

Dear Members of the Committee on Foreign Affairs of the Congress of the United States,

My name is Sanjar Sohail. I was born and grew up in Afghanistan. As a child and teenager, I witnessed numerous catastrophes as a result of continued wars and atrocities in my homeland during the 1980s and 90s. The best years of my life included the two decades of American presence in Afghanistan that provided me with an opportunity to study, and become a journalist and the founder of Afghanistan's largest newspaper, Hasht-e-Sobh, which is internationally awarded and nationally read. With my colleagues, we established the basis of investigative journalism in Afghanistan and have been producing investigative reports, over the past two 15 years. During this journey, I and my colleagues were threatened, attacked, and treated as enemies by warlords, the Taliban, and even powerful government officials that were subjects of our investigations.

I am pleased that the Congress of the United States honored me and my colleagues to testify on the situation of the former Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) following the abrupt withdrawal of U.S. troops that me and my colleagues have been covering. On behalf of 40 million gravely concerned citizens of Afghanistan, who experience terrorism daily in public and private spheres of their lives, I, Sanjar Sohail, as the Founder of Hasht-e-Subh, testify in front of this honorable Committee, that the Taliban have been killing and torturing members of the former ANSF and their families by the Taliban, following the abrupt withdrawal of American troops. It is an honor for me that you have taken an interest in hearing my testimony concerning the status of former Afghan armed forces post-U.S. withdrawal.

In 2022, Hasht-e-Subh's investigation which detailed how the Taliban killed and tortured Afghan troops and their families, shocked the world. Published by the NYTimes, Hasht-e-Subh's investigation documented the Taliban's 490 cases of killing and torture of former Afghan soldiers and officers who worked closely with the US troops.

Honorable Committee members, this investigation only covered the first six months of the Taliban's victimization of the members of former ANSF. As such, please treat the investigative report as the tip of the iceberg.

Presently, despite security constraints, Hasht-e-Subh's brave on-the-ground investigative journalists follow the Taliban's atrocities and observe an increase in systematic targeted killing and torture of former Afghan soldiers and officers as well as their family members. As I am standing in front of you, hundreds of Afghan soldiers and officers and their family members, including women and even children, are being tortured and most are killed in Taliban's official and unofficial detention centers. This catastrophic status of the former ANSF is not an isolated crisis. Millions of civilian women and men are facing threats to their lives under the Taliban regime.

For two decades, following 9/11, the people, particularly the Afghan armed forces, including women, played a crucial role in endorsing America's commitment to fight terrorism and in presenting itself as an ally of the the US in a sensitive regional context. The Afghan people trusted the partnership with the United States. However, the abrupt withdrawal of U.S. troops has

left a breach of their trust and a void that has allowed the Taliban to exploit the vulnerability of those who served honorably in the Afghan security forces and fought alongside U.S. troops from Kunar mountains to Bakwa deserts for a shared cause.

Between 2001 and 2021, for two decades, the people and the armed forces of Afghanistan paved the ground for the re-emergence of the country's 1960s democracy, women's rights, freedom of the media, and public services. These achievements were far from perfection; however, they were in the initial phase of consolidation. The two decades of American presence in Afghanistan demonstrated, that Afghans are not only willing but eager to embrace democratization and work collaboratively with the international community, particularly the United States. I do emphasize that Afghans could not achieve stability, democracy, and progress without the support of the international community led by the US. The partnership between Afghanistan and the US yielded fruitful results, however, today it is only the Afghan people and former Afghan security forces who pay a price for it with their lives.

I implore the Congress, particularly this important Committee, to officially and publicly condemn the killing of former Afghan soldiers and officers and to endorse further investigation of the former ANSF plight under Taliban rule. I also request the Committee to reassess the United States' commitment to supporting progress and democracy in Afghanistan. I urge the members of this Committee to allocate resources and diplomatic efforts to support initiatives that promote stability, security, and democratic governance in Afghanistan. By doing so, we can honor the legacy of those Afghan and American soldiers who sacrificed their lives for a brighter future and reminded us to be more committed to global peace and prosperity.

In the end, I trust that the United States Congress will act decisively to condemn the violence perpetrated by the Taliban and reaffirm the United States' commitment to supporting progress and democracy in Afghanistan.

Thank you for your attention and time and if there are any questions, it is my pleasure to address and discuss.

Thank you!

Statements and Documents about the Situation of Afghanistan

By Sanjar Sohail, the Founder and Publisher of *Hasht-e-Subh daily newspaper*, Afghanistan's internationally awarded and nationally read newspaper.

The Taliban belongs to a specific political genealogy, called political Islam or Islamism in Afghanistan that was created and supported by the U.S. to defeat the Soviet Union. Islamism in Afghanistan was supported by the United States over the 1908s under Zbigniew Brzezinski's doctrine of defeating communism. The United State's political and military positioning under this doctrine led to a civil war in Afghanistan in the 1990s out of which the Taliban emerged and hosted al-Qaeda that attacked the United States in 2001. Following two decades of the U.S. presence in Afghanistan, the Taliban is back to power in Afghanistan and hosts at least two dozen Islamist terrorist organizations most of them call the America the enemy. Therefore, the Taliban could be called Frankenstein's creature of America that could turn on the creator when possible. Therefore, it is time to start thinking about the monster more seriously.

