



February 9, 2017

Situation in Afghanistan

Committee on Armed Services, United States Senate, One Hundred
Fifteenth Congress, First Session

HEARING CONTENTS:

Member Statements

John McCain

[\[View Statement\]](#)

Jack Reed

[\[View Statement\]](#)

Witnesses

General John W. Nicholson, Jr.
Commander, Resolute Support Commander
United States Forces-Afghanistan

[\[View Testimony\]](#)

Available Webcast(s)*:

<https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/hearings/watch?hearingid=0517A5AD-5056-A066-6006-BE0A87171A9D>

Compiled From*:

<https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/hearings/17-02-09-situation-in-afghanistan>

** Please Note: External links included in this compilation were functional at the time of its creation but are not maintained thereafter.*

*This hearing compilation was prepared by the Homeland Security Digital Library,
Naval Postgraduate School, Center for Homeland Defense and Security.*

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 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 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.

**OPENING STATEMENT OF U.S. SENATOR JACK REED
RANKING MEMBER, SENATE ARMED SERVICES COMMITTEE**

**ROOM SD-G50
DIRKSEN SENATE OFFICE BUILDING
Thursday, February 9, 2017**

To receive testimony on the situation in Afghanistan

(As Prepared for Delivery)

Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. I would like to join you in welcoming back General John Nicholson. Thank you General, for being with us today.

As General Nicholson often points out, the Afghanistan-Pakistan region is home to the highest concentration of designated terrorist organizations in the world. Given this context, it is important that the United States, in conjunction with NATO and our other allies, continue our commitment to the security and stability of Afghanistan. Furthermore, Pakistani support for extremist groups operating in Afghanistan, whether it is passive or deliberate, must end if Afghanistan is to achieve necessary levels of security.

Decisions made last year by President Obama to maintain approximately 8,400 troops in Afghanistan into 2017 and to provide robust support to the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces, or ANDSF, laid the foundation for a sustainable U.S. and international security presence in Afghanistan. The decisions also sent an important message to Afghans, the Taliban, and others in the region – including Pakistan – regarding the commitment of the United States to continued progress in Afghanistan. Assuming the continued invitation of the Afghan Government and the support of its people, I believe we should adopt a conditions-based approach to our presence in Afghanistan that provides flexibility on the number of military personnel deployed there in support of our longer-term strategy.

January 2017 marked the second year in which the ANDSF were the chief guarantors of security in Afghanistan. These forces continue to demonstrate determination and operational cohesion, even as they have been confronted by an array of challenges, including intensified urban combat, increased casualties, and a nearly continuous conflict that has hindered their ability to rest and refit. This

sustained operational tempo is also a challenge to the ongoing Coalition training efforts and contributed to the difficulties of recruiting and retaining troops.

In addition, sustained combat operations have taken a particular toll on the Afghan Special Operations Forces, the most capable of the Afghan security forces, who have been relied upon heavily to retake territory from the Taliban. An over-reliance on their special capabilities is resulting in an unsustainable operational tempo and level of casualties. General Nicholson, I look forward to your assessment of the performance of the Afghan forces over the past year and plans for sustaining the force and addressing remaining capability shortfalls.

Afghanistan is, and must remain, a key pillar of our long-term global counterterrorism strategy. We continue to observe more aggressive Taliban operations, capable of pressuring the ANDSF simultaneously on multiple fronts. This is compounded by elements of the so-called “Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant in the Khorasan Province” or ISIL-K, who remain in Afghanistan, despite suffering some significant battlefield losses over the past year. Recently, the Pakistani military has increased operations on their side of the border – this resulted in an increased number of fighters moving into Afghanistan. In addition, elements of al Qaeda, the Taliban, and other associated groups continue to enjoy safe haven along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border. General, it will be important to hear your views on the status of our counterterror fight and the resources you require to continue this mission.

The National Unity Government, led by President Ghani and Chief Executive Officer Abdullah, has demonstrated the will to work through a complex set of issues with the goal of addressing much needed political and governmental reforms. I hope they will continue to demonstrate progress on anti-corruption, economic development, and other governance initiatives which will be central to long-term success. General, I look forward to your assessment of the current political context in which our operations are occurring and the progress made by U.S. Government efforts to in build and reform Afghan institutions.

General Nicholson, I thank you again for your service to your country and I look forward to your testimony.

