

In August, we finally ended twenty years of war in Afghanistan. Almost 125,000 people were airlifted out of the country in a few short weeks, because of the skill and courage of our troops and our diplomats and other humanitarian workers on the ground.

Today, our servicemembers are out of harm's way for the first time in two decades, while thousands of Afghans are starting a better life in this country. We welcome these refugees seeking freedom, just as our country has done for generations.

But in the midst of the evacuation, we also saw a country in turmoil. An Islamic State suicide bomb attack near the airport killed 13 US troops and scores of innocent Afghan men, women, and children. Navy Corpsman Max Soviak of Berlin Heights, Ohio was among those killed in action, and died a hero in service of his country, working to evacuate vulnerable Afghans and protect fellow Americans.

Even after the evacuation ended, tens of thousands of Special Immigrant Visa applicants and other vulnerable Afghans remain in Afghanistan, along with many American citizens or legal permanent residents of the US, including some of my constituents.

It's now clear that the agreement former President Trump reached with the Taliban, which provided for the final phase of the U.S. withdrawal process and the release of around 5,000 battle-hardened Taliban prisoners, was flawed. Many of those released Taliban prisoners contributed to the Taliban's quick seizure of the country.

President Biden, understandably reluctant to keep or expand the number of American troops in harm's way while working out a better deal, observed that agreement.

It's also clear that the Biden administration and U.S. officials at many levels failed to anticipate the rapid fall of the Afghan government. And it's obvious that the execution of the withdrawal was flawed.

We also now know, of course, that the Taliban never intended, as they claimed, to pursue a peaceful path, a more democratic path, with a broader government with representatives from a diverse range of ethnic groups and civil society actors. They refuse to reject relationships with terrorists like the Haqqani network and *al Qaeda*.

Three different Committees chaired by Banking Committee colleagues – Senator Menendez with Senate Foreign Relations, Senator Warner with Senate Intelligence, and Senator Reed with Armed Services – have begun thorough reviews, including a series of hearings which will assess the many decisions, including mistakes made along the way by subsequent administrations, and possibly by Congress, over 20 years in Afghanistan.

What is abundantly clear is that before we send our servicemembers into another conflict, we must make sure that military engagement is truly a last resort, and that we know how we will extricate ourselves from military conflicts before we get ourselves into them.

Today, the focus of this hearing is to look forward – to envision what we can do to address the urgent economic and humanitarian crisis facing the country in the wake of the Taliban takeover, and to assess the role of economic and financial sanctions and other counterterrorism tools against the Taliban, tools within this Committee’s jurisdiction.

With as much as 30 percent unemployment, a brain drain of its most capable young people, enduring deep poverty, an ongoing drought, the Covid crisis, and the collapse of Afghanistan’s economy looming, the people of Afghanistan need help.

We must consider how the United States can maintain the flow of humanitarian assistance and family remittances, while ensuring that aid does not fall into the wrong hands.

This aid has been a lifeline to the people of Afghanistan. Millions rely on it. It must continue, even while we deny access to funds to terrorist actors like the Taliban, *al Qaeda* and the Haqqani network.

As we will hear today, that is no small task – but it is essential. The lives and livelihoods of millions of Afghans may depend on it. We owe them that much.

And we must do this while protecting the security of Americans and preventing Afghanistan from once again emerging as a terrorist safe haven.

The Administration has made clear the Taliban should be judged by their actions over time, and that any decisions regarding diplomatic recognition or the release of billions in frozen Afghan government reserves is far off. They have a clear-eyed realism about who the Taliban are, while at the same time recognizing, along with our allies, that they control the government and thus we must engage them, and when necessary, hold them accountable for abuses.

If the last month is any indication, the Taliban are not moderating their positions.

They have appointed brutal old guard Taliban members to serve in the interim government, including the leader of the terrorist Haqqani network as Minister of the Interior. They have threatened, harassed and attacked women and girls who were demonstrating to retain their hard-fought freedoms. They closed Kabul’s premier university to women faculty and students. They converted the former Ministry of Women’s Affairs into the old, notorious Ministry of Vice and Virtue – a pretty grotesque irony.

They have harassed, beaten, and killed journalists and members of other ethnic groups, they started a return to grisly public executions of alleged lawbreakers, and threatened a return to public amputations.

The situation grows more dire each day. We must get to work.

We know that China, Russia, and other countries that do not share our values are already engaging in Afghanistan – and they have few qualms about funds falling into the wrong hands.

It's up to us to show the Afghan people, and people around the world, that the U.S. will continue to be a beacon of hope and a source of humanitarian relief.

I am eager to hear today from our four witnesses, who will share their unique perspectives with us. We welcome you all to the committee, in person and remotely, and look forward to your testimony.