

**Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken
Opening Statement on Afghanistan
House Foreign Affairs Committee
December 11th, 2024**

Chairman McCaul, Ranking Member Meeks, distinguished Members of the Committee – I appreciate our dialogue and partnership over the past four years, including on Afghanistan.

I want to recognize everyone who served in Afghanistan, including on this Committee. Our thoughts are with the Gold Star families of the 2,461 American service members – as well as State Department and USAID employees – who lost their lives over the course of the 20 years of U.S. military involvement in Afghanistan.

I'm also deeply grateful to the dedicated professionals from the State Department, the Defense Department, and across government... from civil society... and other partners who did so much to support the people of Afghanistan over those two decades.

I'm here to continue the State Department's extensive cooperation with this Committee. The Department has provided more than 20,000 pages of documents, conducted 9 high-level briefings for Members, and facilitated transcribed interviews of 15 senior officials. I've personally testified before House and Senate Committees 14 times on Afghanistan, including 4 times before this Committee.

Any attempt to understand and learn from the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan must be put in the proper context of what preceded it, both in the two decades following 9/11 – and in the decisions and events of 2020 to 2021 that culminated in the removal of all U.S. personnel.

When President Biden took office, he inherited an agreement the previous administration had reached with the Taliban to remove all remaining U.S. forces from Afghanistan by May 1, 2021.

At U.S. insistence, the Afghan government had released 5,000 Taliban prisoners – including several top war commanders. The U.S. reduced our own troop levels from 14,000 to 2,500 in December, 2020.

In return, the Taliban agreed to stop attacking U.S. and partner forces, to refrain from threatening Afghanistan's major cities, and to pursue intra-Afghan negotiations toward a ceasefire and political settlement.

But it continued a relentless march in the countryside so that it controlled or actively contested territory containing three quarters of Afghanistan's population by the end of 2020.

In January 2021, the Taliban was in the strongest military position it had been in since 9/11 – and we had the smallest number of troops in Afghanistan since 2001.

Despite the profound defects of the Doha agreement, President Biden ultimately opted to implement the previous administration's decision to withdraw American troops and honor his pledge to end our nation's longest war.

To the extent President Biden faced a choice, it was between ending the war or escalating it. Had he not followed through on his predecessor's commitment, attacks on our forces and allies would have resumed and the Taliban's assault on the country's major cities would have commenced. That would have required sending tens of thousands more U.S. forces into Afghanistan to defend ourselves and prevent a Taliban takeover – with at best the prospect of restoring a stalemate and remaining stuck in Afghanistan, under fire, indefinitely.

President Biden inherited a deadline, but no plan to meet it. At his direction, beginning in spring 2021, the Administration – and the State Department in particular – engaged in extensive planning for a range of outcomes.

We pursued a sustained campaign to urge any Americans in Afghanistan to leave. We re-started and dramatically increased resources to a moribund Special Immigrant Visa program to bring Afghans who had worked by our side over 20 years to the United States.

Even the U.S. government's most pessimistic assessments did not anticipate that the Afghan government and security forces would collapse so rapidly in the face of Taliban advances.

Nevertheless – because of the Administration's extensive interagency planning and coordination – when Kabul fell on August 15th, the United States was able to evacuate our embassy and relocate our diplomats to the airport within 48 hours... and then conduct the largest airlift in U.S. history, helping approximately 120,000 Americans, Afghans, and citizens of allied nations depart Afghanistan in just two weeks.

In the three years since the end of our country's longest war, all us have wrestled with what could have been done differently during that period, and over the preceding two decades.

I asked retired Ambassador Dan Smith to lead an after-action review of the State Department's actions between January 2020 and August 2021.

In response to Ambassador Smith's report, the Department has taken more than 40 concrete initiatives and identified additional steps to guide our response to future crises. They've already made a difference in subsequent emergencies – including in Sudan, Israel, and Lebanon.

Even as we work to address the places where we fell short, I firmly believe the President's decision to withdraw from Afghanistan was the right one. American troops are no longer fighting and dying in Afghanistan. The American people are safer and more secure.

In fact, many of the most pessimistic predictions have been thoroughly disproven.

We were told Afghanistan would once again become a haven for terrorists – and that, as the Majority report contends, we would be “all but blind to the situation on the ground.” In fact, al Qaeda has not regrouped in Afghanistan, and, in August 2022, we launched a precision strike in downtown Kabul that took out its leader – Ayman al-Zawahiri – with no American boots on the ground.

We were told “our allies would no longer trust us.” Having just returned from NATO meetings in Brussels, and my 20th trip to the Indo-Pacific, it’s clear our alliances and partnerships are stronger today than they’ve been in a generation. You can see that in the more than 50 countries we brought together to defend Ukraine against Russia’s aggression and the unity of purpose and action we’ve built for contending with the challenges posed by China.

Indeed, there is nothing our strategic competitors like China and Russia – or adversaries like Iran and North Korea – would have liked more than for the United States to re-up a 20 year war and remain bogged down in Afghanistan for another decade.

We were told hundreds of Americans and Afghan partners would be left behind. Yet today, every U.S. citizen who told us they wished to leave during the evacuation has had the opportunity to do so. And to those Americans who entered the country since August 2021 and have been detained by the Taliban – we will not rest until we bring you home.

Since September 2021, this Administration has resettled more than 185,000 Afghans and approved or welcomed to the United States more than 68,000 Afghans under the Special Immigrant Visa program. That's nearly half of all SIVs issued since the program's inception in 2009. Due to our unprecedented rate of SIV processing, we have requested additional SIVs from Congress.

This is undoubtedly a profoundly difficult period for the Afghan people – particularly Afghan women and girls. But the final chapter has not been written on Afghanistan.

Last week, I had the chance to be with many partners who supported the evacuation effort, including members of Congress. We were joined by a resilient and resourceful young woman who left Afghanistan in August 2021 and is now an aerospace engineering student at MIT. She aspires to be the first Afghan woman astronaut.

In part because of America's two-decade commitment to Afghanistan, there are many more women who had the opportunity to go to school, to connect with the wider world, to imagine a different life for themselves. And these women – their experiences, their hopes – will one day help pave the path to an Afghanistan where all people can choose their own futures.

With that, I'll take your questions.