

Senate Banking Committee Testimony by Naheed Farid, Chairperson of House Standing Committee for Human Rights, Civil Society and Women Affairs- Afghanistan Parliament

Thank you to the committee for inviting me to speak today. Chairman Brown, Ranking member Toomey, members of the committee, my name is Naheed Farid. I am a member of Parliament from Afghanistan representing the people of Herat, which is my hometown. I have served in Parliament for more than 11 years and since 2019 I have been the Chairperson of the Human Rights Civil Society and Women's Affairs Committee. Here in Washington, D.C. I serve on the advisory board of the Afghanistan-U.S. Democratic Peace and Prosperity Council.

I appear before you today still in shock that the Taliban, the Haqqani Network and Al Qaeda have taken over Afghanistan. For years my family and I have faced death threats from the Taliban. I cannot count how many friends and colleagues I have lost to Taliban violence and targeted assassinations. A week before they took Kabul, the Taliban entered Herat, found my house, searched for my family. Luckily, my family and I were able to escape with just the clothes on our backs. We fled to safety and now I'm among thousands of displaced women, who left our lives behind, not knowing if and when we will ever return.

For Afghan women of my generation, we remember the Taliban from the 1990's. Their sudden takeover of the country brings back so many nightmares. When I was a girl growing up in Herat, I loved going to school and I dreamed of one day becoming a pilot. When the Taliban took control, they closed my school, and I was forced to spend most of my time at home with female relatives.

Today what we as Afghan women have known all along is clear for the world to see. The Taliban cannot be trusted. They are rolling back all of the gains of the past twenty years and reinstating their draconian rules. Afghan women and girls face a return to the 1990's. The Taliban have stripped most women of the ability to work, girls cannot attend secondary schools, young women who grew up in a free and open society are now living in fear.

Make no mistake, the Taliban govern through fear. Their soldiers indiscriminately whip civilians in the street. They have resumed public executions and mutilations. They have committed forced displacements and atrocities against Tajiks and Hazaras in Panjshir, Daikundi and other places. They have curbed free speech and decimated Afghanistan's once-thriving media sector. The Haqqani Network, Al Qaeda and other dangerous terrorist groups now operate freely in Afghanistan and have significant control within the Taliban leadership.

So how can Congress help the Afghan people? I have had so many meetings with Members of Congress these past few years and I know that so many of you feel a deep bond with the Afghan people and especially with Afghan women. What the Afghan people need right now are three things: immediate humanitarian assistance, legislation that prohibits US recognition and normalization of relations with the Taliban, and support for local NGO's and civil society who can deliver basic services in the absence of a normal government.

Afghanistan faces a dire humanitarian crisis. The healthcare system, which was reliant on direct payments from international donors, is on the brink of collapse. There are millions of Internally Displaced Persons unable to return to their homes. More than half of the population faces food insecurity. Without outside assistance more Afghans will suffer and die. But, the Taliban cannot be allowed to set terms and conditions on how this humanitarian assistance is delivered and who it is delivered to. Humanitarian corridors need to be established where international and local NGOs can do their work without any interference from the Taliban.

The Taliban regime cannot be trusted. Because of their hardline beliefs and their partnership with dangerous terrorist groups, the Taliban pose an imminent threat to the region and the world. No US administration or US allies should recognize the Taliban regime, nor should they normalize relations unless and until the Taliban purge their ranks of known terrorists and deliver a pluralistic political system that provides equality to all Afghans. I urge the members of this Committee to support legislation preventing Taliban recognition. There are two different pieces of legislation that have already been introduced in Congress- the Taliban Recognition Prevention Act in the House, and the Afghanistan Counterterrorism, Oversight and Accountability Act in the Senate. I urge you to act quickly and in a bipartisan way to pass legislation to this effect.

Not only can't the Taliban regime be trusted, it also has minimal capacity for governance. Very few of the technocrats that remain in the country are willing to resume their jobs at the various ministries. We are witnessing the breakdown in basic services such as healthcare, education, banking and finance, aviation, and many others. The US should not provide the Taliban with capacity building support. Instead the US should provide direct support to Afghan NGOs and civil society. As someone with a background in non-profit management and a family foundation that has built many schools for girls throughout Afghanistan, I know firsthand just how valuable local NGOs are to so many ordinary Afghans, especially to women and girls. The US government must find ways to provide funding, capacity building and support to these local organizations who are on the ground helping Afghans.

A free and democratic Afghanistan that I committed my life to build, the Afghanistan that me and my generation, and the Gen z'ers that followed us, love, and cherish, that Afghanistan still exists. It exists in the pulse of our cities, in our green landscapes and in our rugged terrain. A free and democratic Afghanistan exists in our hearts and our minds. We will reclaim this dream that the Taliban took away from us. We will fight them, on all levels, until they give us our freedom back. I just hope that our allies in the US Congress, those whose ideals we embraced and whose encouragement we accepted at face value, continue to stand with us during this, our greatest time of need and show the world once again that it can lead and be a force for positive change.

Thank you!