

**Afghanistan Study Group Co-Chair QFR Response**  
**March 23, 2021**

**Questions for the Record for House Committee on Oversight and Reform, Subcommittee on National Security, hearing of February 19, 2021, submitted by Representative Paul Gosar.**

**1. What is the feasibility that an agreement can be struck based on a reduction in violence, or even an agreement at all, when one of the players is an unsustainable partner like the Taliban?**

The feasibility of an eventual negotiated settlement of the conflict that would lead to a ceasefire depends upon the United States' leverage against the Taliban. As our report details, the United States does continue to have some leverage. The Taliban seek political recognition, removal of sanctions, a share of political power, and the withdrawal of international forces. These are all things that the United States has a significant degree of control over. The degree to which an agreement is possible depends on the United States being able to persuade the Taliban that they can only get what they seek through a negotiation with the Afghan government. This is the logic that drives our recommendation to not remove our troops until greater progress towards a negotiated settlement can be demonstrated.

**2. If we were to achieve such an agreement, how much additional time, blood, and treasure would be directed towards achieving this end state, and what guarantees could be put in place which would ensure that the Taliban did not restart its campaign of violence as soon we leave down the road?**

Given the timing of the publication of our report, we were not able to obtain an assessment of the cost of maintaining the current 2,500 troops compared to the 14,000 at the beginning of 2020. We presume it is significantly lower. Similarly, over the past year no American service man or woman has been killed in combat, as the Taliban have respected their commitment not to attack us directly. Even if the Taliban renege on this element of the agreement, we were informed that the United States has a smaller, hardened footprint; the new administration will have to make its own assessment on the level of risk to mission and forces appropriate to our interests. It is hard to predict how much additional time it will take to achieve the end state, but the initial decisions of the Biden administration have demonstrated to all parties that the pace has been too slow and that the United States is prepared to take certain actions to accelerate the negotiation process. These include the request to the United Nations to convene a group of regional countries at the foreign minister level, which is very much in line with the Study Group's recommendations on a regional diplomatic strategy, as well as the release of a proposed plan for an inclusive government, which aligns with the Study Group's suggestion that the United States might need to act more as an arbiter than a mediator. Your concern that the Taliban will renew violence after a U.S. withdrawal is a valid one. While beyond the scope of our report, we would expect that any final agreement would include international guarantees to monitor its implementation. These need not necessarily involve a U.S. presence.

### **3. Would you say that the United States has adequately trained Afghan Forces to defend themselves from terrorist and Taliban attacks?**

Our report goes into some detail on the history and effect of U.S. efforts to train and build up the Afghan National Security and Defense Forces. The result, as we describe it, is mixed. Regarding the counter-terrorism threat, our assessment is that some sort of U.S. presence is required in order to maintain our national security interests. Regarding Taliban attacks, our assessment is that a U.S. withdrawal would likely lead to an empowered Taliban offensive and the fragmentation of forces and interests concurrently with the implosion of increasingly insecure and unstable state institutions. A slide into civil war would be similar to what happened in the 1990s, where the Taliban ultimately gained the upper hand and enabled the rise of Al Qaeda. There have been clear successes. The the U.S.-created and supported Afghan military training academy is a model in the region for officer-level training. The Afghan commandos that the United States has trained and continue to support are also among the finest in the region. The essential problem, as we note in our report, is Afghan forces remain dependent on U.S. financial resources and some key enabling activities such as logistics, training, and intelligence. In this equation however the greater problem has not been the inadequacy of American training as much as the low education levels of Afghan recruits, the weakness of Afghan institutions, enduring political polarization of elites especially along ethnic lines which has permeated the security institutions, and the ongoing, intractable problem of corruption in Afghanistan. These problems were recognized by U.S. officials, and measures were taken to address them, but they proved far more deep-rooted than anticipated. As our report stresses, Afghanistan remains excessively dependent on the international community for both its security sector and the civilian functioning of its government. This dependence constrains American options.