

Special Representative for Afghanistan Thomas West
Written Statement
“Examining the Biden Administration’s Afghanistan Policy Since the U.S.
Withdrawal: Part II”
House Foreign Affairs Committee
Subcommittee on Middle East, North Africa, and Central Asia
Thursday, January 11, 2024

Chairman Wilson, Ranking Member Phillips, distinguished members of the subcommittee: thank you for the invitation to discuss the Biden-Harris Administration’s Afghanistan policy.

I would like to acknowledge the many Americans who served and sacrificed in Afghanistan since 2001, including members of this committee. Almost 800,000 people deployed to Afghanistan over the course of our 20-year commitment. Over 2,400 American Service Members died from combat and non-combat causes in Afghanistan. Many thousands of diplomats, development workers, other civilians, and contractors also served, and some made the ultimate sacrifice.

In the two years since the United States and our allies completed our military withdrawal from Afghanistan, the Biden Administration’s policy has focused on advancing and protecting American interests and continuing to support the Afghan people. In my remarks today, I will focus on where we stand in terms of our national interests, the enormous challenges that Afghans face today, and the path ahead.

Our most critical enduring interest in Afghanistan is to ensure that it never again becomes a launching pad for terrorist attacks against the United States or our allies. We have reorganized our counterterrorism capabilities to monitor and to prevent the reemergence of terrorist threats from Afghanistan.

Al-Qa’ida’s ability to threaten the United States from Afghanistan or Pakistan is at a low point since the group relocated to Afghanistan from Sudan in 1996. Al-Qa’ida’s low capability is the result of successful counterterrorism action by the United States and its allies over 20 years. The Taliban’s sheltering of al-Qa’ida leader Ayman al-Zawahiri in a safe house in Kabul was a flagrant violation of their

security commitments. Since then, we assess that the Taliban have undertaken efforts to fulfill their security commitments with regard to al-Qa'ida.

The terrorist group whose capabilities and intent concern us the most in Afghanistan is the Islamic State branch there, Islamic State Khorasan Province, or ISIS-K. ISIS-K harbors clear intent to launch external attacks, and we monitor their capabilities and planning vigilantly. The Taliban have waged an aggressive campaign against ISIS-K, which has taken out senior attack plotters, including the architect of the August 26, 2021 Abbey Gate attacks, and degraded ISIS-K external operations capabilities.

We monitor and are concerned about additional terrorist groups, including Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), which has increased its attacks against Pakistani territory, security personnel, and civilians.

U.S. citizens are currently being wrongfully detained by the Taliban, and we are working actively to secure their release. During my time as Special Representative for Afghanistan and with the help of colleagues like Special Presidential Envoy for Hostage Affairs Roger Carstens, we have successfully returned several U.S. citizens held by the Taliban to their families. We remain in close contact with the families of U.S. citizens held by the Taliban. Securing the release of these Americans is among the Administration's highest priorities in engagements with Taliban representatives.

The humanitarian and economic crises in Afghanistan are staggering in scope, and addressing Afghans' urgent needs is a policy priority. With thanks to Congress for its support, the United States has been the leading provider of humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan, contributing more than \$2 billion since August 2021. That assistance has reached millions of Afghans, helped to improve food security, and addressed urgent needs after natural disasters. All U.S. assistance to Afghanistan is channeled through UN bodies and international and local NGOs, not the Taliban. My USAID colleague, Assistant Administrator Schiffer, can speak to our rigorous oversight mechanisms in greater detail.

U.S. efforts on Afghanistan are closely coordinated with allies, partners, and UN bodies and leadership. The United States has also worked closely with fellow major donors to push International Financial Institutions, including the World

Bank and the Asian Development Bank, to make available additional resources to meet Afghans' basic needs.

As we seek to address the urgent needs of all Afghans, we are reminded daily that nowhere in the world are women and girls more repressed than in Afghanistan – the result of reprehensible Taliban policies. Due to the Taliban's discriminatory policies, women and girls are barred from attending university and secondary school, prevented from holding jobs in many sectors, and limited from participating in public life. Women's freedom of movement and of expression is heavily constrained; many of those who do speak up have been imprisoned and physically abused by the Taliban.

Our policy in Afghanistan prioritizes the centrality of respect for human rights, and particularly of women and girls' rights, to Afghanistan's future stability and prosperity. We have emphasized to the Taliban that the normalization they seek is unreachable without a radical shift in their human rights conduct, in particular their treatment of half of Afghanistan's population. That is why Secretary Blinken appointed my colleague, Rina Amiri, as Special Envoy for Afghan Women, Girls, and Human Rights. She and I work closely together, and you will hear from her today regarding her efforts to support the rights of women and girls in Afghanistan.

We continue to enable and support the resettlement of Afghans who worked alongside us during our 20-year presence in the country. This effort is led by the Office of the Coordinator for Afghan Relocation Efforts, and it is one that the Congress has likewise strongly supported. We are grateful for it.

In all of our lines of effort on Afghanistan, we have sought to build consensus within the international community regarding our collective interests and, importantly, what changes in Taliban conduct would earn consideration of greater integration of Afghanistan in the international community. In this regard, we support UN Security Council Resolution 2721 and the recommendation of UN Special Coordinator Sinirlioglu for the appointment of a UN Envoy to Afghanistan. Such an Envoy should develop a roadmap that outlines Taliban delivery on international priorities in return for steps toward normalization.

Thank you for your time today. I welcome your questions.