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5 COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS,

6 U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES,

7 WASHINGTON, D.C.

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12 INTERVIEW OF: SALMAN AHMED

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Thursday, October 12, 2023

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Washington, D.C.

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The interview in the above matter was held in 2255 Rayburn House Office

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Building, commencing at 9:30 a.m.

1 Appearances:

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5 For the COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS:

6

7 [REDACTED], [REDACTED]

8 [REDACTED], [REDACTED] SUBCOMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND ACCOUNTABILITY

9 [REDACTED], [REDACTED], SUBCOMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND ACCOUNTABILITY

10 [REDACTED], MINORITY [REDACTED]

11 [REDACTED], MINORITY [REDACTED]

12 [REDACTED]

13 [REDACTED], MINORITY [REDACTED]

14

15

16 For the U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE:

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18 [REDACTED], H INVESTIGATIONS [REDACTED]

19 [REDACTED], OFFICE OF THE LEGAL ADVISOR

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24 [REDACTED]. So it is now 9:30 a.m. on October 12, 2023, and this is a

25 transcribed interview of Mr. Salman Ahmed. House Foreign Affairs Committee

1 Chairman Michael McCaul has requested this interview as part of the committee's
2 investigation of the Afghanistan withdrawal. Can the witness please state his name for
3 the record.

4 Mr. Ahmed. Salman Ahmed.

5 [REDACTED]. On behalf of the committee, I want to sincerely thank you for
6 appearing here today to answer our questions. The chairman appreciates your
7 willingness to appear voluntarily.

8 My name is [REDACTED] I'm a [REDACTED] on Chairman McCaul's staff on the
9 House Foreign Affairs Committee, and I'm leading the investigation into the Afghanistan
10 withdrawal.

11 I now welcome committee staff from both the majority and minority to introduce
12 themselves before going over some ground rules.

13 [REDACTED] [REDACTED] with the majority.

14 [REDACTED] I'm [REDACTED]. I'm [REDACTED] with the majority.

15 [REDACTED]: [REDACTED] for the minority.

16 [REDACTED]: [REDACTED] minority.

17 [REDACTED]: [REDACTED] for the Democrats.

18 [REDACTED]: As noted, I'll go over a few ground rules for today's interview,
19 which will hopefully aid our discussion. Our questioning will proceed in rounds. The
20 majority will ask questions first for 1 hour, and then the minority will have an opportunity
21 to ask questions for an equal period of time if they so choose.

22 We will alternate back and forth until there are no more questions and the
23 interview is over. We'll take a short break at the end of each hour, but if you'd like to
24 take a break apart from that, please let us know. I'd be happy to accommodate.

25 We'll also be taking a lunch and a day break -- midday break, so please let us know

1 when you'd like to do so, and we'd be happy to accommodate. There are a bit more
2 lunch options since we're in session now.

3 As you can see, there is an official court reporter transcribing the interview for a
4 written record, so we ask that you give verbal responses to all questions. Does that all
5 make sense?

6 Mr. Ahmed. Yes. Thanks.

7 [REDACTED]. So the court reporter can take down a clear record, we'll do our
8 best to limit the number of people to those on the staff whose turn it is. We ask that
9 you please speak clearly so the court reporter can understand and so everyone can hear
10 you. We'll do our best to do the same. The court reporter unfortunately cannot
11 record nonverbal responses, such as shaking your head, so please answer each question
12 with an audible, verbal response. Additionally, it's important for the record that we
13 don't speak over one another or interrupt each other.

14 Witnesses who appear before the committee have the opportunity to appear and
15 freely consult with counsel. It is my understanding that you are appearing today with
16 counsel from the State Department, correct?

17 Mr. Ahmed. That's correct.

18 [REDACTED]. Mr. Ahmed, you understand that the State Department
19 represents the Department not you personally, correct?

20 Mr. Ahmed. I understand.

21 [REDACTED] We want you to answer our questions in the most complete and
22 truthful manner as possible, so please take your time. If you have any questions or if
23 you do not understand one of our questions, please let us know. Our questions will
24 cover a wide range of topics, so if you need any clarification at any point, we'd be happy
25 to do so.

1 If you don't know the answer to a question or do not remember, please give us
2 your best recollection and share with us who, to the best of your knowledge, might be
3 able to provide a more complete answer to that question. Additionally, it is okay to tell
4 us if you learned information from someone else. We just ask that you communicate
5 how you came to know the information.

6 Mr. Ahmed. Okay.

7 ██████████. And at this time, I ask the representatives from the State
8 Department please introduce themselves for the record.

9 ██████████. ██████████, Office of the Legal Advisor.

10 ██████████ ██████████ Bureau of Legislative Affairs.

11 ██████████. Mr. Ahmed, this interview is unclassified, so if a question calls
12 for any information that you know to be classified, please state that for the record, as
13 well as the reason for the clarification to the best of your abilities. We do have a
14 classified portion later today so we can address that at a later point. Once you've
15 clarified that to the extent possible, please respond with as much unclassified information
16 as you're able to. If we need to have a classified session or forum later, which we will,
17 we'll address that then.

18 Although this interview is not under oath, by law you are required to answer
19 questions from Congress truthfully. Do you understand that?

20 Mr. Ahmed. I understand.

21 ██████████. This also applies to questions posed by congressional staff in an
22 interview. Does that make sense?

23 Mr. Ahmed. That makes sense.

24 ██████████. Witnesses that knowingly provide false testimony could be
25 subject to criminal prosecution for perjury or for making false statements under 18 USC

1 1001. Do you understand this?

2 Mr. Ahmed. I understand.

3 [REDACTED]. Is there any reason you are unable to provide truthful answers
4 to today's questions?