STATEMENT FOR THE RECORD

BY

GENERAL JOHN W. NICHOLSON

COMMANDER

U.S. FORCES – AFGHANISTAN

BEFORE THE SENATE ARMED SERVICES COMMITTEE

ON

THE SITUATION IN AFGHANISTAN

FEBUARY 9, 2017

Final Version

Contents

Afghanistan Today: The Role of the U.S. and a State of Positive Equilibrium	1
Two Missions: U.S. Counterterrorism and NATO Train, Advise, Assist	2
A Year of Key U.S. and International Policy Decisions Supporting Afghanistan	3
Protecting the U.S. Homeland through Counterterrorism Operations	4
ANDSF Planning for 2016: Developing a Sustainable Security Strategy	6
ANDSF Operations 2016: Tested and Prevailed	6
Critical Factors Affecting the Mission and Equilibrium Favoring the Government	9
Importance of Leadership Development and Other Lessons Learned	11
Offensive Capability: The Afghan Special Forces and Air Force	13
Countering Corruption with Afghan Partners	16
Winter Campaign 2016 – 2017: Leadership, Training, and Sustainment	17
Optimizing USFOR-A Structure to Meet Objectives	18
Looking Ahead: A Critical Partner in a Volatile Region	19

Afghanistan Today: The Role of the U.S. and a State of Positive Equilibrium

Our primary mission remains to protect the homeland by preventing Afghanistan from being used again as a safe haven for terrorists to attack the United States or our allies. U.S. counterterrorism operations this year killed five combatants who were emirs of terrorist or violent extremist organizations (VEO), including Al-Qa'ida (AQ) and the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant – Khorasan Province (ISIL-K). Of the 98 U.S. - designated terrorist organizations globally, 20 are located in the Afghanistan - Pakistan region. This constitutes the highest concentration of terrorist groups anywhere in the world and demonstrates the importance of this mission.

Complementing the U.S. counterterrorism mission in Afghanistan is NATO's Resolute Support Mission. This operation, the largest and longest in NATO's history, focuses on training, advising, and assisting (TAA) the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF) and the Afghan Security Institutions (ASI) to achieve a secure and stable Afghanistan. In 2016 the ANDSF executed their first post-International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) strategy and prevailed in combat against an externally enabled enemy. With the help of Resolute Support TAA and U.S. expeditionary advising and combat enablers, the ANDSF prevented the Taliban from achieving any of their major objectives. The ANDSF's ability to face simultaneity and complexity on the battlefield signals growth in capability. The Afghan Air Force (AAF) was essential to Afghan operations in 2016, but is in dire condition due to an extremely high operational tempo and complications in helicopter maintenance and spare parts availability due to sanctions. Without an AAF transition initiative, the risk to the overall mission success

from a lack of organic aerial mobility and fires will rise for the remainder of 2017 and beyond, putting the ANDSF at risk.

We remain concerned about multiple critical factors, specifically the stability of the Afghan government, ANDSF casualties, the influence of external actors on Afghanistan, including Pakistan, Russia, and Iran, and the convergence of the 20 terrorist groups and three VEOs operating in the region. Other non-military factors such as the economy, governance and corruption, demographics, reconciliation and reintegration, and the influence of the narcotics trade also affect this mission and underscore the need to employ all instruments of U.S. national power with those of our Allies and partners.

We assess the current security situation in Afghanistan as a stalemate where the equilibrium favors the government. Leadership and countering corruption are two areas in which the ANDSF must improve to reduce casualties and increase military capability.

Two Missions: U.S. Counterterrorism and NATO Train, Advise, Assist

Our primary objective is to prevent Afghanistan from being used as a safe haven for terrorists to again attack the United States and our Allies.¹ We work with our NATO Allies, operational partners, and the international community to achieve our remaining objective of a sovereign, secure, stable, and unified Afghanistan.² We execute two narrow, but complementary missions to achieve these objectives:

1. Counterterrorism (CT) consisting of unilateral operations against AQ and its associates and the ISIL-K. We also conduct U.S.- Afghan advise, enable, and

¹ Statement by President Obama on Afghanistan, The White House, 6 July 2016.

