

Written Testimony of Alice G Wells
Acting Assistant Secretary for South and Central Asia
Before the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee for the Asia and the Pacific
Thursday, September 19, 2019

Good morning Chairman Engel, Ranking Member McCaul, and distinguished members of the Committee. I appreciate the opportunity to testify this morning on the Trump Administration's policy in Afghanistan.

Last week in New York, Washington, Kabul, and around the world, Americans and our allies commemorated the 18th anniversary of the September 11 attack on the United States – honoring the nearly 3,000 people who lost their lives in New York, the Pentagon, and in Pennsylvania. When the United States began its military engagement in Afghanistan in response to those attacks, our core interest was clear: to ensure that Afghanistan would never again be a safe haven for international terrorism.

In that regard, our mission over the last 18 years has been a success. Thanks to the skill and vigilance of the U.S. military and our NATO and international allies – supported by our robust diplomatic engagement and development assistance to the Afghan people – no terrorist group has used Afghanistan to launch a successful attack on our shores since 9/11.

Nevertheless, the terrorist threat posed by the ability of international terrorist groups to operate in Afghanistan remains significant. Afghanistan remains a haven for a host of terrorist organizations, including those based in Pakistan that are responsible for the murder of American citizens in deadly attacks on India. ISIS-Khorasan has demonstrated the intention to organize or inspire attacks in the United States and Europe. It has the capacity and willingness to indiscriminately kill civilians who do not support their nihilistic ideology, as they showed again in August when an ISIS-K suicide bomber killed over 90 Afghans at a Kabul wedding hall. In April, Russia and China joined us in calling on the Taliban to make good on its commitments to cut ties with international terrorist groups, prevent terrorist recruiting, training, and fundraising, and expel any known terrorists.

While remaining committed to countering the threat of terrorism from Afghanistan, the Administration understands that the American people are ready to end this war responsibly. In 2017, the President's South Asia Strategy acknowledged that military power alone will not bring peace to Afghanistan or stop the terrorist threat arising from that country. The United States has instead sought to create the conditions for a negotiated political settlement that produces a lasting peace between the Taliban and the Afghan government and people. A comprehensive peace agreement will enable Afghans to effectively focus on eliminating the international terrorist organizations that threaten our societies.

In the last twelve months, under the leadership of Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation Khalilzad and his team, we have made more progress in establishing the terms for a negotiated political settlement than in the previous 17 years. The Taliban engaged in sustained dialogue with the United States and in significant political discussions with their fellow Afghans

– including Afghan government officials – at an intra-Afghan dialogue held in Qatar this July. Simultaneously, the United States has consulted with the Government of Afghanistan and stakeholders across society on the principles that need to undergird a peace agreement.

In this pursuit, Ambassador Khalilzad has also built regional and international support for peace, from securing Pakistan’s assistance in bringing an empowered Taliban negotiating team to the table, to enlisting the help of Russia, China, the Gulf, EU and neighboring countries. We continue to believe a negotiated political settlement among Afghans remains the best way to ensure a durable peace in Afghanistan. A durable peace can only come from an agreement between Afghans that is accepted by most Afghans. More importantly, Afghans consistently tell us that achieving peace is their priority. Consultations within the U.S. government are continuing on the best way forward.

As we foster the conditions for direct negotiations among Afghans, we are taking steps to rationalize our risk and exposure in Afghanistan, to ensure a sustainable diplomatic, assistance, and military presence. Our focus on a sustainable level of commitment sends an important message to the Afghan government that they must accelerate their own development on the path to self-reliance and identify ways to reduce their dependence on the American people. It also sends a clear message to the Taliban that they cannot simply wait us out to achieve a military victory in Afghanistan that would undo the gains of the last 18 years.

