

Testimony of Zalmay M. Khalilzad
U.S. Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation
House Committee on Oversight and Reform,
Subcommittee on National Security
Tuesday, September 22, 2020

Good morning Chairman Lynch, Ranking Member Grothman, and distinguished members of the Committee. I regret that circumstances did not allow me to appear before this Committee sooner during the last several months. I regard making myself available to Congress as one of my most important responsibilities, and I welcome the opportunity today and am honored to brief you.

I was appointed the U.S. Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation in September 2018, with a mandate to find a diplomatic formula that:

- Brings an end to America's longest war;
- Reduces the burden on the U.S. military and taxpayer;
- Provides the best chance for a sovereign, unified, and representative Afghanistan at peace with itself and its neighbors and respectful of the human rights of all its citizens; and
- Most importantly, ensures terrorists can never again use Afghan soil to threaten the security of the United States and our allies.

Underlying this mandate was an assumption that there was no realistic or viable military solution to this complex conflict. To pursue these objectives, we engaged in direct talks with the Taliban and the Afghan government in parallel. Our goal was to secure counterterrorism guarantees from the Taliban alongside their commitment to engage in direct negotiations with the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan on a political settlement and permanent and comprehensive ceasefire.

Eighteen months of intense diplomacy led to two significant milestones. On February 29, the United States and Government of Afghanistan jointly declared their commitment to reach a comprehensive and sustainable peace agreement to end the war in Afghanistan, including: guarantees to prevent the use of Afghan soil by any international terrorist groups or individuals against the security of the United States and its allies; a conditions-based timeline for the withdrawal of all U.S. and Coalition forces from Afghanistan; a political settlement resulting from intra-Afghan dialogue and negotiations between the Taliban and an inclusive negotiating team of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan; and a permanent and comprehensive ceasefire.

That same day, the United States signed an historic agreement with the Taliban that would make negotiations possible. That agreement has four elements.

The **first** is a commitment by the Taliban to prevent any group or individual from using Afghan soil to threaten the security of the United States and its allies. On that, we have seen some progress. It is also important to stress that since the signing of the agreement, the Taliban have instructed their forces to refrain from attacks on U.S. or coalition forces. There have been no American deaths as a result of Taliban attacks since the agreement was signed. And we continue

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to engage regularly with the Taliban to oversee the implementation of our agreement with respect to these issues and to address issues of concern.

The **second** is a timeline for withdrawal of American and coalition forces. That withdrawal is conditions-based. We are on the path to reduce troop levels to between 4,000 and 5,000 by this fall and further withdrawals will be determined based on conditions on the ground and delivery by the Taliban on their commitments.

The **third** is the start of Afghanistan Peace Negotiations. As you know, these talks opened on September 12, a truly historic moment. The Afghan delegations from the parties to the conflict that are sitting across from each other without international mediators or facilitators have the opportunity to bring an end to more than 40 years of war in their country. The talks are an Afghan-led, Afghan-owned process where two warring sides are negotiating a roadmap for the future of their country. Afghans are yearning for peace and there is overwhelming support among the Afghans for these talks and for a political settlement.

Finally, the Taliban agreed that a permanent and comprehensive ceasefire would be on the agenda in Afghanistan Peace Negotiations. By any measure, current levels of violence are too high. We know that reductions are possible; the Taliban carried out two Eid ceasefires and, earlier, a seven-day reduction in violence preceding the February 29 agreement between the United States and the Taliban in preparation for negotiations. We hope that the negotiations will soon lead to a significant reduction in violence by all sides, reducing the number of Afghans getting killed or wounded. A reduction of violence will help build the trust necessary for talks to succeed. We will continue to press for this.

A political settlement in Afghanistan needs broad internal, regional and international support. We have worked closely with Afghanistan's neighbors and international partners to build support for Afghanistan Peace Negotiations. You can see the impact of that effort in the list of countries and organizations that were represented at the opening ceremony of Afghan peace negotiations on September 12 and in the UN Security Council statement welcoming the start of these negotiations.

These achievements are the result of two years of intense diplomacy and have already resulted in American lives saved, the burden on the American taxpayer lessened, and giving the Afghans a historic opportunity for a political settlement that ends their long war.

Now, with an Afghan-led, Afghan-owned process and delegations that represent the country's strength and diversity -- including the Afghan government, political leaders, members of civil society, women, and religious and ethnic minorities -- the people of Afghanistan have reason to hope again. I have urged the Afghan leaders to take advantage of the opportunity for a political settlement now available to them. Unfortunately, Afghan leaders did not behave responsibly or judiciously after the Soviet forces departed their country as a result of a resistance movement that had been backed by the United States. Instead of cooperating and agreeing on a political formula for their country, they started a vicious civil war. We will help Afghanistan seize this historic moment and avoid repeating what happened in the 1990s, but ultimately the responsibility is theirs.

Our strategy going forward is:

- **One**, continue holding the Taliban to the commitments they made in the February 29 agreement, including on combatting international terrorism and discussing a permanent and comprehensive ceasefire at Afghanistan Peace Negotiations.
- **Two**, adjust our force posture consistent with the Agreement and conditions in Afghanistan. We are on a path to reduce troop levels to between 4,000 and 5,000 and with further reductions possible based on conditions. I want to assure this committee that we will always maintain the ability to protect the United States, but staying in Afghanistan is not an end in and of itself. Our goal for Afghanistan is a nation -- with itself and its neighbors -- and firmly aligned with the United States and our allies against international terrorism.
- **Three**, support the parties' efforts to reach a negotiated political settlement while speaking out about our values. The inclusion of women and religious and ethnic minorities in the negotiations is a landmark step in the right direction. The United States will continue to advocate our values, including electoral democracy, rights of women and religious minorities, rule of law, free speech and press. At the same time, we recognize that only Afghans can find a sustainable formula that is unique to their history and culture. While we do not seek to impose our system on others, we have made it clear to the negotiators that their choices and conduct will affect the size and scope of future U.S. assistance, and that this is a position shared by Afghanistan's other major donors.
- **Four**, continue to work with regional and international partners and donors to build international support for Afghanistan Peace Negotiations and support Afghanistan's long-term stability and self-reliance.

While we have reasons to be hopeful, we are under no illusions about the challenges ahead. The conflict in Afghanistan is especially complex, and negotiators will have to overcome personal interests and political differences while representing diverse constituencies. We expect that there will be setbacks and obstacles.

This task has required a diverse and dynamic team, made up of State Department Foreign Service Officers, civil servants, and detailees from across the U.S. government. We have also partnered closely and effectively with the Department of Defense, especially General Scott Miller, the commanding general of U.S. and NATO forces in Afghanistan. This whole-of-government effort reflects the best of American diplomacy.

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Members, and distinguished members of the committee, I am grateful for the opportunity to share this summary of the efforts, challenges and progress of the past two years, and I look forward to your guidance, feedback and support as we seek to consolidate this promising moment to end this war responsibly. Thank you.

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