Afghanistan is not a natural host of any monster that threatens the world's peace and security. Afghanistan's history is the history of harmony between its national interests and global interests and values. Historically, we have tried to adjust our interests and values with the progressive world's interests and values for centuries. Unfortunately, this historical link of mutual interest and trust between the world and Afghanistan's progressive people was compromised and breached by the Taliban's military takeover in 2021. We all together should rebuild and reform

this connection through progressive forces, figures, and organizations of Afghanistan and the international community. I am sure that the U.S. Congress is one of those key institutions.

Since its takeover of Afghanistan in August 2021, the Taliban has committed numerous crimes against Afghan citizens particularly women and girls and all values that the United States invested in by billions of dollars and thousands of American lives. The Taliban's targeted killing and torture of former Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) which was trained and supported by and fought alongside American forces are a serious case that not only concern Afghans but also Americans, particularly the U.S. veterans that served in Afghanistan over the past two decades.

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Presently, despite security constraints, Hasht-e-Subh's brave on-the-ground investigative journalists follow the Taliban's atrocities and observe an increase in systematic targeted killing and torture of former Afghan soldiers and officers as well as their family members. As I am standing in front of you, hundreds of Afghan soldiers and officers and their family members, including women and even children, are being tortured and most are killed in Taliban's official prisons and unofficial detention centers. This catastrophic status of the former ANSF is not an isolated crisis. Thousands of civilian women and men are facing threats to their lives under the Taliban regime. Therefore, the United States Congress must take a strong stance against such outstanding and widespread acts of violence.

For two decades, following 9/11, the people, particularly the Afghan armed forces, including women, played a crucial role in endorsing America's commitment to fight terrorism and in presenting itself as an ally of the American government in a sensitive regional context. The Afghan people trusted the partnership with the United States. However, the abrupt withdrawal of U.S. troops have left a breach of their trust and a void that has allowed the Taliban to exploit the vulnerability of those who served honorably in the Afghan security forces and fought alongside U.S. troops from Kunar mountains to Bakwa deserts for a shared cause.

Between 2001 and 2021, for two decades, the people and the armed forces of Afghanistan paved the ground for the re-emergence of the country's 1960s democracy, women's rights, freedom of the media, and public services. These achievements were far from perfection; however, they were in the initial phase of consolidation. The two decades of American presence in Afghanistan demonstrated, that Afghans are not only willing but eager to embrace democratization and work

collaboratively with the international community, particularly the United States. I do emphasize that Afghans could not achieve stability, democracy, and progress without the support of the international community led by the US. The partnership between Afghanistan and the US yielded fruitful results, however, today it is only the Afghan people and armed forces who pay a price for it with their lives. It is, therefore, a moral obligation to stand by the Afghan people, ensuring that the sacrifices made by both American and Afghan soldiers were not in vain.

I implore Congress to officially and publicly condemn the killing of former Afghan soldiers and officers and to endorse further investigation of the former ANSF plight under Taliban rule. I also request the Committee to reassess the United States's commitment to supporting progress and democracy in Afghanistan. I urge members of Congress to allocate resources and diplomatic efforts to support initiatives that promote stability, security, and democratic governance in Afghanistan. By doing so, we can honor the legacy of those Afghan and American soldiers who sacrificed their lives for a brighter future and reminded us to be more committed to global peace and prosperity.

Taliban as a jihadi organization and their so-called Jihadi opponents are not and will not be the future of my country. Jihadists are not the force that should represent my people. We have a long history of progressive politics —much more rooted than the emergence of extremists in the political scene of the country in the past decades. The idea of progression and having a space out of the control of extremists and Islamists is in the veins of my people. The struggle for civil liberties, human rights, women's and girl's rights is the history of my country. Therefore, the Taliban is not the history of my homeland and will not be.

Of course, the Taliban represent part of the Afghan conservative communities, but the group is not the only reality of my homeland. As a journalist, I would like to express that my nation's struggle for freedom of media is the oldest in the region and that is why I named my newspaper Hast Subh to connect it with Shamsh al-Nahar (both means the same) that was published over 150 years ago in Kabul.

Therefore, it is not fair to reduce our history, our political struggles, and our sacrifices for achieving civil liberties and political rights to the Taliban and other jihadi groups. We have a consistent and constant history of achievements in human rights, women's rights, civil liberties, and political rights for everyone.

