

# Congress of the United States

## House of Representatives

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### Opening Statement

**Chairman Stephen F. Lynch**

**Subcommittee on National Security**

**“Examining the Trump Administration’s Afghanistan Strategy”**

**January 28, 2020**

Good morning, everyone. And welcome to the Subcommittee on National Security’s first hearing of 2020. We begin this year as we did in 2019, with an examination of the U.S. war in Afghanistan. After 18 years, the war in Afghanistan is now the United States’ longest-running conflict and has taken the lives of 2,400 of our brave men and women in uniform and come at the cost of hundreds of billions of taxpayer dollars.

Unfortunately, after almost two decades of fighting al Qaeda and the Taliban, the situation in Afghanistan has continued to deteriorate and, today, is at best a stalemate. Today, the Government of Afghanistan lacks control over about half of the country and it is estimated that the Taliban now has about 60,000 full-time fighters, compared to 20,000 in 2014. Meanwhile, ISIS-Khorasan, the Afghanistan branch of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, today comprises between 2,000 and 4,000 fighters and continues to plot terrorist attacks against the United States and other Western targets.

Today’s hearing also comes after The Washington Post last month published hundreds of documents that reveal long-standing policy failures by multiple administrations in Afghanistan. These so-called “Afghanistan Papers” were originally compiled by the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, or SIGAR, as part of the agency’s lessons-learned project, and demonstrate how successive administrations have misled the American people about the conflict in Afghanistan.

For example, Douglas Lute, the “war czar” for Presidents Bush and Obama, told SIGAR the U.S. was “devoid of a fundamental understanding of Afghanistan – we didn’t know what we were doing.” Other interviewees described efforts to distort statistics in order to hide a lack of progress in Afghanistan. U.S. military advisor and retired Army Colonel Bob Crowley told SIGAR that surveys were “totally unreliable but reinforced that everything we were doing was right and we became a self-licking ice cream cone.”

The Trump Administration’s stated objectives in Afghanistan are to, quote, “achieve a peace agreement that ensures Afghan soil is never used again by terrorists against the United States, its allies, or any country and allows American troops to return home.” And, in August 2017, President Trump stated that “conditions on the ground – not arbitrary timetables – will guide our strategy.”

The purpose of today’s hearing is to examine that strategy. Unfortunately, despite repeated invitations, the Department of State and the Department of Defense refused to make witnesses available to testify today.

That's very disappointing, because I'm concerned that rather than implementing a coherent Afghanistan strategy, U.S. policy in the region is instead being driven by the latest impulse of the commander-in-chief.

For example, in September 2019, just days after Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad announced the U.S. was nearing an agreement with the Taliban, President Trump abruptly and publicly cancelled a secret meeting with Taliban leadership at Camp David. He subsequently declared negotiations with the Taliban "dead," only to restart them months later.

President Trump and officials in his administration have also publicly acknowledged the United States' intent to withdraw from Afghanistan - with or without a deal with the Taliban - undermining our diplomats' leverage at the bargaining table. Earlier this month, National Security Advisor Robert O'Brien said in an interview, "I think we'll be in a position at some point soon, whether it's with a deal or without a deal, to reduce our military footprint in Afghanistan." And, in December 2019, Secretary of Defense Esper stated the U.S. could lower its force presence in Afghanistan "with or without a political agreement."

While we all desire to bring our sons and daughters home from nearly two-decades at war, we must do so in a way that promotes our national security objectives. To echo Special Inspector General Sopko when he testified before our Subcommittee last year, we must plan not just for the day after a U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, but for the months and years that follow. Only by doing so can we ensure the gains we have made for democracy and women's rights in Afghanistan are not lost, and the sacrifices of our men and women in uniform have not been made in vain.

It is therefore all the more urgent for Congress to exercise its Constitutional responsibility to conduct oversight of the Trump Administration's strategy in Afghanistan and for the Administration to come before Congress. Their refusal to do so today is extraordinarily troubling. By failing to appear, the Trump Administration is obstructing Members of Congress - of both parties - from evaluating U.S. policy in the region and denying the American people the answers they deserve about the war they have already sacrificed tremendously for.

That being said, I'd like to thank Special Inspector General Sopko for being here today. Although Mr. Sopko is not an Administration witness, nor does he represent the views of the Trump Administration, he has served a critical oversight function for many years, identifying waste, fraud, and abuse across U.S. reconstruction programs in Afghanistan, and I look forward to his continued insights as our Subcommittee examines the potential national security consequences of an anticipated withdrawal from Afghanistan.

Before I turn to the Ranking Member, I'd like to acknowledge that yesterday, military officials confirmed that a U.S. aircraft crashed earlier this week in Taliban-controlled territory near Kabul. Although initial reports about the cause and extent of the damage are still coming in, I certainly hope that all passengers and crew are safe and accounted for.

I now yield to the Ranking Member, Mr. Hice of Georgia, for his opening statement.

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