

**Statement for the Record by Ambassador Alice G. Wells
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Before the House Foreign Affairs Committee
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Chairman Royce, Ranking Member Engel – thank you for inviting me to appear here today to discuss the situation in Afghanistan. Thousands of U.S. service–members, diplomats, and development specialists are working every day alongside our Afghan and international partners to achieve our strategic objective of a more stable and secure Afghanistan that is never again a platform for terrorists to plan and execute attacks against the United States.

It has been almost a year since I was asked to lead our diplomatic efforts. Over the course of this year, I have seen the President’s South Asia Strategy make a difference. Afghan security forces are now fighting with renewed confidence and are slowing the Taliban’s momentum. Pakistan is on notice that we expect its unequivocal cooperation ending sanctuaries that the Taliban have enjoyed since the remnants of their toppled regime fled into Pakistan in 2001. And, for the first time, a ceasefire brought peace to Afghanistan during the period of Eid, with Afghan soldiers and Taliban praying together, side-by-side. If Afghan troops and Taliban foot-soldiers can pray together, then the Afghan people have every reason to believe that their leaders can come together and negotiate an end to this war. Achieving progress toward this goal is among our highest diplomatic priorities and I want to take this opportunity to update you on our efforts.

Jumpstarting an Afghan Peace Process

The Administration’s conditions-based South Asia Strategy ensures the Taliban cannot win on the battlefield. But it recognizes that a resolution to the conflict will be through a negotiated political settlement. Our desired outcomes for any peace process are clear and have not changed. The Taliban must renounce violence, break ties with al-Qaida, and accept the Afghan Constitution – including its protections for women and minorities.

The path to achieving these outcomes will likely be filled with obstacles and unanticipated setbacks. Nevertheless, after more than 16 years of war, we see a real opportunity this year to start an Afghan peace process that could lead to a durable settlement of the conflict. Such a settlement would help secure vital U.S. interests and ultimately reduce the costs associated with our long-term engagement in Afghanistan.

The basis for our cautious optimism starts with the Afghan government, which under President Ghani's strong leadership is doing everything possible to signal its openness to a dialogue with the Taliban. In February 2018, President Ghani invited the Taliban to enter into a peace process without preconditions – an unprecedented gesture by the Afghan government. More recently, President Ghani took another unprecedented step and announced a temporary ceasefire in offensive operations against the Taliban for the week surrounding the Eid holidays. The Taliban responded with a three-day ceasefire. This was the first national ceasefire in the last 17 years of the Afghan conflict, and the national outpouring of relief and joy this past weekend was unlike anything Afghanistan has seen in many years. Taliban fighters wandered the streets of major cities, leaving their weapons at the gates. They took selfies with Afghan soldiers, sampled Eid treats with Afghan citizens, and worshipped in mosques alongside those they had been exchanging fire with the previous week. For many Afghans, Taliban and pro-government alike, it was an exhilarating first taste of what peace might look like.

Ghani's bold move to reduce violence came on the heels of three historic religious edicts ("fatwa"). The first was a fatwa issued in 2017 by leading Pakistani clerics that declared suicide attacks to be forbidden under Islam and reserving to the state the authority to declare jihad. Then in May of this year, Islamic scholars from Indonesia, Pakistan and Afghanistan issued a trilateral declaration calling for peace in Afghanistan and reiterating that suicide attacks are contrary to Islam. Finally, this month, roughly 2,000 Afghan religious leaders gathered in Kabul and issued a fatwa with the same themes and calling for intra-Afghan peace. These scholars are adding their powerful voice to the message of countless ordinary Afghans who are increasingly demanding that their political leaders set aside longstanding differences and come together in pursuit of peace.

The United States has long held that Afghans must ultimately determine their own future and that a peace deal cannot be dictated by outside powers. As President Trump emphasized when announcing our South Asia Strategy, "We are a partner and a friend, but we will not dictate to the Afghan people how to live, or how to govern their own complex society." Nonetheless, this Administration also recognizes the decisive role that American leadership can have in catalyzing progress toward a peace agreement. With Secretary Pompeo's energetic leadership, we are reinvigorating U.S. diplomatic efforts to support an intra-Afghan peace process.

In the past four months, the United States and 28 other countries have endorsed President Ghani's peace vision. Ambassador Bass and his team in Kabul are lending support to Afghan-led efforts to extend the recent ceasefire, while our diplomats in other capitals are pressing influential international partners to publicly support it. The United States has made clear that we are prepared to support, facilitate, and participate in direct negotiations between the Afghan government and the Taliban. We will support the government and all Afghan stakeholders as they work to reach a mutually agreeable negotiated settlement that ends the conflict and ensures Afghanistan is never again used as a safe haven for terrorist groups.