5 Mr. Ahmed. Not that I'm aware of.

6 [REDACTED]. Finally, I'd like to make note that the content of what we discuss
7 here today is confidential. We ask that you not speak about what we discuss in this
8 interview to any outside individuals to preserve the integrity of our investigation. Does
9 that make sense?

10 Mr. Ahmed. Makes sense.

11 [REDACTED]. For the same reason, the marked exhibits that we will use today
12 will remain with the court reporter so that they can go in the official transcript.

13 All right. That is all the majority has to say on this topic. Is there anything my
14 colleagues from the majority would like to add?

15 [REDACTED]. Just to also echo our thanks for appearing here voluntarily today
16 before committee staff, and also to note that notwithstanding any agreement made
17 between the majority and the State Department or the witness for this transcribed
18 interview, there is no provision governing or mandating confidentiality of investigations
19 and/or transcribed interviews in the House or committee's rules for the 118th Congress.

20 Mr. Ahmed. Okay.

21 [REDACTED]. Okay.

22 EXAMINATION

23 BY [REDACTED]:

24 Q Now we'll begin the hour. Mr. Ahmed, what is your current position at the
25 State Department?

1 A Director of the policy planning staff.

2 Q When did you assume the position of director of policy planning staff?

3 A January twenty -- January 2021.

4 Q So are we correct in understanding that you held that position throughout
5 the Afghanistan withdrawal?

6 A Correct.

7 Q How were you selected for that position?

8 A I've been involved in international affairs and foreign affairs for about
9 30 years. I have been involved in conflict-related issues, matters of war and peace
10 during that time, as well as broad questions of U.S. National Security Strategy and foreign
11 policy. I previously held the position of senior director for strategic planning at the
12 National Security Council at the White House and had also overseen the agency review
13 process during the transition. And I engaged over the course of a career in a lot of other
14 relevant assignments, including [inaudible] government, looking at how chairing a
15 bipartisan task force for the Carnegie Endowment on how U.S. foreign policy affects
16 America's middle class.

17 Q Thank you. Do you know who selected you for the position of director of
18 policy and planning?

19 A The Secretary in consultation with the White House personnel.

20 Q Okay. And to whom do you report to in that role?

21 A The Secretary.

22 Q And how many people report to you in your position?

23 A Approximately two dozen.

24 Q Okay. Who are your direct reports?

25 A I have a principal deputy, and I have a second deputy in addition to chief of

1 staff and staff assistants, and then the -- there's a chief speechwriter and a speechwriting
2 team as well, which reports to the Secretary and to me both, because they're housed in
3 the policy planning staff, but they have kind of a semiautonomous role. And the other
4 members often will report to me directly as well, but often a lot of what they're reporting
5 comes through one of the deputies.

6 Q Thank you. Can you please briefly explain the role of the policy planning
7 staff, also known as S/P, within the Department?

8 A Sure. In its current incarnation, I think there are three broad roles that it's
9 playing. One is on strategic planning and coordination, which, you know, to put it
10 simply, it's trying to look at big picture issues and long-term trends in the strategic
11 environment representing the Department in conversations related to our overall
12 National Security Strategy and on things like the Interim National Security Strategic
13 Guidance, or the National Security Strategy, on -- and then on big priorities that flow from
14 that overall strategy and how they might affect the Secretary's travel, his time, or the
15 budget requests that we are making, and to be engaged with counterparts within the
16 interagency but also foreign counterparts or also policy planning heads on those types of
17 big picture questions.

18 A second area is on policy development and debate. Generally speaking, we
19 have focused more on policies that are being developed that have a crosscutting nature,
20 that might cut across regions or across regional and functional issues, so they don't
21 naturally sit within a specific bureau alone or they have a very long-term horizon to them.

22 We're also, as part of the policy development and debate process, are the keeper
23 of the Dissent Channel; as well as an analog that the Secretary created called the Ideas
24 Channel, which was meant to be a vehicle to also communicate affirmative ideas people
25 might have on policy; the Open Forum, which was another Vietnam war-era creation on

1 providing a platform for staff to be able to engage with senior leadership and also people
2 from the outside; Foreign Affairs Policy Board as well is another source of input. And
3 often we're engaged when kind of long-term thinking is being pressed, engaging on the
4 outside.

5 And then a third function is on policy and messaging, insofar as the speechwriting
6 team is part of our shop, so being able to communicate what those policies are.

7 Q Okay. That's very helpful. Thank you.

8 And can you speak to how the staff are organized within these three functions,
9 three components of the office?

10 A Generally speaking, our members are assigned a set of portfolios, and so
11 some have regional areas of focus. We tend to have one per, let's say, regional bureau
12 at least, sometimes more, like on the Indo-Pacific, and functional responsibilities as well.
13 So, for example, someone who's covering the tech portfolio or someone who's covering
14 an econ portfolio. Sometimes people might cover a regional and a functional issue,
15 depending on what their background is.

16 On -- so there -- and then there are people assigned to different issue sets, like we
17 have someone who is assigned to manage the Foreign Affairs Policy Board. The Dissent
18 Channel doesn't have an individual -- the deputy -- career deputy is tended to be the one
19 who's the first port of call for the Dissent Channel and for the Ideas Channel, because a
20 lot of the engagement is with the career staff, but individual members who work on a
21 dissent issue or a specific issue, depends on what the issue is, so if there was a dissent on
22 like Latin America the person who covers Latin America would be the one working for
23 it -- on it, et cetera.

24 Policy issues tended to be -- the principal deputy tends to be more focused on
25 that. The more institutional organizational issues, modernization agenda, things like

1 that, the career deputy is tended to be more focused on that.

2 Q Thank you.

3 A But obviously they overlap as well.

4 Q That's very helpful. Thank you.

5 And what does your position as director of policy planning entail?

6 A Well, it's overseeing these functions and to be available to the Secretary to
7 take on think work, as you might put it, if he's looking for an independent view on a set of
8 issues, either directly or indirectly to say, you know, I'd be interested in what views might
9 be elsewhere.

