

**Testimony of Dr. Ian Bickford, President, the American University of Afghanistan (AUAF)  
Before the House Appropriations Subcommittee on National Security, State Department,  
and Related Programs  
Outside Witness Hearing  
Wednesday, April 2, 2025**

Chairman Diaz-Balart, Ranking Member Frankel, and distinguished members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify on behalf of the American University of Afghanistan, known to many of you as AUAF. I am honored by the invitation and opportunity to contribute to discussions surrounding United States foreign assistance as the Committee considers the Fiscal Year 2026 National Security, State Department, and Related Programs Appropriations bill. Please accept my sincerest gratitude for including AUAF today. I am a strong supporter of the committee's work and appreciate the chance to participate in this process.

Chairman Diaz-Balart and Ranking Member Frankel, you both know AUAF well. I consider you each to be longstanding champions of the American University of Afghanistan, and for that the AUAF community has long been deeply grateful. You and your staff, who visited our Doha Hub in 2023, have met with and taken a personal interest in AUAF students. You have stood by the university during our highs and lows. You have advocated for AUAF more than once and motivated others in Congress to embrace our mission. Your vision to protect one of the few remaining U.S. investments in Afghanistan is inspiring.

As the United States faces a shifting global landscape marked by competition with adversaries such as China and Iran, the importance of education has never been clearer. Education is one of the most powerful tools in shaping the future of nations and advancing American strategic interests globally. AUAF represents one of the most successful and enduring legacies of U.S. involvement in Afghanistan. Through this institution, the U.S. has made a highly effective investment in the future of Afghanistan, one that holds deep meaning for the many Americans who served in Afghanistan. AUAF is not only an educational institution but also a cornerstone of U.S. national security policy. To that end, its implementation is carefully designed to avoid diverting American taxpayer dollars to the Taliban or to enable the Taliban in any way. Indeed, AUAF might be seen as a model for how foreign assistance can be safely and effectively applied in Afghanistan and similar complex environments.

**AUAF: A Legacy of American Commitment and National Security**

From 50 men and 1 female student in 2006 to over 1,000 today, AUAF represents progress by any measure and remains a critical platform for emerging Afghan leaders. AUAF provides virtual access to an English-language, academic program based on the American university model and expressive of American ideals. Its programs are comparable by many standards to the offerings of the most renowned private universities in the United States, and it hosts the only business program in the region independently accredited by the U.S.-based Accreditation Council for Business Schools and Programs. Since enrolling its first small class, AUAF has become truly coeducational, producing hundreds of male and female graduates, many of whom are leaders in the fields of law, science, business, and policy. Approximately 11% of these exceptional graduates have been awarded Fulbright Scholarships – the highest number of Fulbright awardees, as a percentage of graduates, of any academic institution in the world.

AUAF has faced considerable insecurity and, at times, an unthinkable violent reality, yet this legacy institution has always been a beacon of hope for Afghanistan's best and brightest. Even in the most critical circumstances, AUAF has repeatedly met its students' overwhelming call to continue classes with swift action and adaptive solutions. This was evidenced after the August 7, 2016 abduction of two AUAF professors and the August 24, 2016 attack on our campus, when terrorists killed 7 students, shot our Stanford law professor in the back, killed 7 guards and wounded dozens. Just six months after these events, AUAF responded by reopening at a new, secure, state-of-the-art location. On August 26, 2021, amidst chaos, AUAF commenced its fall semester, online and on-time, for nearly 1,000 Afghan students left behind in Afghanistan, despite their best efforts to evacuate. With generous aid from the U.S. government, AUAF maintained its commitment to these promising young people, providing educational opportunity, but also pathway forward.

When Kabul fell to the Taliban on August 15, 2021, AUAF was forced to redesign its operations and transition into a 'university in exile.' Since then, the university has adapted to new constraints, thrived thanks to daring innovations, and continued to deliver high-quality education to a population in dire need of hope. AUAF has formed partnerships with the American University in Suleimani (AUIS), the American University of Central Asia (AUCA), and Bard College in New York, among others, and opened a branch campus in Education City, Qatar. Such partnerships have enabled hundreds of AUAF students to continue their education in safety outside of Afghanistan. In addition to relocating many AUAF students, the university continues its mission in-country. Today, more than 1,000 young women and men join virtual classes from their homes in Afghanistan. Hundreds more, still just high-school age, found their way to our college readiness program, which we are hopeful will be resumed by the Administration. These courageous students dare to choose hope and education over fear and uncertainty, determined to seek a world-class education at AUAF with the ambition to one day lead their country into a new and brighter future.

All of this would have been impossible without the wisdom of Congress, steadfast support from the Administration, and leveraged assistance from the Qatar Foundation (QF) and Qatar Fund for Development (QFFD), which since August of 2021 has enabled nearly 200 AUAF students to continue their studies in the safety and security of Education City, Doha.

Looking back on AUAF's history, one can clearly see we have made steady, measured progress in Afghanistan where others have not. From the outset, we have committed to the long-term goal of shaping the next generation of Afghan leaders for the security of America. Indeed, this investment is maturing and we, along with AUAF students are reaping extraordinary benefits. These inspired, empowered Afghan men and women, many of whom would otherwise have had no access to higher education, now carry the torch of American values and strengthen the fabric of Afghan civil society. AUAF has long served as a critical outlet for those who strive to challenge the environment of radicalization in Afghanistan, offering a counter-narrative to extremist ideologies and providing young Afghans with the tools to build a better future for their country.