² Department of Defense, "Enhancing Security and Stability in Afghanistan," 1 December 2016.

partner operations against other threats and have the shared goal of the defeat of AQ and ISIL-K. Our regional Central Asia South Asia (CASA) CT platform and training, advising, and assistance of Afghan Special Security Forces (ASSF) keep pressure on the terrorist groups in this region, at least half of whom have regional and transnational ambitions.

2. Train, advise, and assist (TAA). U.S. forces execute the TAA mission as part of the 39 nation NATO-led coalition Resolute Support (RS) mission to develop the ASI and ANDSF. A capable and sustainable ANDSF is critical to the independent defense of Afghan sovereignty and deterring long-term instability. It also enables our CT operations and maintains pressure on VEO and irreconcilable insurgent elements who threaten the stability of Afghanistan and the region.

A Year of Key U.S. and International Policy Decisions Supporting Afghanistan

Three crucial U.S. decisions enabled policy success in 2016. First, the decision to strike Taliban Emir Mullah Mansour caused leadership and financial disruption within the Taliban. Next, the authority to use U.S. combat enablers in support of Afghan forces to achieve strategic effects enabled the success of certain ANDSF CT and counter insurgency operations. These combat enablers helped bridge capability gaps from the 2014 transition. Close air support and aerial mobility are the most critical remaining gaps that need to be addressed. Finally, the decision to maintain U.S. troop levels at 8,448 permitted us to restructure our command to advise all Army Corps and Police Zones going into next year. It also has enabled us to use expeditionary advising packages to provide tailored support to the regional ANDSF commands when required.

The cumulative effect of these decisions saw an ANDSF that prevailed in 2016 and prevented the Taliban from achieving any of their major objectives, helped renew international commitment at the NATO Warsaw Summit and EU-hosted Brussels Conference on Afghanistan, and provided great confidence to the people and government of Afghanistan.

At the July 2016 Warsaw Summit, 39 NATO Allies and Resolute Support coalition members, representing one-fifth of the global community, remained committed to providing forces for the Resolute Support Mission beyond 2016. In addition to planned U.S. support, 30 other nations pledged more than \$800M annually to fund the ANDSF until the end of 2020. In late September, India added \$1B to the \$2B it already committed to Afghanistan's development. Seventy-five countries and 26 international organizations met in October for the Brussels Conference on Afghanistan where they confirmed their intention to provide \$15.2B for the period 2017-2020 in support of Afghanistan's development needs. These commitments show the U.S. and international community's resolve to stand by our Afghan partners by continuing capacity building for sustainability and strengthening the fight against terrorism.

Protecting the U.S. Homeland through Counterterrorism Operations

U.S. counterterrorism forces conducted over 350 operations against AQ and ISIL-K in 2016 and killed the emirs of five terror and violent extremist organizations, to include Faruq al-Qatari, the Al-Qa'ida emir for Eastern Afghanistan, along with his deputy, Bilal al Utaybi. As the external operations director, Faruq al-Qatari and his deputy were directly involved in planning threats against the U.S. in the last year. Nearly fifty AQ and

AQ affiliated leaders, facilitators, or key associates were also killed or captured and transferred to the Afghan government, and over 200 AQ and AQ affiliated fighters were killed. Of note, Afghanistan is a unique partner with a host-nation judicial system able to take custody of terrorists, prosecute them, and enter them into their penal system if convicted. Working in a partnered raid with Afghan commandos, our U.S. counterterrorism forces also rescued Haider Gailani, the kidnapped son of the former Pakistani Prime Minister, in a raid against AQ in Eastern Afghanistan.

Working closely with our Afghan partners, U.S. counterterrorism forces also conducted specific counter ISIL-K operations, named GREEN SWORD, during 2016. These operations killed approximately one-third of their fighters, including Emir Hafiz Sayed Khan, and reduced the territory they hold by two-thirds. U.S. forces destroyed two dozen command and control and training structures, disrupted financial support networks, and significantly reduced an ISIL-K sanctuary that existed in Nangarhar Province since early 2015 from nine to three districts.

Besides Mullah Mansour, Faruq al-Qatari and Hafiz Sayed Khan, there was also the strike against Hamidullah, the emir of the Islamic Jihad Union, and the strike against Omar Khalifa, emir of the Tariq Gidar Group. Omar Khalifa was the mastermind of multiple attacks in Pakistan, including the horrendous attack on the Peshawar Army Public School that killed 150 civilians, including 134 children, the attack on the Bacha Khan University that killed dozens of professors and students, and an attack on Badaber Air Force Base, killing Muslims at morning prayer.