10 But generally, we operate within those three buckets, but the role obviously
11 evolves over time, both when you arrive as a new administration, I think this is true for a
12 lot of former directors who I think consulted in previous Republican and Democratic
13 administrations, is what you're doing in the first 6 months on agenda setting writ large
14 isn't necessarily what you're doing at year three, because we have more things in place
15 and you might be digging in deeper on certain specific issues later on.

16 Q That makes sense. Thank you.

17 And can you speak to what some of your major responsibilities are in addition to
18 overseeing the staff?

19 A I would say that in overseeing the staff and being engaged on all these
20 functions things that have particularly occupied time has been on precisely what is our
21 overall National Security Strategy, what is the moment of time we're in. As this
22 Secretary has spoken about, the post-cold war era is over, we're entering a new phase in
23 international affairs, the strategic geopolitical competition in general, what its
24 implications will be over the next 10, 20 years, especially the strategic competition of
25 China, which is a generational challenge and it's going to play out in every region and

1 across a whole set of issues and in international organizations, and trying to fully come to
2 grips with what does that mean for us as a department in the conduct of our diplomacy,
3 what kind of expertise do we need and capacities do we need to build. That's one set.

4 Another set that the Secretary was especially keen for me to look at, especially
5 given prior work I had done, is on at a time when Americans are -- many Americans are
6 struggling economically, especially during the COVID era, to maintain or sustain a
7 middle-class standard of living, you know. Are there things that the Department can do
8 either to head off shocks that might arise overseas that could further make their lives
9 complicated, difficult at home, you know, or we could make a positive difference and to
10 try to lean into things like that, so supply chain, security, and resilience as an example.

11 Q Thank you. And did the policy planning staff play a role in matters related
12 to Afghanistan?

13 A Not really, other than in some discrete areas, like when the Dissent Channel
14 came in and some followup subsequent to that, but prior to it, not much.

15 BY [REDACTED]:

16 Q Were there any other discrete areas unrelated to the Dissent Channel?

17 A On Afghanistan?

18 Q Yeah.

19 A Not prior to its arrival.

20 Q Okay.

21 [REDACTED]. I'm sorry. Could you speak up? We didn't hear the answer.

22 Mr. Ahmed. Not prior to the arrival of the Dissent Channel.

23 BY [REDACTED]:

24 Q And how about after the arrival of the Dissent Channel, did it branch out into
25 other functions or issues relating to Afghanistan?

1 A It did. One was, of course, the response to the cable; but then another,
2 that it led to initiating quite quickly thereafter, was to do some thinking on -- as a
3 contingency on what the political implications would be if and when the Taliban took over
4 in terms of what would be the legal implications, what would be the implications for
5 recognition or ability to prosecute our CT aims. It wasn't the sum total of what the
6 government was doing, but it added us into the mix of bringing in another voice and
7 another perspective on it.

8 Q Of course.

9 ██████████ In hindsight, do you think that you and your office should have
10 been more engaged in Afghanistan, especially given the role that you then had to play?

11 Mr. Ahmed. As a general proposition, I could say that on a whole host of issues
12 in hindsight that -- you know. On that particular case, there was an ongoing policy
13 review and there was a division of labor, and so we're -- just as a matter of division of
14 labor, we're not involved on that. Could we prospectively be more involved on that kind
15 of exercise, the answer is yes, and we are, in fact, have been subsequently since.

16 BY ██████████ :

17 Q Can you speak to who the key individuals within the policy planning staff
18 were involved on work relating to Afghanistan?

19 A My two deputies were involved to a degree, but I didn't have one officer
20 who was dedicated to Afghanistan at the time. Later on, I had someone who joined my
21 staff who had served in Kabul, and when he left Kabul I brought on board Rich Hinman,
22 who had formally served in the U.S. military and was a career diplomat. That was a
23 decision I took subsequent to -- as events unfolded, it became clear that it would be
24 useful to have him on the team. But prior to, that I didn't.

25 Q And how did --

1 A Also a lot of the team that I had -- some of the team that I had when I came
2 in was a team that was already there, and others, you know, I was involved in the bidding
3 and the hiring for what takes effect of following cycle --

4 Q Of course.

5 A -- you know, every -- the transition being each summer.

6 Q That makes sense. And how about within the Regional Bureau, was there
7 anyone within the Regional Bureau though that was dedicated, so the regional portfolio,
8 that was dedicated to Afghanistan?

9 A On my team, no; but within the -- Ambassador Khalilzad's team, an SCA, yes.

10 Q Okay.

11 A I can't -- I mean, there are more than one SCA, so I don't know how I'd
12 answer that.

13 Q Okay. And did you play a key role in work relating to Afghanistan?

14 A Not prior to the Dissent Channel.

15 Q But after the Dissent Channel?

16 A In discrete areas, one being the one I mentioned; the second is that for a
17 brief period in August I joined some of the Ambassador Khalilzad's meetings, one in
18 New York in early August with the U.N., because I had a prior background on the U.N.,
19 and I knew the U.N. envoy, and he thought my prior knowledge would be helpful. And
20 also, in the period from the 15th of August to the 30th of August, I was dispatched to
21 Doha to reinforce Ambassador Khalilzad's team in the process of the negotiations that
22 they had at the time with the Taliban.

23 Q Okay.

24 A Other members of my team also were engaged. It was sort of an
25 all-hands-on-deck. So one of my deputies went to Quantico to help set up the reception

1 center there. I had other staff who he went to the Expo at Dulles. They basically asked
2 for volunteers from all the different parts of the building to help with dealing with the
3 inflow of people coming in from Afghanistan, and so I obviously had people on my team
4 who we also led to that effort.