AUAF has created a generation of Afghans who possess a deep commitment to democratic governance, the rule of law, and economic development. Their values align closely with U.S. strategic goals in the region and provide a foundation for enduring partnerships that promote peace,

stability, and prosperity. The United States' national security is deeply intertwined with the stability of Afghanistan. As the country has been a central focal point in the global war on terror, it is vital that U.S. efforts continue to support institutions like AUAF that provide education, counter extremism, and afford a path toward a more stable, prosperous future for Afghanistan and the broader region. This is not simply a moral responsibility – it is a critical national security imperative. American investment in AUAF reflects the understanding that promoting stability in Afghanistan is a key component of maintaining U.S. influence in the region and countering the rising influence of adversarial powers.

### **AUAF as a Strategic Tool for U.S. Influence in Afghanistan and Beyond**

Education is among our most effective tools to maintain American strength and foster diplomatic ties abroad. AUAF offers a stark ideological contrast to adversarial regimes seeking to gain a foothold in Afghanistan. Graduates of AUAF who serve throughout the private sector and civil society are poised to become advocates for policies that advance both Afghan and U.S. interests. By engaging with international partners and collaborating regionally, AUAF students and alumni help align Afghanistan with global norms, creating new opportunities for trade, development, and regional cooperation. In doing so, they foster a safer, more prosperous America and contribute to a more stable Afghanistan. Through AUAF, the U.S. can continue to combat extremism, promote stability, encourage economic growth, and build diplomatic relationships that will endure for generations. AUAF is not merely an educational institution; it is an investment in Afghanistan's future, and by extension, in the future of U.S. national security.

The United States has worked tirelessly to support Afghanistan's transition towards stability, democracy, and economic development. AUAF serves as one of the most effective means by which the U.S. can influence positive change in Afghanistan without enabling the Taliban-led government. The young leaders educated at AUAF are advocates for democracy, rule of law, human rights, anti-extremism, and anti-corruption – values that are directly aligned with U.S. foreign policy priorities. As these graduates continue to rise in leadership positions, they will be critical in shaping Afghanistan's future and its relationship with the United States and the broader international community.

### **Coeducation as a Powerful Counter to Extremism**

There is no denying research that young men with access to education are less likely to join extremist groups. Educated women, in parallel, have outsized influence within their families and communities: a single educated woman in a household can significantly reduce the chances of radicalization within her family, particularly among male relatives. AUAF's focus on empowering women, who make up a substantial portion of its student body, has created a ripple effect throughout Afghan society, promoting peace and stability. Educating men and women side-by-side, meanwhile, fosters a recognition in men – who may have grown up believing otherwise – that women are their counterpart, with an equal role to play in building a better future.

Along with funding for AUAF, I strongly endorse the committee's vision to support the Women's Scholarship Endowment (WSE) program, established in 2018, and initially meant to build capacity for Afghan institutions such as Kardan University. This program enjoyed significant initial success, yet challenges arose when the Taliban returned to power in August 2021. Women were banned from higher education in December 2022, effectively halting all in-person degree programs

for Afghan women and thereby rendering Kardan University and similar institutions unable to continue their support for women's educational aspirations.

As the restrictions on education for women and girls persist in Afghanistan under the de facto Taliban government, there is little possibility of restoring sector-wide coeducational university programs in the country. AUAF consequently represents the best alternative. To this end, WSE pivoted to award scholarships to 55 Afghan women enrolled at AUAF, with housing provided for some in the all-female residences at Education City in Doha, Qatar, and others studying online from their homes in Afghanistan.

AUAF is the only remaining Afghan university offering comprehensive educational services to Afghan women at scale – both online in Afghanistan and in-person in Doha – and is uniquely positioned to support WSE's ongoing efforts. We so strongly support the WSE, that AUAF has developed a blueprint to grow the Endowment by raising additional private funds and bringing new partners into the fold. This commitment to increasing the scale and impact of the Endowment is a testament to AUAF's dedication to the educational empowerment of Afghan women and the university's ability to foster sustainable development in the region. The committee's support for the WSE represents a strategic step forward in ensuring that Afghan women continue to have access to high-quality education.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

As you work to set funding priorities, I urge the Committee to continue its support for AUAF. The university's success is a direct reflection of the power of education as a tool for promoting peace, stability, and prosperity. I respectfully recommend the following:

- 1. Sustained Support for Education as a Core Component of U.S. Foreign Policy**  
Education is essential for long-term stability. The U.S. must continue to prioritize support for institutions like AUAF that promote American values and foster leadership.
- 2. Alignment of U.S. Investments with Strategic National Security Goals**  
U.S. investments in AUAF should continue to be seen as strategically aligned with broader U.S. foreign policy objectives, ensuring this initiative continues to contribute to national security, regional stability, and long-term prosperity.
- 3. Increased Focus on Empowering Afghan Women**  
Investing in Afghans women's education, particularly through the WSE, will have a profound impact on reducing extremism and promoting societal change.

Year after year, both Congress and the Administration have prioritized AUAF's contributions through the passage and implementation of funding measures. Just two weeks ago, the Administration's decision to resume funding for most of AUAF programs reaffirmed how integral this work is to the long-term stability of Afghanistan and in-turn, the long-term security of the United States. AUAF has proven itself to be a critical investment in the future of Afghanistan, the stability of the region, and the advancement of U.S. national security interests. I thank you for recognizing this, for your continued support, and for considering the importance of AUAF in the broader context of U.S. foreign policy and national security.