on the country, with US and Afghan operations now killing more civilians than the insurgency for the first time in a decade. But getting confirmation of who has carried out a fatal strike is often impossible. An apology, or any form of public accountability, is even harder to obtain.

The US denied repeatedly that it had bombed Masih's house, or even that any airstrike in his area had taken place. But using satellite imagery, photos and open source content, we proved that denial false. Following our investigation, the military has now admitted that it did conduct a strike in that location, but it still denies it resulted in civilian deaths.

A happy life destroyed

"Prior to my house being bombed, I had a normal life. I was married, had four daughters and three sons," Masih told our reporter in Kabul. "Our life was full of love."

Masih was the headteacher in a local school run by a Swedish organisation before financial issues forced him to seek employment in construction in Iran in 2014. He still reminisces about his days in the village of Mullah Hafiz, where he split his time between farming, teaching and his children. "We were so happy," he says.

"Our life was full of love"

Exactly what happened on the day of the strike is not clear. Villagers say that overnight on September 22 2018, bombs were dropped in Mullah Hafiz, which lies in a Taliban-controlled area. The same night, they said, soldiers carried out a raid on the village as part of an operation on a Taliban prison, which was about 200 metres away from Masih's house. One of the villagers said Taliban fighters had fired on the soldiers from some civilian homes.

A cousin of Masih's told us he and and other male relatives were taken away and detained, alongside some other villagers. At some point the next morning, a strike hit Masih's house. When his relatives returned, they found the building flattened. In the rubble were the bodies of Amina, the seven children and their four cousins, they say.

Masih's children were aged between four and 14 years old; his wife Amina was 32. The cousins, all girls, were aged from 10 to 16.

Name	Age
Mohammad Fayaz	4
Fahima	5
Samina	7
Mohammad Ilyas	8
Mohammad Wiqad	10
Amina	10
Safia	12
Zarifa	12

Name	Age
Anisa	14
Nafisa	14
Rahmania	16
Amina	32
The full list of those who died in the strike	

On finding out his family had been killed, Masih returned immediately to Afghanistan. The return journey was tough - having been working illegally in construction in Iran he says he had to hand himself to the Iranian police and wait for deportation. It took him three days to get back to his village. It was then that he began hunting for the truth.

Masih claims government officials acknowledged in private that his family died. However while both the Afghan Ministry of Defence and the provincial police publicly announced in the days following the attack that an operation on a Taliban prison had killed large numbers of Taliban fighters, they did not acknowledge that any civilians died in a strike.

"I have repeatedly told them that it was my children, that it was my wife, that it was my cousins, that they were all civilians and that my house was destroyed," Masih said. "When they say that they have bombed a [Taliban] prison, they have absolutely not done that."

Journalists investigate

As Masih was investigating, so was the Bureau. We had independently heard of a strike that had killed multiple children in Mullah Hafiz on September 23, and were trying to establish who had carried it out.

The Bureau has been recording strikes in Afghanistan for over four years. Getting to the bottom of what has happened is often difficult. The attacks mostly take place in remote areas under Taliban control. They are often not reported by local media and neither the US nor the Afghan military is fully transparent.

We faced all these same barriers with this strike. But this time, over the course of several months, working with Afghan reporters on the ground and the Visual Investigations unit of The New York Times, we were able to prove that the US was responsible for a strike which killed multiple children.

Our first step was to contact both the Afghan and the US militaries.

Officials in the Afghan Ministry of Defence told us no one was available for comment.

When we went to the US military, we were met with contradictory statements. Its story changed repeatedly as our reporting developed and the New York Times got involved.

A US spokesperson first stated in October that there were "no connections" between their actions and the allegations of civilian casualties in Mullah Hafiz. In a later email in February, they claimed to have no record at all of a strike in the district on September 23.

In a Pentagon report released this month the strike on Masih's house was not included in a list of confirmed civilian casualties.