Without a doubt, we are attaining our primary objective in Afghanistan. Our presence in Afghanistan in 2016 maintained critical pressure on terror networks to protect the homeland. U.S. counterterrorism forces will continue to target Al Qai'da and conduct a series of operations designed to defeat ISIL-K in 2017 and preclude the migration of terrorists from Iraq and Syria into Afghanistan.

ANDSF Planning for 2016: Developing a Sustainable Security Strategy

In 2015, the ANDSF developed their first post-ISAF strategy. Nested within a five year National Campaign Plan designed to incentivize reconciliation, the Sustainable Security Strategy prioritized efforts based upon a “hold-fight-disrupt” methodology. This methodology designated areas which the ANDSF would "Hold" to prevent the loss of major population centers and other strategic areas to the enemy, those for which the ANDSF would immediately "Fight" to retain and those areas where they would assume risk by only "Disrupting" the enemy if they appeared. The ANDSF designed their phased operational campaign plan, called Operation SHAFaq, to anticipate and counter the enemy's main and supporting efforts. This prioritization caused them to concentrate forces in more populous areas and remove forces from more remote, sparsely inhabited areas.

ANDSF Operations 2016: Tested and Prevailed

Two dynamics characterized the early months of 2016. First, the externally enabled Taliban fought through the winter months in an attempt to exhaust the ANDSF. However, this effort also depleted their own manpower and finances. Second, Afghanistan joined Pakistan, the U.S., and China to discuss peace and reconciliation as

the Quadrilateral Coordination Group (QCG). However, in mid-March, Taliban Emir Mullah Mansour publically rejected participation in the process. On 12 April, they announced the start of their 2016 offensive, Operation Omari.

The ANDSF largely stayed on their campaign plan for the first half of 2016, successfully executing the first three phases of Operation SHAFaq from February through late July. In Phase I, they defended Kunduz, inflicting heavy casualties on local Taliban who desired a repeat of their October 2015 seizure of that provincial capital. The ANDSF transitioned to Phase II of Operation SHAFaq in June, and shifted their main effort to Helmand and Uruzgan. While suffering high casualties, the ANDSF successfully consolidated control over the most populous areas and defeated attempts at isolating provincial capitals. By mid-July, the ANDSF executed Phase III in which they shifted the main effort to southern Nangarhar Province for counter-ISIL-K operations.

In early August, the Taliban initiated multiple efforts to seize the provincial capitals of Lashkar Gah in Helmand and Kunduz City in Kunduz Province. Through the end of September, the Taliban tried again to isolate and seize these two cities, as well as Tarin Kot, the provincial capital of Uruzgan Province. With the help of U.S. Expeditionary Advising Packages (EAPs) using U.S. authorities and combat enablers, the ANDSF prevented the capture of any of these provincial capitals, a significant success in just their second year at the helm of the fight. Additionally, Afghan National Army (ANA) units executed clearing operations to reopen highways and maintain lines of communication between key regional population centers throughout this period.

Of the 34 provincial capitals, Kunduz was the primary target of the Taliban. Their third attack on this city in early October 2016 was timed to correlate to the Brussels Conference on Afghanistan and the one year anniversary of the fall of the city in 2015. On 6 October, the ANDSF fought four simultaneous, coordinated attacks on Lashkar Gah, Kunduz, Tarin Kot, and Farah City in Farah Province, and repelled them all. Between August and October, the ANDSF prevailed against a total of seven Taliban attacks on major Afghan cities.

Since the start of the Taliban's campaign in April, the ANDSF prevented them from accomplishing their stated strategic objective of overtaking provincial capitals. They were often unable to mass in large numbers because of Afghan and U.S. airpower instead resorting frequently to numerous small-scale attacks on checkpoints in their attempts to isolate cities and create panic. They exploited localized and temporary successes by depicting these events as major strategic shifts through the use of social media and propaganda. The ANDSF consistently retook district centers and population areas within days of a loss, whereas in 2015 it sometimes took them weeks to recover. While the number of high-profile attacks in Kabul was 25% lower than during the same time period last year, these terror attacks resulted in large numbers of civilian casualties. Despite promises to safeguard civilians the Taliban caused approximately two thirds of civilian casualties according to statistics provided by international organizations, such as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.