5 Q That's helpful. Thank you.

6 A But it wasn't a normal policy planning function. It was a kind of part of the
7 all-hands-on-deck response that took place at the time.

8 Q That makes sense. Thank you.

9 And did you have any experience relating to Afghanistan prior to becoming policy
10 planning director?

11 A I did. In 2001, I was serving as an adviser to the U.N. special envoy in
12 Afghanistan, Lakhdar Brahimi. And his task at the time, post-9/11, was to work on
13 brokering a post-Taliban government coming into power once the Taliban were dislodged
14 from Kabul. It was what became known as the Bonn Conference. And so I was
15 involved with him in supporting the setup of that conference. It's the one in which
16 Hamid Karzai ultimately emerged as the first leader of the interim administration of
17 Afghanistan.

18 And I deployed to Kabul for a brief initial period of some months to help Lakhdar
19 Brahimi set up the U.N. assistance mission in Afghanistan, and so I worked on the concept
20 of operations for that mission. So that was in that period of 2001 to 2002.

21 In 2009, when I was working at the U.S. mission to the United Nations as a senior
22 adviser on international peace operations, I was -- there was a review of Afghan policy
23 that had been initiated by President Obama at that time. I provided some advice at the
24 time on what the U.N. was and wasn't capable of doing on the ground based on my prior
25 knowledge of having helped set up the U.S. -- the U.N. mission there. Those were the

1 two areas where I had prior engagement and knowledge, but I was never -- I never had
2 any lead or line responsibility for Afghanistan.

3 Q Thank you. Can you speak to the policy planning staff's engagement with
4 Department principals on the seventh floor?

5 A As a general matter?

6 Q As a general matter, yes.

7 A It's very frequent. So we are a participant in morning meetings and
8 evening wraps that take place on a daily or multiple times a week bases. When they are
9 briefing the Secretary on certain issues we might be asked to join, or sometimes if they
10 and an individual principal is leading a particular item then they might ask us to also be a
11 participant in that or seek our thoughts.

12 For example, Deputy Secretary Sherman at the time led a China process within the
13 Department, and so we were a regular participant in her process. Tech was another
14 issue where there -- we've been heavily involved. So it depends on the issue. It's not
15 on every issue, but it's certainly on a number of things. On modernization we've been
16 very involved with the Deputy Secretary of State for management and resources and the
17 under secretary for management.

18 Q And how about with respect to Afghanistan, did that change, stay the same,
19 expand?

20 A I would say that from the period of July through maybe September, through
21 September, I -- I mean, in the case of September I was a more regular participant in some
22 of the discussions about what is our policy going forward in terms of how are we going to
23 engage or not with the Taliban politically, and also how are we going to manage their bid
24 for recognition and trying to keep, to be candid, much of the international community
25 from rushing in to recognize them, that, in fact -- you know, what did we need to do in

1 order for them to understand that that was an unwise move.

2 So those kind of conversations, especially since I've been -- had been party to the
3 discussions with the Taliban, the previous few weeks, I had some direct knowledge of
4 what they had, in fact, been saying about what their intentions were.

5 And so I -- I participated in conversations on the seventh floor that were germane
6 to those kind of issues. Sometimes they might have been led by the Secretary, but they
7 may have been led by others. I can't recount every one of them, but that was the
8 general involvement. But it didn't last for very long, because, again, Afghanistan didn't
9 fit within the kind of category of crosscutting long-term issues that our office was focused
10 on. It wasn't that they weren't important; it's just that there were others who had
11 responsibility for it.

12 Q And to the extent that you did engage with the seventh floor principals on
13 Afghanistan, can you recall who those individuals were?

14 A You know, on occasion it -- well, so -- I would say, on occasion, Counselor
15 Chollet, Derek Chollet. In the case of the dissent cable, the Deputy Secretary for
16 Management and Resources Brian McKeon. Those would be the ones with whom I
17 engaged, but not a lot. In the case of Brian McKeon, it -- prior to the dissent cable, I
18 wasn't really engaged with him on those issues. I did some conversations with
19 Ambassador Khalilzad, but not many, and he wasn't a seventh floor principal.

20 Q And with respect to Counselor Chollet, in what capacity did you engage with
21 him, so what functions, what issues?

22 A In the period prior to us having a confirmed deputy Secretary of State and
23 Under Secretary of State, Counselor Chollet often represented the Department in
24 deputies meetings, and among the issues was on Afghanistan. And so there may have
25 been occasions -- I can't probably count on one hand -- where I might have asked him

1 what was the nature of how the deputies meeting went, kind of what are the issues being
2 discussed.

3 I didn't have any taskings from him per se, and I, you know, didn't report to him,
4 but it often -- it wasn't only about Afghanistan. It might be in the context of, oh, you
5 were in deputies meetings this week, you know, kind of what were the suite of issues that
6 came up this week.

7 Q That makes sense.

8 A But I wasn't a participant in any regular process or policy discussion related
9 to Afghanistan.

10 Q Thank you. And how does S/P engage with other parts of the Department,
11 specifically the other bureaus and offices and sort of regional bureaus?

12 A Technically we report directly to the Secretary and were among the few
13 offices that don't need to clear anything we sent to him with everyone else in the
14 building, as is the famous State Department clearance process, so that has its privileges.
15 But I tend not to act that way because I think that, you know, I have a more general
16 approach, which is nothing about you without you. It's also sort of what the Secretary
17 expected of us.

18 So if we are writing something to him on something pertaining to Africa, we would
19 normally share a copy of the note with the front office in the Africa Bureau, as an
20 example, and say, listen, we're thinking of offering this view to the Secretary. Is there
21 anything in here that gives you heartburn? It doesn't mean that will change our view,
22 but we want to actually represent, by the way, we have this thought, but, you know, you
23 should be aware that the AF Bureau may or may not agree.