Finally, as we prepared to go to press earlier this week, they admitted they had bombed Masih's house. Days later, there was yet another statement. American soldiers had reported being fired on from the house, they said, and a strike had been carried out "in self-defence." But they did not kill Masih's family, they said.

The military has not told us what information it used to reach its conclusion. It is not uncommon for the US to rely, for the most part, on pre-strike and post-strike footage filmed by aircraft to investigate claims that an air attack has harmed civilians. But when a strike hits a building, as in the case of Masih's home, it can be difficult to tell what's under the rubble.

Crucial evidence

Masih wanted the world to know what had happened. Interviews he did with Afghan media led us to contact him, and in April we were able to meet him in Kabul. By this time, he had been knocking on doors for months in search for answers. He had carefully collected evidence he hoped would shine a light on what happened that day.

Some of this helped our investigation. First we needed to do the basics - to verify that a strike had hit his house. We had to do this without visiting the village, because it was not safe for reporters to go to the Taliban-controlled area. From metadata contained in photos supplied by Masih, we were able to obtain the coordinates of his home. We used these to get satellite images which showed the house had been attacked, with the damage consistent with a strike. A team from the Bureau and the The New York Times' Visual Investigations unit also reviewed photos of Masih's children's graves and found satellite images of the burial site. Both the damage to the house and the burial site are only visible in satellite images after September 23.

Crucially, we also were given photos of weapon fragments said to be found at the site of the strike. While most were nondescript, a few pieces had distinctive markings. On one piece we could see what is known as a "CAGE code" - this is a unique identifier given to companies which supply government or defence agencies. This code linked the fragment to a US-based company called Woodward, that makes components for a missile kit known as a JDAM. These enable bombs to be guided by GPS.

Weapons experts then reviewed the photos, and saw something else - the distinctive pattern of four bolts on a tail fin that identified it as part of a JDAM.

We trawled defence and aviation news archives and found the Afghan military did not have capability to use JDAMs. The only other military carrying out strikes in Afghanistan is America's.

We asked the weapons experts which military could have dropped the bomb and they confirmed what we had learned - only the US military has the capability to use JDAMs in Afghanistan.

After four and a half years of recording civilian casualties from strikes in Afghanistan, we were finally able to say for certain who pushed the button on one.

Answering the why

While we believe our investigation answers the who, the why is less clear.

The US's final statement - that they dropped a bomb on the house after American soldiers reported being fired on - tallies in part with one villager who said the soldiers were shot at from civilian homes. However two others say everything was quiet in the area by the time the strike happened.

Perhaps a clue lies in the location of the house, which was set apart from the rest of the village, very close to a Taliban prison. We know an operation on the prison was carried out, with villagers claiming that a number of security force members being held inside were rescued during the raid. It's possible that Masih's house was hit by accident.

Without full military transparency, these questions will remain unanswered. And whatever the reason for the attack, the US still claims it did not kill any civilians.

Soaring civilian deaths

Our investigation raises serious questions about US military accountability.

Last year, the UN found that US military operations in Afghanistan killed and injured 632 civilians - more than double the year before. The US military has admitted to just over 20 percent of that figure. The reason for the discrepancy, says the US, is that they have access to intelligence such as drone footage which shows that "what often looks like civilian harm from US actions was actually a result of other causes."

In its first statement back in October, the US spokesperson had warned us: "It isn't uncommon for insurgents to use these accusations to drive a wedge between the military and the population. As Secretary Mattis has said: 'We do everything humanly possible consistent with military necessity, taking many chances to avoid civilian casualties at all costs.

There have been calls for change, even from the Pentagon itself. It released a report in February highlighting concerns about how the US military investigates and responds to civilian casualties. The military was sometimes seen as "restrictive" in how it assessed allegations of civilian harm received from organisations like the Bureau or NGOs, it said.

The report also found that different regional military commands had different processes for reviewing civilian casualties. The US is now developing the first military-wide policy on civilian casualties, which has sparked hopes that things may improve.

For Masih, the pursuit of justice continues. The little money the family managed to save as a result of his work in Iran is now being used for this battle.