The current situation in Afghanistan is not acceptable to millions of progressive Afghans and should not be acceptable to the international community, particularly the U.S. Congress and government. Therefore, there should be a collaborated and coordinated effort between the members of the Congress and Afghan progressive parties and organizations to consult on how to change this situation which is necessary for the following political, global security, and humanitarian reasons and objectives:

Political reasons and objectives

Afghanistan under the Taliban lacks both internal and international legitimacy and this situation has led to the regime's lack of transparency and accountability to both the Afghan nation and the international community. Therefore, there should be attention on a political transformation based

on a focus on progressive political forces which requires four key conditions that should be facilitated by the international community:

1. The Taliban's military takeover has led to a regional and to some extent international conclusion that Afghanistan is not built for democracy. We are the oldest democracy of the region and we have the capacity to democratize our country. Extremist groups are just minorities in our society and, therefore, a special focus on supporting the democratization of Afghanistan is important. The rule of a theocratic authoritarian regime will have regional and international political and security consequences and will strengthen the idea and models of authoritarianism in the region which is against global peace and security.
2. The Taliban's military takeover has expanded the Idea in the world that there is a probability that Islamist extremist groups could dominate in specific countries and we have to accommodate them. This idea should be revised because it has a long-term policy and international security consequences.
3. The short-term political agenda should be based and focused on the facilitation and creation of a non-military zone (a green zone) in Kabul to accommodate non-Taliban politicians and activists which will facilitate a conducive context for multi-party politics. The U.S. Congress and government should make sure that international peacekeepers secure this area until the country is unsecured by non-Taliban forces.
4. Therefore, the U.S. Congress and government should call for and mediate an international setting for the situation of Afghanistan among all Afghan parties. This will facilitate the beginning of a peace negotiation in a broader context. The focus in this context should be on a road map by both Afghan and international players to facilitate the

democratization of Afghanistan and the facilitation of a situation where (at least) the education of girls and women is not a part of politics.

Global security reasons and objectives

The ambiguous situation under the Taliban creates the same picture as the 1990s. The lack of transparency by the Taliban and denial by the international community on the situation of Afghanistan led to the strength of al-Qaeda in 1996 that attacked the heart of the sole great power and led to consequences that shocked international peace and security for several decades. Therefore, if the U.S. Congress and government do not take the situation in Afghanistan seriously, the same international peace and security challenges might be ahead of us. I am sure that the Congress and government of the United States have its measures to deter similar disasters and Afghans will be thankful to be heard and their thoughts are understood. We believe that two points should be taken into consideration regarding the global security consequences of Afghanistan's current situation under the Taliban:

1. The Taliban is not transparent about their links with international terrorist groups and therefore it must be taken as a serious international security threat.
2. The group's relationship with governments that have historically sponsored international terrorism in the region is not clear. This should be taken as a serious international security issue otherwise it will have broader global security consequences.

Humanitarian reasons and objectives

The issues of women and girls, poverty, and a ban on freedoms and rights, forces Afghans to leave the country. Addressing these issues requires, at least, four measures as follows:

1. They lack of capacity to provide services and therefore we can claim that the group only occupied government buildings but cannot provide governance. It is very simple to explain that Mullahs/clerics are not there to govern but to “only” provide religious services. It must be taken into consideration. Otherwise, it will have humanitarian consequences.
2. Women and girls are out of the public sphere. Girls cannot go to school and women cannot work. Many Afghans migrate to neighboring countries for several reasons but in the past two years, the main reason has been the lack of opportunity for the education of girls. Therefore, it will be important for the U.S. Congress and government to create a council to investigate and facilitate the improvement of the situation of girls and women – particularly the education of girls.
3. To prevent these humanitarian disasters, the United States must watch the humanitarian crises directly support the creation of an Afghan Human Rights Institution based in Kabul, and make sure that all members are secure and protected by the UN.
4. It is impossible to have a clear image of what is going on without free media inside the country. It will be important for the U.S. Congress and Government to focus on facilitating this requirement.

Other Propositions

The U.S. Congress and government should focus on the following five key areas while tackling the Taliban in Afghanistan under the current circumstances.

1. **Alternative to the Taliban:** the U.S. Congress could call upon progressive Afghans and forces to define the structures and objectives of an alternative to the Taliban instead of relying on the failed Doha process that was a catastrophe in the U.S. foreign policy and its values.
2. **Working with former ANSF:** the U.S. Congress could call on members of former ANSF to provide a clearer picture of the situation in Afghanistan and present realistic alternatives to the situation
3. **Humanitarian Aid:** there should be accountability on humanitarian aid under the Taliban making sure that aid does not support and fund terrorist organizations
4. **Diplomatic Engagement:** diplomatic engagement, based on lessons learned, is necessary. The engagement should not be based on the mechanisms of the Doha process which is a failed process and will not work in the future. The United States should rely on domestic knowledge and democratic Afghan forces to reinvent a useful structure for diplomatic engagement directed at resolving Afghanistan's issues following the abrupt withdrawal of U.S. troops.
5. **Civil Society:** These objectives can not be achieved without the involvement and leadership of Afghan civil society which includes both formal and grassroots organizations in the process.

Thank you for your attention and if there are any questions concerning details and sources concerning this document, it will be a pleasure for me and my colleagues to address and discuss.

Sincerely,

Sanjar Sohail

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