

STATEMENT BY
Gregory B. Starr
Department of State
Assistant Secretary for Diplomatic Security

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Chairman Chaffetz, Ranking Member Cummings, and distinguished Committee members – Good Morning. Thank you for your invitation to appear today to discuss security and construction developments at the U.S. Embassy in Kabul, Afghanistan. Our efforts in Afghanistan and our determination to support the Afghan government are of the highest importance to the Department and the Administration. I, along with my colleagues at the Department of State, look forward to working with you to examine these issues and illustrate how we are collectively supporting the courageous men and women who serve at this mission with safer, more secure facilities.

Our national interests sometimes require us to operate in very dangerous places. We identify risks, and we take deliberate and prudent steps to mitigate them. The Department has made important strides in that regard. I personally discuss, plan, and strategize with my counterpart Director Lydia Muniz in the Bureau of Overseas Buildings Operations (OBO) on at least a weekly basis, usually more. We plan with a wide array of Department interlocutors, interagency partners, and directly with the people managing security and construction projects at the Mission in Kabul. However, we can never foresee or mitigate all the potential pitfalls in an unpredictable environment like Afghanistan.

In Kabul's high threat environment, hostile actors routinely target the U.S. and other foreign nationals. Insurgents have employed a wide range of attacks, including suicide operations, small arms fire, IEDs, assassination attempts, mortars, insider threats, kidnappings, and complex attacks. Just last week there was an attack near the compound, and like past attacks our facilities and security measures performed as they should and protected our personnel.

In addition to operating in a challenging security environment and geographic location, we have had our primary shipping and resupply route impeded and closed for extended periods of time without notice. The closure invariably slowed our ability to get materials to the site, but we ultimately found alternative routes, and our mission never ceased. Embassy Kabul is not just a construction site—it's one of the largest functioning embassies in the world, with a large number of direct hires and contractors, which require significant support including housing, office space, and vehicles. Although we've experienced periods of elevated and targeted violence which has halted all movement by Embassy personnel, we have resumed movements and we continue to build.

When my colleague at the Office of Inspector General (OIG) has brought issues and deficiencies to our attention, we have made changes in short order to ensure mistakes are not prolonged or duplicated. We have learned lessons and greatly improved operational efficiencies due to the thorough inspection of the OIG as well as the GAO reports. We thank them for their contributions in helping us improve our operations in Kabul and many places around the world.

Our facilities have proven time and time again that they can withstand the most complex of attacks. Simply put: our physical security countermeasures work. Building facilities in this environment is not easy and is certainly not without risks, delays, and unforeseen circumstances and costs. Due to a fluid and evolving security environment, we must evolve and adapt to the conditions and circumstances presented to us. We work constantly to improve our practices and protect our people. We continually re-evaluate; and at times, despite the inherent setbacks it may cause, we must chart new courses, in order to advance the bigger picture of completing the mission to secure our people.

As I close, I will say, I am both confident and pleased that despite the many unforeseen challenges and setbacks, Department personnel in Kabul are better prepared, protected, and secured. We look forward to working with Congress to ensure that our people serving abroad, particularly in high threat environments, have a safe platform for carrying out the conduct of diplomacy. I want to thank Congress for the resources that you have provided over the years to strengthen and reinforce this vitally important diplomatic platform. As the Assistant Secretary for Diplomatic Security, I work every day with my colleagues in the Department of State to ensure a safe environment for our people, and with your continuous support, we are doing that. Thank you and I will be glad to answer any questions you have.