"We have a saying; staying silent against injustice is a crime, therefore I will spread my voice throughout the world," Masih said. "I will talk to everyone, everywhere. I will not stay silent.

"But this is Afghanistan. If someone hears us, or not, we will still raise our voice."

Additional reporting by Abbie Cheeseman and Ahmed Mengli. This investigation was a partnership between the Bureau of Investigative Journalism and The New York Times' Visual Investigations team.

RESPONSES TO QUESTIONS SUBMITTED FOR THE RECORD

Questions for the Record submitted to
Ambassador Alice G. Wells by
Chairman Eliot L. Engel
House Foreign Affairs Committee
September 19, 2019

Question:

Has the Trump Administration always sought a cease-fire as a precondition to talks with the Taliban?

Answer:

Ambassador Wells did not submit a response in time for printing.

Question:

Will the Administration continue with the drawdown of troops to 8,600 as announced by the President on August 29, 2019?

Answer:

Ambassador Wells did not submit a response in time for printing.

Question:

Is Ambassador Khalilzad still in communication with the Taliban? Does he use WhatsApp or other messaging platforms to communicate with the Taliban or other foreign dignitaries?

Answer:

Ambassador Wells did not submit a response in time for printing.

Question:

Under what conditions will talks be resumed?

Answer:

Ambassador Wells did not submit a response in time for printing.

Question:

The UN Assistance Mission to Afghanistan found that NATO and Afghan security forces were responsible for more civilian casualties than the Taliban in the first six months of 2019. What accounts for the increase in civilian casualties at the hands of NATO and pro-government forces?

Answer:

Ambassador Wells did not submit a response in time for printing.

Question:

Have there been any significant changes in the rules of engagement? How has this impacted Afghans' views of their own security forces?

Answer:

Ambassador Wells did not submit a response in time for printing.

Question:

What would qualify as a reduction in violence to allow for talks to progress?

Answer:

Ambassador Wells did not submit a response in time for printing.

Question:

The Taliban have indicated that their views on rights for women and girls have evolved since they ruled Afghanistan in the 1990s. What evidence would the Department point to that would corroborate the Taliban's claims on their changed views?

Answer:

Ambassador Wells did not submit a response in time for printing.

Question:

When will the Department begin sending foreign service officers to fill unfilled positions in Kabul, in line with the law?

Answer:

Ambassador Wells did not submit a response in time for printing.

Question:
How is the U.S. government and Afghan government ensuring that women are part of the reconciliation process?

Answer:
Ambassador Wells did not submit a response in time for printing.

Questions for the Record submitted to
Ms. Karen Freeman by
Chairman Eliot L. Engel
House Foreign Affairs Committee
September 19, 2019

Question:

When will USAID begin sending foreign service officers to fill unfilled positions in Kabul, in line with the law?

Answer:

USAID continues to rotate Foreign Service Officers in and out of Kabul assignments. The Agency's total Foreign Service posture in Afghanistan is currently under Congressional review. USAID will continue to update Congress as conversations progress.

Questions for the Record Submitted to
Ambassador Alice G. Wells
Representative Ilhan Omar
House Foreign Affairs Committee
September 19, 2019

Question:

How do you see U.S. engagement after the war ends? What level of diplomacy and development will be needed to continue to fulfill our strategic objectives there?

Answer:

Ambassador Wells did not submit a response in time for printing.

Question:

What role do you see for the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconciliation after troops have left? If there isn't one, will there be a need for a similar whole-of-government IG or ombudsman?

Answer:

Ambassador Wells did not submit a response in time for printing.

Questions for the Record Submitted to
Ms. Karen Freeman
Representative Ilhan Omar
House Foreign Affairs Committee
September 19, 2019

Earlier this week I met with the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction and his team. One of the big lessons from their work is that reconstruction and development aren't really possible without a comprehensive peace deal. And this is common sense - how can a country develop at the same time it's at war? They told me stories from years ago where we were trying to reintegrate ex-militia fighters while at the exact same time trying to partner with those militias against the Taliban. So, there's a certain absurdity to it.