Critical Factors Affecting the Mission and Equilibrium Favoring the Government

The critical factors that can affect our mission are the stability of the Afghan government, ANDSF casualties, convergence of terrorists and violent extremist organizations in Afghanistan, and the influence of external actors on Afghanistan.

Reinforcing the stability of the Afghan government is a work in progress primarily led by the diplomatic community. The USFOR-A supporting effort has been to urge all political actors to not allow their political process to undermine the security gains made at such high cost. At the strategic level, Afghanistan is a moderate Islamic republic and arguably one of the most democratic nations in the region. The Government retains broad international community support, represented by the financial and security commitments through the 2020 timeframe of the Warsaw Summit and the Brussels Conference.

High ANDSF casualties remain a major concern, but thus far recruitment has generally kept pace with losses and attrition. The high losses have primarily resulted from poor leadership, tactics, and training, as well as corruption, which undermines combat effectiveness.

The convergence of individuals and groups among the 20 designated terrorist organizations and three VEOs is an ongoing threat. ISIL-K is illustrative of this, as its composition includes former Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan and Afghan Taliban leaders as well as members of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan. These groups benefit from complementary capabilities and networks and require continuous pressure to prevent the emergence of a new, more virulent organization in which the new whole is more dangerous than the sum of the previous parts.

Afghanistan's geostrategic location invites the often malign interest and influence of several external actors. It sits at the geographic, political, and cultural crossroads of transnational terrorism, the volatile Pakistan-India border, the former Soviet republics of Central Asia, Iran, and China's One Belt, One Road initiative. The Taliban and Haqqani network are the greatest threats to security in Afghanistan. Their senior leaders remain insulated from pressure and enjoy freedom of action within Pakistan safe havens. As long as they enjoy external enablement, they have no incentive to reconcile. The primary factor that will enable our success is the elimination of external sanctuary and support to the insurgents. Russia has become more assertive over the past year, overtly lending legitimacy to the Taliban to undermine NATO efforts and bolster belligerents using the false narrative that only the Taliban are fighting ISIL-K. Similarly, neighboring Iran is providing support to the Taliban while also engaging the Afghan government over issues of water rights, trade, and security.

Afghanistan desires that outside actors will cooperate with rather than undermine the Afghan government to bolster its capability and legitimacy and not the insurgents. Iranian – Indian – Afghan cooperation over the Chabahar Port presents great economic potential. With over \$2B development aid executed since 2002, and another \$1B pledged in 2016, India's significant investments in Afghan infrastructure, engineering, training, and humanitarian issues will help develop Afghan human capital and long-term stability. China is a moderate influencer focused mainly on regional economic interests. Multiple witnesses have appeared before this body and testified that insurgents cannot be defeated while they enjoy external sanctuary and support from outside of the

national boundaries of the conflict area.³ External safe haven and support in Pakistan increases the cost to the United States in terms of lives, time, and money, and it advantages the enemy with the strategic initiative, allowing them to determine the pace and venue of conflict from sanctuary. Even within this dynamic, the situation in Afghanistan has reached a state of equilibrium that favors the Government. Neither the Taliban nor the ANDSF is currently capable of fundamentally altering the operational environment, which leaves the government in control of roughly two thirds of the population, the Taliban in control of approximately ten percent, and the rest contested.

The “Hold-Fight-Disrupt” methodology of the Sustainable Security Strategy shifted Afghan focus from control of terrain to population security this year. Another way to affect change in equilibrium is to encourage reconciliation of insurgents. The Afghan government-negotiated peace agreement with the Hezb-e Islami Gulbuddin (HiG) has the potential to serve as a catalyst for similar settlements with the Taliban or portions of them. President Ghani is focused on the complex coordination required to successfully demobilize and reintegrate the HiG in 2017.

Importance of Leadership Development and Other Lessons Learned

2016 operations highlighted the greatest weakness of the Afghan security forces - poor leadership. Poor leadership occurs primarily because of patronage vice merit-based appointment, which is prevalent in the Police, but improving in the Army. The high quality of leadership within the Special Forces and, to an increasing extent the Air Force, demonstrates the art of the possible in building effective Afghan leaders from

³ Statement of ADM Michael Mullen, “U.S. Strategy in Afghanistan and Iraq,” 22 September, 2011. Testimony of GEN John M. Keane, USA (Ret), “Emerging U.S. Defense Challenges and Worldwide Threats,” 6 December, 2016.

their sizeable youth population. Reforms to the appointment systems and leader development programs are beginning to now address these deficiencies.