24 So that's a pretty common view -- way we might engage with them. We also do
25 the rounds, so to speak, with bureaus to ask them what's on their mind on things longer

1 term that's keeping them up at night, and they feel as if they don't have the bandwidth or
2 the capacity to develop the policies, often also because it cuts across, you know, multiple
3 bureaus.

4 What we found is often our added value is where there isn't anyone on this
5 bureau that owns and who would lead on an issue and could largely do it itself, but
6 because it's so crosscutting. And then sometimes we play a convening role and we have
7 a place where different bureaus can come and talk to each other at different levels,
8 depending on the case.

9 We also engage with bureaus in a systematic way now, and this is -- and maybe
10 it's something that we'll come to later. We lead a process now, deliberate process that I
11 chair with the seventh floor principals, the two deputies, the under secretary, the
12 counselor, the executive secretary, INR, and some others -- and others on a case-by-case
13 basis to systematically look at 6 to 18 months out, what are things that could happen in
14 the world that may not be the highest probability but they would be very high impact,
15 and therefore to look at do we have planning processes in place for these worst-case
16 scenarios.

17 And then in preparing for those meetings we engage with the bureaus to get their
18 sense of what might fit into that category, and then we work with them where our group
19 has identified more work may be needed. And so that's taken on, you know, more of
20 our bandwidth quite a lot.

21 [REDACTED]. Those worst-case scenario meetings that you just referred to,
22 when did that start?

23 Mr. Ahmed. That was post Afghanistan. It was an outgrowth of a specific
24 recommendation that came out of lessons learned on Afghanistan.

25 BY [REDACTED]:

1 Q So with respect to the bureau --

2 A That's not -- wait -- if I could finish that. That's not to say others may not
3 have been doing that, but that was our involvement as the policy planning shop in leading
4 such a thing, happened after, as a direct result of recommendations to do so.

5 [REDACTED]. Do you think it would've been useful to be working in such a role
6 before the Afghanistan withdrawal and the Afghanistan evacuation?

7 Mr. Ahmed. I think -- I think the answer has to be always more is better if you
8 can. I think though often when you first arrive into an administration, I think I talked to
9 my predecessors from prior administrations too, is, you know, on day one, you know,
10 to -- a lot of the people are focused on like just getting the existing policies down, and
11 there are existing review processes that are happening that have been initiated. So in
12 that particular case there was a review process.

13 So, you know, it wouldn't necessarily have been the easiest thing to start on a day
14 one, so to speak. But as a general proposition, I would very strongly recommend to
15 anyone who follows to sustain this effort and to do it continuously, because I think it is
16 valuable and I think it's important.

17 BY [REDACTED]:

18 Q I'd like to go back to the prior point, specifically with the bureaus and offices
19 that you engage with. Can you speak to your involvement, so with respect to matters
20 relating to Afghanistan, so did you engage with SCA on those issues frequently, more
21 sporadically, or can you sort of speak to the particulars of that?

22 A I don't recall personally engaging with SCA much at all on Afghanistan. To
23 the extent that there was engagement on Afghanistan, it would have been more likely
24 with the SRAR office being -- and specifically Ambassador Khalilzad and Tom West, his
25 deputy.

1 Q Thank you. And how about with Embassy Kabul?

2 A I did not have engagement with Embassy Kabul.

3 Q Does S/P generally interface with U.S. Embassies abroad, depending on the
4 issue?

5 A I mean, we tend to work through the bureaus, and if we -- like I -- when I
6 visit, make visits, obviously we engage with posts, or if we're looking at kind of a broad
7 systemic issue, like, for example, do we have the skills and expertise we need as a
8 department on tech. I ran a focus group with chiefs of mission on the margins of our
9 chiefs of mission conference to get their views on where were their gaps, where do they
10 think they need it.

11 So on systemic issues we've been engaging with posts, but we tend not to just
12 reach directly to ambassadors in order to say, look, what's happening here, so as not to
13 create any kind of confusion in their chain.

14 Q Of course.

15 A So but there is some engagement. Often when they come to town an
16 Ambassador might ask to see me to share their views, or they might want to say, listen,
17 there's, you know, want to put your bug in the ear -- a bug in the ear about something or
18 other that maybe you could, you know, put into discussions on the seventh floor if they're
19 not happening already. There isn't something that I would say is a -- it happens as they
20 come through town or as they also take the initiative. And I'm always happy to take that
21 call when they make it.

22 Q Thank you. At Embassy Kabul do you have a main point of contact, to the
23 extent you did communicate with them?

24 A I didn't.

25 Q Thank you.

1 A But to be precise, we did have engagement with some staff who were part
2 of Embassy Kabul in connection with the Dissent Channel cable. That was very specific
3 engagement related to that cable. But outside of that, we didn't have a point of
4 contact. We didn't have an engagement with the embassy.

5 Q And were these staff who were signatories or authors of the Dissent Channel
6 cable?

7 A Correct.

8 ██████████: So I just want to note for the record, and we can talk about it at a
9 break, but anything to do with that exact cable is going to need to be in the class session
10 as opposed to the kind of generic how the dissent works in general or things like that.
11 And I'm not saying we got to that line, but we're -- I'm just -- any specifics we really need
12 to do -- because, as you know, in the accommodation we did, everything to do with the
13 cable and the cable itself was always conducted in a SCIF with members and
14 my -- most -- and my participation not in all instances, but in many.

15 ██████████: No, thank you for making note of that, ██████████ and we'll be sure to
16 take into account.

17 ██████████: So I'm not saying it's off limits; it just needs to be in a different
18 setting.

19 ██████████: Thank you.

