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Opening Statement

Full Committee Hearing: Afghanistan's Future: Assessing the National Security, Humanitarian and Economic Implications of the Taliban Takeover
October 5, 2021 at 10:00 AM

Mr. Chairman, thank you.

Last month, we all watched in horror as chaos unfolded at Kabul's airport. This administration's flawed decisions resulted in an utterly catastrophic evacuation from Afghanistan. Responsibility for this withdrawal— notwithstanding our severely flawed negotiations with the Taliban under the previous administration—lies with President Biden.

To be clear, I felt at the time and still believe that it was wrong for the previous administration to negotiate with the Taliban to the exclusion of the legitimately-elected Afghan government, and to agree to a full withdrawal of U.S. troops. However, at least that agreement was conditioned on the Taliban fulfilling certain political commitments, including achieving a "permanent and comprehensive ceasefire," and agreeing upon a "political roadmap" for Afghanistan's future. Since it's universally acknowledged that the Taliban failed to live up to these conditions, the Biden administration could have chosen a different path and adjusted their withdrawal plan without even having violated the prior agreement. Tragically, they did not.

We know from recent congressional testimony that President Biden ignored the counsel of DOD officials to keep a military presence in the country longer. We also know from recent media reporting that the DOD urged the administration to begin the evacuation of Americans months earlier. Had the president listened to this advice, America could've ended—not continued, as the president claims, but responsibly ended—our involvement in this war on our own terms. Instead, the terms of our chaotic exit were set by the Taliban, a terrorist group we've been at war with for 20 years.

Amazingly, the administration entrusted the "safe passage" of Americans, green card holders, and vulnerable Afghans to evacuate the country to the Taliban, and did not publicly question or challenge the Taliban's threats that

we depart by August 31st. So it's no wonder that, contrary to President Biden's assertion that the U.S. would stay until every American was able to leave, hundreds of American citizens and legal permanent residents were left behind—including Pennsylvanians.

One such Pennsylvanian American citizen, a mother of four, works at a middle school in the Lehigh Valley. During the evacuation operations in Kabul, she repeatedly tried and failed to make it to the airport. Once she was teargassed. Another time she nearly had her passport seized by a Taliban militant. She was just blocks away when the suicide attack at the airport killed 13 U.S. service members and nearly 200 Afghans.

The only way she escaped Afghanistan was because a veterans' group operating on the ground found her, protected her, and got her on a flight on September 10th. It's unbelievable to me that a group of Americans—civilians—had to save this woman's life because her own government abandoned her. And now, as a direct result of the humiliating unnecessary surrender in Afghanistan, a massive humanitarian disaster appears likely to descend on the Afghan people.

Today, thousands of Americans, green card holders, and Afghan special immigrant visa applicants, who aided the U.S. military, and their families are still trying to escape this disaster. And, of course, the Afghan people, including vulnerable women, girls, and minorities now face violence, systematic repression, and the denial of their basic rights under Taliban rule—something they have not known for two decades.

The Biden administration has said repeatedly that the Taliban must cut ties with terrorist groups, ensure the rights of women and girls, conduct no revenge killings against our Afghan partners, and allow Americans, green card holders, and SIVs and their families to leave the country freely.

As we will hear today, the Taliban is failing on all of these fronts. They are a brutal, murderous, terrorist group intertwined with al Qaeda. And yet, the administration's current posture seems based on the naïve hope that the Taliban will reform itself now that they have taken power.

The administration may feel pressured to provide sanctions relief to the Taliban to address the acute humanitarian crisis emerging in Afghanistan. But bestowing international legitimacy on the Taliban and allowing them

access to \$7.5 billion dollars at the New York Fed would be a grave mistake. We should be exploring ways to help the Afghan people without empowering the Taliban.

Today we will consider critical issues that will determine whether and how the administration will engage with the Taliban, including the status of sanctions on the Taliban, which is a Specially Designated Global Terrorist organization, now that it controls Afghanistan; the interconnectedness of al Qaeda and the Haqqani Network with the Taliban and any new sanctions that should be imposed on these groups; the acute risk of Afghanistan becoming an epicenter of money laundering and terrorist financing; Treasury's policies permitting humanitarian aid to continue flowing to the Afghan people; the current and future status of the \$7.5 billion in Afghan foreign reserves kept at the New York Fed; and Afghanistan's \$500 million in Special Drawing Rights held at the IMF.

I look forward to hearing from today's witnesses about these issues.