Besides poor leadership, the widespread ANDSF use of static checkpoints is still the greatest contributing factor to increased casualties. There is significant social and political pressure to maintain these checkpoints around villages and along highways. However, the ANDSF are not trained in how to defend these small outposts, conduct local security patrols or ambush would-be attackers. We continue to stress checkpoint reduction and are seeing this begin within the Afghan Army.

Other weaknesses include poor sustainment of soldiers and police in the field, the lack of an operational readiness cycle, no collective training, and corruption that diverts needed support from fighting units. At the tactical level, the ANA needs to improve its integration of fires and air power, as well as cross-pillar integration between the ANA and Afghan National Police (ANP) to improve unity of effort and maximize available combat power, use established chains of command, and integrate intelligence into operations. With so many Afghan troops tied up on static checkpoints this year, units did not execute an Operational Readiness Cycle (ORC) in which they rotate troops through field duty, training and refit cycles. During the current Winter Campaign, units are establishing these cycles, and we have observed an increased focus on company-level collective training and leadership development over the past 4 months. USFOR-A is working with the Ministry of Defense (MoD) to counter corruption within the personnel system through the biometric enrollment and improved accountability procedures. As of 1 January 2017, USFOR-A is limiting dispersal of funds for salaries to cover only the number of individuals who are biometrically enrolled.

Despite these shortcomings, there are some areas of success within the Ministry of Interior (MoI). The number of female officers has increased to nearly 3,000 and gender integration in the MoI outpaces the MoD. The ineffectiveness at the ministerial level should not detract from the bravery and skill demonstrated by the special police units. Crisis Response Unit 222 responds to all high profile attacks in Kabul. It successfully contained the terror attack against the American University in Kabul on 24 August, saving the lives of over 60 hostages and hundreds more who were trapped on the university grounds. This same unit also responded to the 11 October twin attacks against Shia mosques, rescuing 70 hostages.

Offensive Capability: The Afghan Special Forces and Air Force

While the MoD has many challenges as well, primarily in the areas of procurement, logistics, and leadership, there are numerous successes. The professionalism and competence of the Afghan National Army Special Operations Command is the most noteworthy. These 17,000 special operators conduct 70% of ANA offensive operations and are the best example of success in 2016. The regeneration of this force and their role as a catalyst for improvement of the Army are critical objectives for the winter campaign. The proficiency of the ASSF is directly attributable to their long-standing and consistent partnership with U.S. and coalition advisors who train, advise, assist and partner for specific operations down to the tactical level (company and battalion) and up to the operational level (division and corps). Competent ASSF are the result of extensive international investment in time, funding, and personnel. The capability and capacity of the ASSF will ensure Afghanistan cannot again be used as a safe haven from which trans-regional terrorists can threaten the U.S. and international partners.

Coalition advisors anticipate the ASSF will make strides in the coming years in critical warfighting functions, but this will require the continuation of persistent coalition training and advising, as well as the security assistance funding we provide them.

Another key to future success is the Afghan Air Force (AAF). Although still limited in number of aircraft and crews, since the beginning of the 2016, the AAF has added 26 strike aircraft, consisting of 18 MD-530 attack helicopters and eight A-29 attack aircraft.

Comparing 2016 to 2015, the AAF has increased organic strike missions by 268%.

Before March, the AAF had no dedicated fixed wing attack aircraft – in 2016, the Air Force added eight A-29s and nearly 120 Afghan Tactical Air Controllers to improve the combat capability of the ANDSF. The first A-29 strike mission was flown on 14 April

2016. In the remainder of 2016, the AAF dropped over 430 bombs. Nearly 20 air crews were added to the force this year and their training and education in U.S. schools

helped further professionalize their force. These Afghan pilots demonstrated sound judgment, good flying skills and the courage to dissent when there was risk of civilian

casualties. The AAF also demonstrated the ability to integrate the new national targeting process with A-29s, MD-530s and ScanEagle ISR platforms to attack insurgent targets.

Afghan Special Security Forces rely on the Afghan Special Mission Wing, which is fully night-vision goggle qualified and enables them to conduct night time operations

anywhere in the country, bolstering national counterterrorism efforts.