A lot of time in Afghanistan, our left hand has not known what our right hand was doing. So, it's logical to me - even obvious - that USAID needs a comprehensive peace deal to do its best work. And your work will be absolutely essential after we've withdrawn troops. I wanted to ask you about some of your planning for that transition:

Question:

What are your plans for reintegration of ex-fighters from either the Taliban or other militias after the withdrawal of troops?

Answer:

The Administration has not made any final decisions regarding the withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan. Questions about a conditions-based troop withdrawal from Afghanistan should be directed to the Department of Defense. At this time, USAID is not planning for reintegration programs. However, in the event of a negotiated settlement in Afghanistan, USAID intends to take a community-based approach (including victims as well as demobilized Taliban) with any post-settlement programs. Lessons learned indicate that programs focused solely on benefitting ex-combatants can breed resentment and intensify the divide between the community and former fighters. Similarly, by rewarding armed actors with development benefits, such programs can create perverse incentives for violent behavior by others. USAID/Afghanistan efforts are guided by, and will continue to be guided after any potential political settlement and

by its recently approved Country Development Cooperation Strategy (CDCS). Depending on the nature of the political settlement, USAID will be led by the direction taken by the government itself and we will collaborate within the broader donor community. Initial thinking is to first ensure that humanitarian needs are met and then expand the services of existing programs to newly secured communities, and incorporate components such as social cohesion activities, trust-building efforts, and traditional dispute resolution. USAID is examining how existing education, health, economic opportunity and governance activities can pivot in support of a political settlement. We are also exploring ways to support strategic communications and engagement between the GoA and Afghan citizens, how to strengthen sub-national governance structures to ensure an inclusive approach to a political settlement, and how to support the new Ministry of Peace Affairs in its endeavor to build a sustainable peace. For example, the Mission's emphasis on export-led economic growth could help ease reintegration tensions by connecting communities to economic value chains, which can create opportunities for all local Afghans pursuing legitimate business and trade opportunities.

Question:

What are the plans for clean-up of unexploded munitions in Afghanistan after the withdrawal of troops?

Answer:

The Administration has not made any decision regarding the withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan. Questions about a conditions-based troop withdrawal from Afghanistan should be directed to the Department of Defense. Likewise, USAID refers you to the Department of State on the issue of unexploded munitions.

Question:

What programs are you planning to ensure a better life for Afghan women after the withdrawal of troops?

Answer:

The Administration has not made any final decisions regarding the withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan. Questions about a conditions-based troop withdrawal from Afghanistan should be directed to the Department of Defense. Support for Afghan women has been, and remains, a top priority for the United States Government. Afghanistan's future peace and prosperity depends on building an inclusive society whose members freely participate in the public and private sectors. Afghan women have made significant gains with continued support from the American people, and building on these gains is a cornerstone of USAID's strategy in Afghanistan.

It is critical, to ensure women's voices are loud, clear and coordinated going into a peace dialogue and discussions on the future of their country. USAID is working with Afghan women to enable them to be effective participants in the peace negotiations and dialogues. For example, in August, USAID supported 25 well-known women activists, advisors, members of Parliament, and representatives of civil society to attend a strategic negotiation workshop in order to prepare these prominent women to secure more inclusive and equitable outcomes in peace negotiations.

Developing strength and capacity over the long-term, in 2015, USAID launched the Agency's largest bilateral program for women in Afghanistan, known as PROMOTE. The program was developed to train 75,000 Afghan women leaders by providing them the skills, networks, and opportunities to better engage in business, government, and civil society leadership. To date, over 68,000 women have benefitted from the program. USAID will

continue to implement women's empowerment activities focused on access to education, economic empowerment, and prevention and response to gender-based violence. USAID programs will also build the capacity of women activists and civil society organizations to effectively advocate for increased support for gender equality and women's empowerment.