Recently, there have been signs that the Taliban's Pakistan-based leaders are debating the merits of joining a peace process; however, the group has not responded to President Ghani's offer of unconditional talks. We are pursuing a multi-track strategy to make clear to the Taliban that negotiations are their best option. The strategy has a number of distinct lines of effort quite apart from the military effort. These include a diplomatic effort to rally regional support for the Afghan Government and isolate the Taliban, and a financial component designed to eliminate the Taliban's ability to raise funds from donors and from narcotics trafficking. We are also working to end the sanctuary that the Taliban have enjoyed for decades in Pakistan and to encourage fighting elements within the Taliban to consider local arrangements to de-escalate the levels of violence.

I want to focus on four key areas where we are working to help bolster prospects for an eventual settlement of the conflict.

First, we are supporting Afghan efforts to reduce violence and protect a peace process from spoilers. Taliban momentum has slowed, as a result of both our own modest troop increase, as well as the renewed commitment of our NATO Resolute Support Mission (RSM) Allies and partners who currently contribute over 6,500 troops to train, advise, and assist the Afghan military. Afghan security forces are steadily improving, consistent with President Ghani's four-year roadmap for security sector reform. Ineffective generals and commanders are being replaced by younger, more dynamic officers. Afghan Special Forces are on track to double in size, from roughly 15,000 to 30,000 personnel, and they are increasingly targeting irreconcilable elements of the Taliban who aim to prevent a peace process from gaining steam. These and other military efforts are part of a

concerted effort, as the President articulated in August 2017, to strategically apply force in order to create the conditions for a political process to achieve a lasting peace.

Of course the Taliban remains a resilient foe. Afghan forces are still laboring to regain control of large areas of rural Afghanistan. Equally – if not more troubling – ISIS Khorasan has increased the pace and scope of its attacks against urban targets, often with a devastating civilian toll. These attacks, which have increasingly focused on ethnic and religious minorities, are clearly aimed at stoking sectarian and political tensions and undermining Afghan popular support for a peace process.

President Ghani, to his great credit, has signaled his steadfast commitment to pressing ahead with a peace process, despite these attacks. But this is obviously a challenging balancing act for him and other Afghan leaders. Through our military and intelligence cooperation with the Afghan government, we are doing everything possible to ensure that ISIS and Taliban hardliners do not succeed in derailing peace efforts. Additionally, we have aggressively countered Russia's false and outrageous claims that the U.S. supports ISIS.

Second, we are encouraging Afghans from across the political spectrum to come together in support of peace and to put the interests of their country first during upcoming parliamentary and presidential elections. One paradoxical result of the Unity Government is that more Afghans see their governing structures as the spoils of ethnic rivalry. We know from past experience that the upcoming elections – for parliament in October 2018 and for President in early 2019 – will be a real test for Afghans and could lead to further political polarization. Consequently, we are engaging on a daily basis with a broad range of Afghan political figures, in and out of government, and stressing the importance of an inclusive, timely and credible election process. We are also working with other donors to provide targeted capacity building assistance to Afghan electoral institutions to assist with voter registration and ensure more robust measures aimed at reducing electoral fraud. Our assistance appears to be having an impact; an estimated six million Afghans have registered to vote and over five thousand candidates have stepped forward to run for local and national-level office.

Of course, there are going to be political concerns raised by any progress toward a peace process. The prospect of the Taliban returning to Afghan political life in

whatever form is unsettling to many Afghans. Our strong desire is that Afghans will use their upcoming elections as an opportunity to not only engage in a national dialogue on these and related issues, but also to coalesce around a peace vision that will further reinforce to the Taliban the stark choice they face.

Third, we are supporting Afghan government reforms, in a bid to further sap the insurgency of support. President Ghani's efforts to increase transparency and accountability are promising, but corruption in Afghanistan will not be eliminated overnight. Economically, we have seen small improvements in growth, but it is not keeping pace with the birth rate, and poverty is increasing. A devastating two-year drought has hit Afghanistan's northern and western provinces especially hard, and will further increase poverty and drive internal displacement.

U.S. assistance is designed to improve the conditions for peace by helping to build Afghan capacity and address these governance challenges. For example, we provide assistance to help the Afghan government improve its delivery of health and education services and partner with Afghan government organizations to counter-corruption. We work with the Afghan private sector to increase exports that generate revenue and provide alternative livelihoods to joining the insurgency and the narcotics trade. Our enhanced bilateral and regional dialogues foster a significant and still growing increase in Central Asian trade with Afghanistan, including increased exports of electricity to Kabul. Alongside our partners in Afghan civil society, we press to increase the participation of youth and women in the formal economy, while also supporting the Afghan government's priority of developing English as a medium of instruction in higher education so that Afghans' can increasingly contribute to socio-economic development. We also continue our work to improve Afghan justice systems, so they can effectively prosecute narcotics traffickers and criminal networks that fuel the insurgency and corruption.

