

**Opening Statement on the Situation in Afghanistan**  
**Chairman John McCain**  
**February 9, 2017**

The Senate Armed Services Committee meets this morning to receive testimony on the situation in Afghanistan. I am pleased to welcome General John Nicholson back to the committee. We thank you for your many years of distinguished service and your leadership of U.S. and allied forces in Afghanistan at a critical time. And we would ask you to relay to the brave men and women fighting under your command how appreciative and how proud we are of their service.

America has been at war in Afghanistan for more than a decade-and-a-half. But it is always worth remembering that American forces went to Afghanistan because that was where, under the sanctuary of the Taliban regime, al-Qaeda planned and trained for the September 11<sup>th</sup> 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 America or our allies and partners. That mission has been successful for fifteen years, but it is not over.

American forces are carrying out that mission today by performing two critical tasks: counterterrorism and training, advising, and assisting our Afghan partners. Both of these tasks are vital to achieving our strategic goals and protecting our homeland. We are taking the fight to America's enemies in Afghanistan while at the same time building a sustainable Afghan security force that can stand on its own, take on violent extremists, and deny terrorists safe haven in their country.

Unfortunately, in recent years, we've tied the hands of our military in Afghanistan, and instead of trying to win, we settled for just trying not to lose.

Time and time again, we saw troop withdrawals that seemed to have a lot more to do with American politics than conditions on the ground in Afghanistan. The fixation with so-called "force management levels" in Afghanistan, as well as in Iraq and Syria, seemed more about measuring troop levels than measuring success.

Authorities were also tightly restricted. Until last summer, our military was prohibited from targeting the Taliban, except in the most extreme circumstances, taking the pressure off the militants and allowing them to rebuild and reattack. Indeed, while we were fighting ISIS in Syria and Iraq, authorities in Afghanistan were so restrictive that it took an entire year before American forces were finally given authority to strike ISIS fighters in Afghanistan.

In short, for too long, our strategy in Afghanistan has been “don’t lose.” Meanwhile, the risk to American and Afghan forces has only grown worse as the terrorist threat has intensified.

The Taliban has grown more lethal, expanded its territorial control, and inflicted heavy casualties on Afghan forces. In October, the Taliban launched multiple concurrent offensives that seriously threatened four provincial capitals. While Afghan forces, with U.S. support, successfully defended those capitals, the Taliban seized the initiative, kept the pressure on Afghan forces, and captured new ground.

In Afghanistan, as we have seen elsewhere around the world, as America has pulled back, vacuums have opened up and been filled by more of our enemies. Al-Qaeda and the Haqqani Network continue to threaten our interests in Afghanistan and beyond. ISIS is trying to carve out another safe haven from which it can plan and execute attacks. Iran is reportedly arming and funding the Taliban. And as if the situation were not complicated enough, Russia is now meddling in Afghanistan in an apparent attempt to prop up the Taliban and undermine the United States.

I want to stress an important point: Afghans are in the fight. They are not looking to us or anyone else to do their fighting for them. They are proud people who want to defend their own country. And they are taking significant casualties. At the same time, they want and need our continued assistance: It is in our interest to help our Afghan partners become capable of standing on their own, defending their own country, and defeating our common enemies with less and less U.S. assistance.

Securing Afghanistan and preventing another attack on our homeland requires the right number of people in the right places with the right authorities and the right capabilities. This new administration has the opportunity to turn the page and finally give our commanders the resources and authorities they need to seize the initiative and force the enemy to react, instead of the other way around.

This will likely require additional U.S. and coalition forces and more flexible authorities. And it will require sustained support to the Afghan security forces as they develop key enabling capabilities, including intelligence, logistics, special forces, air lift, and close air support. We in the Congress have a vital role to play in providing this support, especially for the Afghan aviation initiative.

Succeeding in Afghanistan will also require a candid evaluation of America’s relationship with Pakistan. Thousands of Pakistanis have served and sacrificed in the fight against our common terrorist enemies. Many gave their lives in recent

counterterrorism operations in North Waziristan. But the fact remains that numerous terrorist groups still operate within Pakistan, attack its neighbors, and kill U.S. forces. Put simply, our mission in Afghanistan is immeasurably more difficult, if not impossible, while our enemies possess a safe haven in Pakistan. These sanctuaries must be eliminated, as Pakistani leaders have committed to doing. The new administration must work with the Congress to determine what additional actions are necessary to ensure that the enemies we continue to fight in Afghanistan can find no quarter in Pakistan or any other country.

America has been at war in Afghanistan for fifteen years. Weary as some Americans may be of this long conflict, it is imperative that we see our mission through to success. We have seen what happens when we fail to be vigilant. The threats we face are real. And the stakes are high—not just for the lives of the Afghan people and the stability of the region, but for America's national security.