Through the USAID PROMOTE program, more than 12,000 women have obtained new or better jobs in government and other sectors; more than 9,000 women have received internships in the public and private sectors; more than 400 women-owned businesses have received business development and marketing support; 27,000 women have obtained leadership certificates; and over 4,700 health service providers have been trained in preventing and responding to gender-based violence.

The United States and donor community remain committed to standing with Afghan women and will continue to work with the Afghan government, businesses, and civil society organizations to support constitutional protections and gains made over the last 18 years. The U.S. Government continues to convey to all Afghans that their country's relationship with the international community, and particularly donors, will depend heavily upon continued commitment to the inclusion of women, the protection of women's rights, and women's participation in political and economic spheres. No current or future Afghan government should count on international donor support if that government restricts, neglects, or represses Afghan women.

Question:

One thing I've heard repeatedly is that current programs have benefited women in Kabul, but not in rural areas. How do you differentiate between the needs of women in Afghan cities and the needs of women outside the cities?

Answer:

Activities account for regional, urban, and rural contexts to provide the skills, networks, and opportunities for Afghan women to better engage as participants and leaders in business, government, and civil society. USAID support for women's empowerment throughout Afghanistan allows women to be more financially self-sufficient and contribute to the welfare of their families and communities, which in turn promotes a more self-reliant Afghanistan. These efforts take place throughout the country and are not limited to the Afghan capital. For example, of the 68,000 women supported by PROMOTE to date, 64 percent of these beneficiaries are from outside Kabul and the central region. Additionally, 68 percent of the women participating in the PROMOTE scholarship program are studying in institutions outside Kabul. USAID is supporting a network of 357 civil society organizations benefiting women, including 287 working across rural and semi-urban areas and 70 focused on the five major urban centers in Afghanistan. USAID's investment in agricultural and non-agricultural production supports women in both rural and urban environments. Many producers of carpets, embroidery, stone fruits, saffron and gemstones live in rural areas. In urban areas, women benefit from USAID investments in companies, often women-owned, that produce, process, and sell various products.

Question:

What are the prospects for improving the situation for women in Taliban-controlled areas?

Answer:

USAID works in areas where the security conditions permit. We rely on our implementing partners to determine the accessibility of a location and make programming decisions accordingly. Therefore, our programs are not tailored to "Taliban-controlled" or "Government-controlled" areas. PROMOTE, for example, works throughout the country to

support women who work at home, weave carpets, or work in other sectors including sales of dried fruits and nuts. Bolstering women who work at home with business training, improved equipment, and lessons on sanitation are some of the ways that PROMOTE improves women's lives regardless of which group is currently controlling a given area.

Questions for the Record Submitted to
Ambassador James B. Cunningham
Representative Ilhan Omar
House Foreign Affairs Committee
September 19, 2019

Almost exactly one year ago today, on September 23rd, 2018, there was an airstrike in an Afghan village called Mullah Hafiz. The target was apparently a Taliban prison, but it also blew up the home of a man named Masih Ur-Rahman Mubarez. Masih's wife was killed in the bombing. So were all seven of his children – his youngest was 4 years old. Another four young cousins were killed as well.

Masih has been working with the Bureau of Investigative Journalism and the New York Times to find out who was responsible for the deaths of his family, and they published his story in June. The Department of Defense denied at first that we were responsible. But after an exhaustive investigation by Masih, along with BIJ and the Times, they concluded that it was a DoD bombing. The Department has since admitted it carried out a bombing in the area, but denies civilians were killed.

This is an endemic problem. The United Nations says that in 2018, U.S. airstrikes killed 393 civilians in Afghanistan and wounded another 239. DoD acknowledges 76 dead and 58 injured, about one-fifth of the UN's total. Just last night, according to Afghan officials, 40 civilians were killed in a U.S. drone strike. The Pentagon, again, acknowledges the strike but is declining comment on civilian casualties.

I want to ask about reconciling with our own history in Afghanistan. It seems to me that part of a responsible withdrawal would be, for example, coming to consensus about the number of civilian casualties. I think it's both the morally correct thing to do, and also a key part of making sure Afghanistan doesn't once again become a safe haven for terrorists, to make sure Masih and people like him are told the truth.