Although the Afghan government's progress in these areas is slower than we would prefer, we have seen real progress. The clearest evidence of this is that the Afghan people are now living longer, healthier lives than at any point in recent memory. Over the past 17 years, an entire generation of Afghans has had an opportunity to go to school instead of going to war. This generation of Afghans also lives in one of the most open media environments in South Asia, with access to hundreds of private radio and TV stations where political debate is free and vigorous. It is this cohort of politically informed Afghans who are now driving

calls for additional reform and for peace. And so we will continue our targeted civilian assistance and keep encouraging Afghan government reforms.

Afghan leaders understand that our conditions-based approach is not a blank check, and through the Afghanistan Compact have asked us to hold them accountable for meeting clear benchmarks. Over the last year, the Afghan government has improved its fiscal performance and is funding a greater share of its budget, reducing its dependence on the United States and other donors. Specifically, the U.S. share of pledged donor support for Afghanistan has fallen from about 50 percent in 2012 to about 25 percent. As such, we have requested \$632.8 million in civilian assistance for FY 2019, down 85 percent since FY 2010. The upcoming Geneva Conference, slated for November 2018, will offer another opportunity to review Afghan progress on government reforms. A central theme of that conference will be how donors can work with the Afghan government to energize the peace process. I hope Congress will join us in putting the United States in a strong position to leverage generous contributions from other donors as we work together toward that goal.

Fourth, we are engaging with all of Afghanistan's neighbors and near-neighbors to build regional support for the Afghan government's peace vision and discourage spoilers. Pakistan has an important role to play and has legitimate interests that it wants to ensure are met during any peace process. The dialogue that we have with Pakistan seeks to address those concerns while also encouraging additional concrete support for Afghan peace efforts. For example, with U.S. support, Pakistan and Afghanistan entered into a constructive dialogue to develop the Afghanistan-Pakistan Action Plan for Peace and Solidarity (APAPPS), an initiative to which we have given our full support. However, despite some positive indicators, we have not yet seen Pakistan take the sustained or decisive steps that we would have expected to see ten months after the announcement of the South Asia strategy, including arresting or expelling Taliban elements who will not come to the negotiating table.

More broadly, all of Afghanistan's neighbors – from Iran and Russia, to India, China, and the Central Asian states – have repeatedly stated their support for an Afghan peace process. All of these countries feel a strong stake in Afghanistan's future security and stability. They all would benefit from a political settlement in Afghanistan, which would help to reduce the terrorist and narcotics threat to their own citizens and also bolster regional economic cooperation. And so we are

expanding our regional engagement and utilizing every diplomatic mechanism – from the C5+1 process with the Central Asian Republics to the Heart of Asia process – to encourage additional concrete support for Afghan-led peace process.

Way Ahead

This is an ambitious agenda and Secretary Pompeo is committed to strengthening our diplomatic effort going forward. That means exploring opportunities to build on the fragile opening created by President Ghani’s February 2018 peace offer and by the recent ceasefire.

Congress’ support for these efforts remains crucial to our continued progress. I am optimistic that progress can be made in the coming months – if we continue to apply the necessary resources and align our military campaign to increasingly support our diplomacy.

The Afghan people, who face the deadly toll of this war every day, understand that reality. In March, a car bombing outside a sports stadium in Helmand killed 16 civilians and injured more than 50 bystanders. Within hours, family members and other mourners convened a sit-in at the blast site. Their message was simple: it’s time to end the senseless violence. In subsequent days, peaceful activists, many of them women, formed a small tent city and began planning a march for peace. And within days, there were “peace tents” being erected in far-flung provinces around the country.

Today, more than three months after the horrific attack, those peace tents are still outside the sports stadium in Helmand and across the countryside. Those courageous marchers earlier this month finally reached Kabul. Along their long journey, they struck a chord with ordinary Afghans of all backgrounds and launched what is now recognized as the first popular movement in favor of peace since this war began – a grassroots movement that started in the heartland of the Taliban’s insurgency.

So, the Afghan people and Afghan government have made clear that they want an end to war. In pursuing that goal, they have the United States as their equally determined partner. The key question remains: will the Taliban join us in a peace process? Are they prepared to sit across the table from the Afghan government and United States, and to make the compromises necessary to turn the page on four

decades of violence? As I have outlined to you today, the men and women of the Department of State are doing everything possible to help jumpstart that peace process and achieve this elusive but important goal.

Mr. Chairman and Ranking Member, thank you again for this opportunity to appear before your committee. I look forward to discussing our strategy and addressing your questions.