20 BY ██████████:

21 Q So we'll switch gears a bit and sort of transition to the interagency process
22 relating to Afghanistan. Can you speak to that, or were you involved in that process at
23 all?

24 A I wasn't involved in that process. My awareness of it is that, you know,
25 there were quite a number of deputies meetings and principals meetings that took up the

1 question first about the withdrawal about whether to and when to withdraw and then
2 subsequent to that planning for it. I did not participate in any of those meetings, so I
3 wouldn't represent to you what was discussed in them.

4 Q Did anyone within S/P participate in those meetings?

5 A They did not.

6 Q Did they provide -- did they ask S/P for any inputs prior to or after the
7 meetings?

8 A Not that I recall.

9 BY [REDACTED]:

10 Q You mentioned earlier in discussing S/P's role and, you know, in contrast to
11 other departmental roles that there was a division of labor on Afghanistan within the
12 Department. Can you speak more to what that division of labor was and who had the
13 roles of responsibility in relation to that?

14 A Sure. The Secretary had -- so I don't have any line responsibility, you know.
15 We're advisers within the Secretary's office, so we're not formally line responsible for any
16 of the specific files.

17 Q Right.

18 A But we're always available to provide general advice to the Secretary on any
19 item that he wants. He has another general adviser, so to speak, in his office and that's
20 the counselor. In this particular instance, in the general advice category, the counselor
21 was the person who, one, was representing us in deputies and principals meetings until
22 such time as we had confirmed deputies and under, but then subsequently, because he
23 hadn't been involved in those discussions, today me might be more likely to provide the
24 general advice on those issues because he'd been privy to the discussions to date, even
25 though he didn't have line responsibility, because that would've been on the diplomacy

1 Ambassador Khalilzad, and Brian McKeon on operational issues related to Afghans at risk
2 or embassy security related issues.

3 Where my focus was tended to be less on country specific cases that were the
4 subject of ongoing deputies and principals meetings, et cetera, but rather more big
5 picture, what is our overall strategy and how are we tackling big questions like
6 competition with China. Subsequently, the long-term play with Russia following its
7 threat of and then subsequent invasion in Ukraine and questions on the Indo-Pacific like
8 the development of the Indo-Pacific strategy.

9 So as you can see, more were there more global, more national-level strategies
10 that cover broad regions, we tended to be more in that space, also those that had a more
11 long-time horizon. The more near-term, the more operational, and the more country
12 specific it was, the less likely it was that we'd be involved.

13 That said, where we have individual officers they might be on a clearance line, for
14 example, for when things go to the Secretary. Very often in the dozens of people who
15 are on a clearance line we're often -- we might be on there as well. So I don't want to
16 say that we have no engagement on those issues, but it's not what our main focus is, the
17 more operationally near term that the focus is, mainly because you've got so many
18 people in the Department who are focused on the immediate and on the near term.

19 One of the advices that I had received from my predecessors from multiple
20 administrations was there aren't that many people who are thinking a year, 2, 3 years out
21 and looking at the long-term trend lines, et cetera. And so the more you can do that,
22 the more of a value add that's going to be relative to what someone at the desk can do on
23 a day-to-day level.

24 BY [REDACTED]:

25 Q And, Mr. Ahmed, did you engage with anyone at the Department of Defense

1 on matters relating to the Afghanistan withdrawal as director of S/P?

2 A I didn't as a matter in my job. Where I would've intersected with the
3 Department of Defense was in Doha, in those two-week period where there were
4 representatives of DOD at various levels who had been cycling through Doha as part of
5 those negotiations or who were part of Ambassador Khalilzad's team. So I definitely
6 interacted with them then, but that was a discrete point in time in a very specific case.
7 Otherwise, as a general matter, I wasn't the person who was assigned to work with DOD
8 on Afghanistan.

9 Q Do you recall who you engaged with while in Doha at the DOD?

10 A Yes. General McKenzie, who was at the time the CENTCOM commander,
11 who had been sent out for one of the meetings with the Taliban, and there would have
12 been members of his staff that I would've engaged with whose names I can't recall.

13 Q It was a long time ago.

14 A Yeah.

15 Q And how about individuals within the White House and the NSC on matters
16 relating to the Afghanistan withdrawal, did you engage with any of them?

17 A I did not, other than to share my impressions out of Doha on -- when I came
18 back from Doha, after those few weeks, I did engage with the NSC to share my
19 impressions. And along the way I would've engaged with them but not exclusively
20 them, with leadership at the NSC and the State Department in those few weeks. But
21 other than that, I did not.

22 Q And what were those impressions?

23 [REDACTED]. So the answer to that question will implicate executive branch
24 confidentiality interests, because the witness has just noted that he shared them with the
25 NSC and seniors there. And so until we know, which I won't know and we can't do on

1 the record, I don't know if there is a privilege involved, but at this time, I would ask the
2 witness to not share that information because it implicates potential privilege issues.

3 BY [REDACTED]:

4 Q So let me reframe that question. What did you learn while in Doha?

5 Mr. Ahmed. The period that I was there in Doha, the main focus was on
6 communicating to the Taliban that they should not interfere in any way, shape, or form
7 with our effort to withdraw our people, including Afghans at risk but also our people.
8 And in the process, what I also -- and so what -- I think they understood our message very
9 clearly that they should not interfere, and that they understood what our expectation of
10 them was not only not to interfere but to where they could facilitate our exit.

11 What I also learned was obviously they were only going to do what was in their
12 interest. They weren't going to do us any favors. But insofar as they believed that our
13 departure was in their interest and us being able to get our people out safely was
14 material to that departure they had an interest in not interfering with that withdrawal.
15 That was an impression that I formed from listening to them in the conversations, and it
16 was very much a focus of our discussion.