Question:

Why, in your estimation, are the Pentagon's numbers on civilian casualties so much lower than the UN's? How can we get as close as possible to the truth?

Answer:

Ambassador Cunningham did not submit a response in time for printing.

Question:

How do you see U.S. engagement after the war ends? What level of diplomacy and development will be needed to continue to fulfill our strategic objectives there?

Answer:

Ambassador Cunningham did not submit a response in time for printing.

Question:

What role do you see for the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconciliation after troops have left? If there isn't one, will there be a need for a similar whole-of-government IG or ombudsman?

Answer:

Ambassador Cunningham did not submit a response in time for printing.

Questions for the Record Submitted to
Ms. Laurel Miller
Representative Ilhan Omar
House Foreign Affairs Committee
September 19, 2019

Almost exactly one year ago today, on September 23rd, 2018, there was an airstrike in an Afghan village called Mullah Hafiz. The target was apparently a Taliban prison, but it also blew up the home of a man named Masih Ur-Rahman Mubarez. Masih's wife was killed in the bombing. So were all seven of his children – his youngest was 4 years old. Another four young cousins were killed as well.

Masih has been working with the Bureau of Investigative Journalism and the New York Times to find out who was responsible for the deaths of his family, and they published his story in June. The Department of Defense denied at first that we were responsible. But after an exhaustive investigation by Masih, along with BIJ and the Times, they concluded that it was a DoD bombing. The Department has since admitted it carried out a bombing in the area, but denies civilians were killed.

This is an endemic problem. The United Nations says that in 2018, U.S. airstrikes killed 393 civilians in Afghanistan and wounded another 239. DoD acknowledges 76 dead and 58 injured, about one-fifth of the UN's total. Just last night, according to Afghan officials, 40 civilians were killed in a U.S. drone strike. The Pentagon, again, acknowledges the strike but is declining comment on civilian casualties.

I want to ask about reconciling with our own history in Afghanistan. It seems to me that part of a responsible withdrawal would be, for example, coming to consensus about the number of civilian casualties. I think it's both the morally correct thing to do, and also a key part of making sure Afghanistan doesn't once again become a safe haven for terrorists, to make sure Masih and people like him are told the truth.

Question:

Why, in your estimation, are the Pentagon's numbers on civilian casualties so much lower than the UN's? How can we get as close as possible to the truth?

Answer:

Ms. Miller did not submit a response in time for printing.

Question:

How do you see U.S. engagement after the war ends? What level of diplomacy and development will be needed to continue to fulfill our strategic objectives there?

Answer:

Ms. Miller did not submit a response in time for printing.

Question:

What role do you see for the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconciliation after troops have left? If there isn't one, will there be a need for a similar whole-of-government IG or ombudsman?

Answer:

Ms. Miller did not submit a response in time for printing.

Questions for the Record submitted to
Ambassador Alice G. Wells
Representative Colin Allred
House Foreign Affairs Committee
September 19, 2019

Question:

In your testimony you stated, "The number of Afghans living in poverty increased from 36 percent to 50 percent in 2017".

a. What are the driving causes of this dramatic increase in the poverty rate?

b. What more can the State Department, USAID, and Congress be doing to reduce the poverty rate?

Answer:

Ambassador Wells did not submit a response in time for printing.

Question:

In your testimony you discussed high rates of corruption and government malfeasance in Afghanistan and stated, "We will continue to hold the Afghan government accountable for its progress in combatting corruption and will adjust our assistance levels accordingly."

a. What steps has the Afghan government taken to combat internal corruption?

b. What are the next steps the Afghan government needs to take?

c. Are U.S. dollars contributing to that corruption? What mechanisms are in place to prevent U.S. funds from contributing to the problem?

d. Which, if any, USAID programs are helping combat corruption?

Answer:

Ambassador Wells did not submit a response in time for printing.

○