

**Opening Statement on Nomination of Lieutenant General John W. Nicholson
Chairman John McCain
January 28, 2016**

The Senate Armed Services Committee meets this morning to consider the nomination of Lieutenant General John Nicholson to be the next commander of U.S. and coalition forces in Afghanistan. General, congratulations on your nomination and welcome. As is our tradition, General Nicholson, we hope you will take the opportunity to introduce any family and friends joining you today.

I would like to begin by thanking General Campbell for his many years of distinguished service and his leadership in Afghanistan at a critical time. He presided over important progress in improving the capability and capacity of the Afghan military and developed a strong and productive relationship with the Afghan unity government. But when he saw that progress was in danger, he insisted that further troop withdrawals should be based on conditions on the ground.

While President Obama decided to keep 9,800 U.S. troops in Afghanistan beyond 2016, conditions on the ground in Afghanistan today clearly demand an immediate reevaluation of scheduled American troop withdrawals and this Administration's continued adherence to a calendar-based withdrawal.

In 2001, American forces went to Afghanistan because that was where, under the sanctuary of the Taliban regime, al-Qaeda planned and conducted initial training for the September 11th attacks that killed 3,000 innocent civilians on American soil. Our mission was to ensure that Afghanistan would never again be a safe haven for al-Qaeda or other terrorist groups to attack the United States. That mission has been successful for fourteen years, but it is far from over.

American forces are carrying out that mission today by performing two critical tasks: counterterrorism and training and advising our Afghan partners. But the reality is that the 5,500 American troops that will be left in Afghanistan at the end of this year after scheduled withdrawals will be adequate for one or the other of these critical tasks, but not both. This smaller American force will inevitably be forced to shoulder a higher level of risk to be successful. Put another way, the individual American service member deployed to Afghanistan is safer as part of a force of 9,800 than a force of 5,500.

The risks to American forces only grow worse as the terrorist threat in Afghanistan intensifies. We are now confronting threats from a resurgent Taliban, a reviving al-Qaeda, and a rising ISIL. ISIL's sanctuary in Syria has been deadly enough. We cannot afford another one in Afghanistan. This complex and expanding terrorist threat tests both our own counterterrorism capacity as well as the capability and capacity of the Afghan military, which is still developing key enablers including intelligence, logistics, special forces, air lift, and close air support.

By now, we should have learned from the precipitous withdrawal from Iraq and the disaster that ensued that wars do not end because politicians say so. Nor will any politician be able to schedule an end to the threat of radical Islamist terrorism emanating from Afghanistan or the region more broadly.

That is why, as the security situation in Afghanistan continues to deteriorate, it makes no strategic or military sense to continue the withdrawal of American forces. Indeed, our military commanders increasingly realize that preventing the reemergence of terrorist safe havens in Afghanistan will require a long-term partnership with Afghan government and military similar to the U.S. role in South Korea or Colombia.

The world walked away from Afghanistan once before, and it descended into chaos that contributed to the worst terrorist attack ever against our homeland. We cannot afford to repeat that mistake, because the threats we face are real and the stakes are high for the lives of the Afghan people, for the stability of the region, and for the national security of the United States.

President Obama cannot turn back the clock on decisions made four years ago in Iraq, but he can make decisions now that will empower his successor to do what is necessary to confront the challenges we will face in Afghanistan in 2017 and beyond. It is time to immediately halt U.S. troop withdrawals and eliminate any target date for withdrawal. That will allow American forces to perform the vital tasks of eliminating terrorist threats and building the capacity and capability of Afghan military. And it will send a powerful signal to the Taliban that it cannot simply wait out the United States and that we will not abandon Afghanistan to tyranny and terror again.

General Nicholson, I look forward to your testimony and your assessment of the way ahead.