

**Testimony of Karen Freeman,
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Before the House Foreign Affairs Committee
“The Trump Administration’s Afghanistan Policy”
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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.