17 A lot of it though was about -- was also setting up processes for actual operational
18 coordination to take place in Kabul. So part of those conversations -- and I should be
19 clear, I wasn't the one leading them. I was present, but they were very much led by
20 Ambassador Khalilzad, and then when General McKenzie was there by General McKenzie.
21 So I was present, I heard the discussions, but I wasn't leading them.

22 And from my impressions of what I was hearing also, they agreed that it made
23 sense for us to each appoint people to be designated in Kabul to work out the range
24 of operational things and to be available if those arrangements weren't working to try to
25 resolve differences. Again, this was a two-week period, and that was the primary focus.

1 The other impression I had was that they were unlikely to -- they were not making
2 any noises to suggest that they were going to form an inclusive governing arrangement,
3 and so that gave us a little bit of insight into what kind of a Taliban government we may
4 be dealing with going forward, and that would have a bearing on conversations that
5 might take place subsequently on, for example, questions of recognition, you know.

6 I think one had the impression that they understood we had CT interests at stake
7 and that they needed to, under any circumstance, not thwart those. I think one has the
8 impression that they heard us. Obviously you don't know at the time what they're going
9 to act on subsequently.

10 One learned about, you know, some of the insights into who were the people that
11 they were appointing and what that could mean for the situation of women and girls in
12 the country and the status of human rights, and, in fact, the threat to what had been
13 achieved to them. But those are impressions that you're basing on those few weeks, on
14 what they're telling you. You also don't know whether what they're telling you is, of
15 course, going to be born out in reality.

16 And also, when I say what I was learning, I was also benefiting from other
17 members of Ambassador Khalilzad's team who had been privy to them and who had been
18 following Afghanistan for years. And so often it was, listen, they've just said that, what
19 does that mean, can you help me understand, what's the implication of that. So those
20 are the kind of impressions that I was forming, albeit it for a very brief period of time.

21 BY [REDACTED]:

22 Q Thank you. And sort of backtracking to my prior question, do you recall
23 who your main points of contact at the White House or the NSC were?

24 A My main points of contact?

25 Q Correct.

1 A To the extent that I sent back any communications or was expecting
2 someone to communicate it to them, Jon Finer and Jake Sullivan as the NSC leadership,
3 just because the level of discussion that was happening was at the level of deputies and
4 principals at that time.

5 Q That makes sense. Thank you.

6 And can you speak to what that reporting relationship looked like, if any?

7 A Well, I had no reporting relationship to them. What I would say rather is
8 simply, if deputies were meeting or principals were meeting, either Jon Finer or Jake
9 Sullivan would convene those meetings. The State Department participated in them.
10 Generally speaking, I didn't, when I was in Doha. Although, I might have attended a few.
11 I did attend a couple, but otherwise, I wasn't a regular participant in them because we
12 were representing otherwise.

13 So a lot of those meetings were about, to the extent that people in Doha
14 participated in them, it was mainly to provide a SITREP of what was happening, whether it
15 was in Doha, what are the Taliban saying, what has been communicated to them, what
16 are -- you know, what have we communicated, et cetera. If Kabul participated it was to
17 provide a SITREP of what's actually happening on the ground.

18 So that was -- a lot of the nature of it was providing information so that
19 decision-makers had the benefit of different nodes of input. And to the extent that -- if I
20 had impressions, and I didn't -- I was only there 2 weeks, so I didn't -- wasn't like, you
21 know -- it was, you know, the handful of occasions when I said, look, here, I've rounded
22 up my impressions, I wanted to make sure that they were privy to them as well, so not
23 only my department's leadership but the NSC leadership too.

24 Q That makes sense. Thank you.

25 You noted that you didn't directly report to the NSC. Did the Department report

1 to the NSC in any capacity, more broadly on these issues?

2 A Again, I think, you know, I mean, the Department reports to the Secretary,
3 reports to the President, and I think the NSC was convening meetings to ensure that it
4 was getting input from all the departments so that when the President was asked to
5 make a decision it was with the benefit of the full set of information, but also if
6 departments -- if agencies had a view on what should be done that that view was
7 communicated to the President, including whether there were differences of views.
8 That's its general role in general, you know. I mean, that's the role it plays. And in a
9 crisis that becomes, you know, the President may be more frequently engaging with it
10 than in a steady state.

11 Q In terms of decision-making, just so I understand better, was it that the
12 Department was then providing advice and guidance on these issues and the NSC
13 White House was making the decision, or is it that the Department made decisions on
14 issues within its jurisdiction, then shared that with the NSC?

15 A I think it's a mix.

16 Q Okay.

17 A I think that once a decision is made, let's say by the President, that the
18 troops will be out at the end of the month, and I'm talking about down in the midst of the
19 crisis. The Department has activities that it's been given an instruction to proceed with
20 as they understand they need to proceed with. They may have been doing so. There
21 may have been junctures at with -- at which you say, wow, that's a big -- that's actually a
22 big decision, and they might say, actually, that's something we should bring back to make
23 sure the President will be comfortable with if we proceed X, Y, and Z. The Department
24 may or may not make a recommendation when bringing that to the attention. So I
25 wouldn't pinpoint it to one exact answer to it, but that's the general nature of the

1 process.

2 Q Thank you.

3 [REDACTED]: I just want to note that Salman just testified that he wasn't in these
4 meetings, so these are his views and impressions, opinions.

5 [REDACTED]: Of course.

6 [REDACTED]: They're not ill informed, but he wasn't in the meetings.

7 Mr. Ahmed. Yeah. Fair.

8 BY [REDACTED]:

9 Q And in terms of engagement with allied nations, can you speak to which
10 nations you personally experienced, the Department, or you in your capacity as director
11 of S/P having worked with on Afghanistan matters?