The extremely rugged and mountainous terrain in Afghanistan requires the ANDSF to have an organic aerial mobility and fires capability. Aerial mobility enables offensive action through the rapid movement of troops in advance of enemy maneuver, provides critical resupply over impassible terrain, and permits the rapid medical evacuation of

wounded Soldiers. Aerial fires provide prompt overmatch fire support to friendly troops in contact with the enemy. Air support affects the entire range of the campaign from operational maneuver to Soldier morale and is the most critical enabler for our partners.

The U.S. government is considering a critical AAF initiative to replace the unsustainable Russian-manufactured aircraft fleet and make up for combat losses in Afghan transport helicopters by providing U.S. Army UH-60s. The Department of Defense submitted a funding request in November 2016 to begin this transition. While making steady progress, a fully operational AAF is still some years away. Of note, it will take approximately 21 months from the initial approval decision to field the first refurbished and upgraded UH-60. Deferring funding decisions any further widens the critical Afghan aerial capability gap as the Russian-made Mi-17 helicopters attrite and UH-60s are not available until the 2019 campaign. This will require U.S. aviation and authorities to bridge the gap and pushes the arrival of these critical AAF helicopters and additional strike aircraft until later in the Warsaw Summit time frame, which puts attainment of our campaign objective at serious risk.

In the 2015, USFOR-A recommended a wargame to “provide a projection of the ANDSF’s level of success as it continues to have responsibility for the security of Afghanistan.” From March to August 2016, the USFOR-A staff, in partnership with the Center for Army Analysis (CAA), conducted a study of various combinations of ground force structures and AAF aerial mobility and fires options. The study team recommended retention of the 352,000 authorized Afghan force structure through 2020, with full implementation of an AAF initiative and lifecycle replacement of armored HMMWVs (“Humvees”) in the ANDSF to enhance air and ground mobility of forces on

the battlefield. This option, which sustains an effective ANDSF, is the most likely to succeed given the expected threat environment and projected ANDSF capabilities.

Combined Security Transition Command – Afghanistan (CSTC-A) conducted a Tactical Wheeled Vehicle Optimization study in 2016 in support of the MoD and Mol Tashkil (i.e., official manning document) with a focus on creating a sustainable, affordable, and effective fleet that increases combat capability and force protection for occupants. In concert with the results of the subsequent wargame, CSTC-A will only sustain 53 percent of the current vehicles. Those vehicles specifically identified for termination of CSTC-A resourced sustainment are predominately pickup trucks and other unarmored vehicles not designed for combat and military vehicles that are uneconomical for continued Coalition sustainment. This reduced fleet maintains HMMWVs and Mobile Strike Force Vehicles in order to maintain protected mobility and force protection.

Countering Corruption with Afghan Partners

More than any other factor, corruption drains critical resources and undermines combat effectiveness. During the last several months, we have pushed both the ANA and ANP to conduct Personnel Asset Inventories (PAIs) to account for every employee, by ensuring they are properly enrolled in the Afghan Human Resources Information Management System (AHRIMS). USFOR-A notified both MoD and Mol Ministers that beginning on 1 January 2017, we will only fund the actual monthly Afghan Local Police⁴ and ANA payroll disbursements reflecting the number of validated personnel. CSTC-A will field the Afghan Personnel and Pay System (APPS) in 2017 to automate much of

⁴ The ANP is funded by the Law and Order Trust Fund for Afghanistan (LOTFA) using the Web-based Electronic Payroll System (WEPS). We have begun negotiations with LOTFA to implement the same standards in the Mol.

the pay process, and dramatically reduce human error and remove opportunities for fraudulent and corrupt behavior within the payroll system.

President Ghani is strongly committed to reforms within both security ministries and is committed to fighting corruption. The recent arrest or suspension of senior Mol officials as a consequence of corruption investigations is a start. With the help of the international community, the Government established the Anti-Corruption Justice Center in 2016, which has already tried, convicted, and sentenced senior Afghan officials for corruption. After corruption in the supply system was identified as a major cause of casualties this year, President Ghani directed the replacement of over 700 personnel in the logistics system in order to reduce criminal network penetration.