- **Diplomatically**, we have reduced our civilian direct hire presence from over 1,100 personnel in 2011, spread throughout the country, to around 500 dedicated staff today, based in Kabul. We have also consolidated our physical presence in Kabul, closing outlying facilities and reducing the contractor footprint.
- **Developmentally**, we have responsibly tapered our civilian assistance from over \$4 billion in 2010 to approximately \$500 million per year today – focusing on the most urgent humanitarian needs and initiatives designed to increase Afghan self-sufficiency. We continue to seek greater burden-sharing and this week are convening with like-minded partners in London for important discussions on the principles and approaches that will guide donor contributions to the implementation of any future peace agreement. At the 2012 Tokyo Donors Conference, the United States accounted for 50 percent of civilian donor assistance to Afghanistan. Today, thanks to the increased contributions of our donor partners, the United States contributes only 25 percent of total humanitarian and development assistance to Afghanistan.
- **Militarily**, we have reduced our military presence from over 100,000 troops in 2011, to less than 14,000 men and women today, with the NATO Resolute Support Mission constantly evaluating the requirements of its Train, Advise, and Assist Mission. We do this in partnership with an international community that shares our concerns over the threat posed by the insurgency and the terrorist eco-system it has spawned. We are working alongside 39 NATO Allies and Partners as part of the Resolute Support Mission to train, advise and assist the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces. We have committed \$4 billion per year to sustain the ANDSF – which bears the brunt of the fight against terrorism. Our NATO Allies have joined us in committing to fund the ANDSF through 2024.

Thanks to our diplomatic, development and security efforts, Afghanistan is a different country than the one we entered in late 2001. Afghan troops are increasingly leading the fight against ISIS-K and the Taliban, backed by the small, but critical support mission of United States and international partners. Today, more than 57 percent of Afghans have access to basic healthcare, compared to 9 percent in 2002. Over half of the Afghan population today has access to electricity, 30 percent via a power grid, compared to only 6 percent in 2001. More than 2,000 kilometers of roads have been constructed and rehabilitated, allowing Afghans to travel and trade. Over 9 million students are enrolled in school, 39 percent of them girls. Over 1 million Afghans have received advanced education, with over 100,000 women enrolled in public and private universities. One-third of the approximately 4 million voters in the 2018 parliamentary election were women, with over 400 female candidates running for office. Afghan farmers are beginning to export high value crops, with a nascent private sector strengthening supply chains and building market linkages. Afghanistan is trading more with its Central Asian neighbors, diversifying the country's markets for energy supplies and exports, and finding new markets in India. This new generation of Afghans lives in one of the most open media environments in South Asia, with access to a large and diverse array of information sources promoting vigorous public dialogue.

But the challenges remain daunting. The number of Afghans living in poverty increased from 36 percent in 2007 to over 50 percent in 2017. Corruption, government malfeasance, record-high opium production, and criminalization of the economy continue to be the greatest threats to the sustainability of what Afghans, the United States and our partners have sacrificed to achieve in Afghanistan. The lack of security and criminality prevent Afghanistan from commercially exploiting its natural resources or serving as a natural transit route for landlocked Central Asia. The Afghan government needs to live up to its commitments to the international community, as well as to its own people. We will continue to hold the Afghan government accountable for its progress in combatting corruption and will adjust our assistance levels accordingly.

Afghanistan will hold a presidential election on September 28. We have called repeatedly for the Afghan government and electoral institutions to make preparations for the election to be credible and transparent, particularly given the deficiencies of the 2018 parliamentary election. We hold all candidates accountable to the code of conduct they signed. The Afghan government is fully responsible for administering the presidential election and has allocated \$90 million from its budget to administer the polls, complemented by \$60 million from the donor community. The use of polling center-based voter registration lists has the potential to curb industrial level corruption, but the Government of Afghanistan and its electoral institutions will need to demonstrate a higher level of technical competence than was seen in the parliamentary elections. The 24 percent reduction in polling centers as compared to the 2014 elections is the reality of a deteriorated security landscape.

Afghan voters have the right to go to polling centers on election day without fear of intimidation, attack, or violence. The Taliban statements threatening election workers and voters are naked intimidation of a population that the insurgents have only been able to subjugate by fear. Any attempt to intimidate, coerce, or buy voters is an attack on democracy. We offer our strong support to the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces, who are in charge of electoral security and day-in and day-out sacrifice their lives for the cause of peace and stability.

Even as Afghanistan goes to the polls, it cannot pause its efforts to advance peace. The intra-Afghan dialogue on peace must continue. Every Afghan is a victim of the last forty years of violence. Every Afghan must be invested in a political process that brings security and reconciliation. No political party or group can monopolize or dictate peace.

The United States will continue to support efforts to achieve an honorable and enduring outcome in Afghanistan that preserves our investment in Afghanistan's future. For too long the Taliban have taken comfort in their conviction that our fight is unsustainable. Our friends and adversaries should understand that our interest in protecting American citizens is enduring, as we advance a responsible way forward toward peace, development, and security in Afghanistan.