Winter Campaign 2016 – 2017: Leadership, Training, and Sustainment

The ongoing ANDSF Winter Campaign (Operation SHAFaq II) is focused on leader development, collective training, personnel accountability, establishment of an operational training cycle, and sustainment at all levels. CSTC-A has assessed each of the Corps for its regeneration requirements, with ASSF as the top priority.

Leadership, training, and sustainment will have the largest impact on reducing the high number of ANDSF casualties that occurred this year. Leadership in particular is the key to progress. As with corruption, President Ghani is committed to reforming leader development and recently authorized a merit-based High Oversight Board to appoint ANDSF Senior Officers. In the fall of 2016, the ANA selected a new Sergeant Major of the Army in the first ever merit-based senior leader selection. It has since expanded this

process to the selection of two Command Sergeants Major for ANA Corps and is supporting a USFOR-A study to improve general officer selection and management.

To best translate the 2017-2020 Warsaw Summit timeline into success, President Ghani has directed the implementation of an Afghan four-year "Roadmap" to increase ANDSF fighting capabilities, which will expand Afghan government control of the population and incentivize reconciliation.

Optimizing USFOR-A Structure to Meet Objectives

In planning for the transition from 9,800 to 8,448 troops, we optimized the force structure to provide four TAA commands, an increase by two. We are reorganizing our advisory teams to create training and sustainment sections in each to teach the ANDSF "how to train" and "how to sustain."

To address ANDSF casualties, we continue to advise the ANA Medical Command, the ANP Office of the Surgeon General, and the Afghan Air Force Surgeon General on medical care and evacuation. Our new structure includes TAA at the Train, Advise, and Assist Command level for point of injury medical care and en route care.

Based on lessons learned from 2015, we recognized the need for expeditionary advising. EAPs consist of approximately 130 personnel and are self-sufficient for roughly three weeks. This provides three possible employment options: advising Afghan Brigade or Provincial Police elements during particularly important operations; extending TAA when Corps and Police Zone leadership travels away from the headquarters; and advising on collective training, extending TAA to SOF elements away

from their bases, or even advising such non-combat missions as assessing infrastructure vulnerabilities.

Other USFOR-A organizational changes include the regeneration of counter-corruption capabilities. When USFOR-A transitioned to OPERATION FREEDOM'S SENTINEL in early 2015, we divested key capabilities and lost the ability "see ourselves" to prevent diversions of money for fraudulent or corrupt purposes. We are establishing a resident counter-corruption finance cell to ensure U.S. and Coalition Forces funds allocated to the Afghan government are used appropriately as well as prevent corruption in conjunction with U.S. contracting.

USFOR-A is working with the ANDSF on organizational changes to deliver greater mobility. Through structured wargames run at the U.S. Army's Center for Army Analysis, we examined various ANDSF organizational models against the insurgency over time. These wargames suggest that by the end of 2019, we could achieve a "tipping point" in terms of ANDSF mobility and strength to secure a critical mass of the population and relegate the enemy to remote areas where they can be disrupted by either our CT platform or an improved ASSF.

Looking Ahead: A Critical Partner in a Volatile Region

Our primary mission remains CT and protection of the homeland. Afghanistan serves as a critical partner and platform from which we combat AQ and ISIL and maintain pressure on the convergence of 20 terrorist groups and three VEOs in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

ANDSF progress is not as rapid or as uniform as we would like, and in order to further improve corruption and poor leadership must be addressed. Critical risks that could cause mission failure remain and we must learn from the hard lessons of 2016.

The current security situation is a stalemate where the equilibrium favors the government. The Afghan government is further refining its Sustainable Security Strategy and operational concept to gradually increase the government's security of the population for the period 2017-2020 and beyond. With continued TAA and U.S. operational authorities, an increasingly capable ANA, led by its ANASOC and a capable, robust AAF, will begin the growth of governmental control and the corresponding push of the Taliban into the remote regions. However, success will be dependent on eliminating external support to Afghanistan's enemies.

The ANDSF were tested and prevailed in 2016 and earned the trust and confidence of the Afghan people. 76% of the population expressed confidence in their security forces and 87% believed a return to Taliban rule would be bad for Afghanistan. 2017 will be an important juncture for Afghanistan as renewed international commitment to the Government and the Resolute Support Mission provides an opportunity to reinforce improvements demonstrated by the ANDSF in execution of the 2016 Campaign.

The payoff is the reduction of terrorist threats to the homeland and an increasingly stable and critical partner in this volatile but important region.