12 A So when I met with my policy planning counterparts, the ones that -- where
13 it's the most mature relationship that, you know, precedes even my coming into the job
14 are like the G7 countries, right, so the Brits, the French, Germans, Japanese, Italians,
15 Canadians, there's a history of policy planning engagement with them bilaterally.
16 Collectively, it wasn't actually until the end of the year that the Brits under their
17 presidency began a formal G7 policy planning dialogue, so that was a new creation.

18 There's a NATO policy planning network. So we have established networks
19 where I engage with them, and those -- I would say those first 6, 7 months, Afghanistan
20 wasn't the subject of our discussions because each of these countries had their own
21 envoys on Afghanistan, and the envoys were talking to each other.

22 Q Okay.

23 A So like I wasn't the normal interlocutor for Afghanistan, and my own
24 counterparts deferred to their envoys for that conversation with one another, generally
25 speaking. I think subsequent to the fall of Kabul, for example, there was a NATO policy

1 planning meeting or there was a G7 policy planners, we were collectively thinking through
2 as Russia, the threat from Russia was mounting, as we were dealing with a growing
3 challenge from China, but also considering, okay, now that we're not in Afghanistan -- it's
4 like looking at the totality of it, and we were exchanging views on what has this done to
5 the environment within the region and more generally, and where is it free to apply
6 abilities, where has it create vulnerabilities, et cetera. So that was kind of the nature of
7 it, but there was no operational coordination in my channel on those issues.

8 Now, I did have engagement with the envoys who dealt with Afghanistan when I
9 was in Doha as part of the discussions Ambassador Khalilzad had with them. I can recall
10 the German, the French, I believe, the Norwegian. I'm going to misremember. It was
11 whoever cycled through Doha and asked to see him, and if I happened to be free and he
12 said, listen, I'm seeing this envoy, would you like to, you know, sit in.

13 Those conversations tended to be pretty specific to, hey, listen, we're trying to get
14 our people to the airport or we're trying -- you know, I mean, so some of it was
15 operational. Some of it was already we were laying the groundwork to try to make sure
16 people didn't rush to recognize the Taliban.

17 So from a political point of view, if I could say there was a common theme, it was
18 trying to make sure that people understood the Taliban. If they, you know -- when they
19 take power they're going to be wanting everyone to kind of rush in and legitimize them,
20 and we wanted to lay out our cautions to them.

21 Q Do you think now, sort of, in hindsight, that would've been useful to have
22 those Afghanistan ramification meetings with allies before the withdrawal?

23 A Oh, so to be clear, I -- I believe that there were discussions ongoing with
24 allies at various levels. There were discussions with allies in Brussels at NATO. It was
25 being discussed bilaterally. What I'm saying is that there were envoys, and those envoys

1 were put into ministers and ministers discussed these with each other, ambassadors of
2 NATO. There was a ton of allied consultation.

3 I'm just saying in the policy planning channel, that wasn't the area of focus. And,
4 again, we tended not, in the policy planning channels, to talk about the individual country
5 strategy because we have other people who talk about that. Even on Russia-Ukraine,
6 we're not talking in the policy planning channel about specific weaponry going in or
7 specific operational issues, but we might be looking at what are the long-term
8 implications of, let's say, weaning Europe off of energy dependence on Russia and what
9 kind of geostrategic strength that might give us if we're able to get there.

10 Q That's helpful. Thank you.

11

BY [REDACTED]

12 Q So -- but you did say after the withdrawal you did then have these meetings
13 about the ramifications related to the withdrawal from Afghanistan and the Taliban
14 takeover. So would it have been useful to start to have those conversations about what
15 the possible ramifications would be prior to the withdrawal, prior to the evacuation, prior
16 to the Taliban takeover?

17 A Again, anything that has transpired, I would say, as a general matter, more
18 conversations better, and if you have the benefit of that information, sure. Why not?
19 I don't disagree as a general, practical matter. But even -- to be clear though, the
20 conversations that we had subsequently were not only about Afghanistan. It was about,
21 you know, okay, how are you all thinking about your policy towards South Asia now given
22 that for 20 years a lot of our focus towards South Asia was looked at through the prism of
23 sustaining our effort in Afghanistan.

24 Now, given the reality of not being invested in Afghanistan in the same manner,
25 how has that changed your view? How has it changed your view? Has that meant that

1 you're going to have a different posture towards Pakistan? Are you going to have a
2 different posture towards India? Does that diminish our dependence on the Russians,
3 you know, for certain logistics support?

4 So that's what I mean is to say, all right, what is the implication of that from a
5 strategic and geopolitical sense on a wider basis. You know, to say would it have been
6 worthwhile to have that conversation beforehand, sure.

7 BY [REDACTED]:

8 Q And you noted this previously in terms of your trip to Doha, but can you
9 speak to the Department's engagement with the Taliban more broadly relating to
10 Afghanistan?

11 A The Department's engagement with the Taliban?

12 Q Uh-huh.

13 A The Department's engagement with the Taliban, from the period that I came
14 into the role, was primarily, I think, almost exclusively to the -- or not exclusively, but
15 primarily conducted through Ambassador Khalilzad than his team. In the event that the
16 IC and the DOD had contacts with them as well, and they very well, I'm sure, did, I wasn't
17 privy to those.

18 Q And you say primarily in the Department that it was through Ambassador
19 Khalilzad. Was there anyone else that engaged someone --

20 A Well, his team. He had people on his team who also engaged with them,
21 and they were in Doha. I mean, there was a presence in Doha, and the Taliban had
22 people in Doha with whom they were engaging. And I think that predates when I was in
23 the job going back to the Doha agreement.

24 Q What is your understanding of Ambassador Khalilzad's negotiations with the
25 Taliban throughout 2021?

1 A My understanding is he had frequent engagement with them. I can't tell
2 you how much. I presume it was primarily rooted in the implementation of the Doha
3 agreement and its status, and a lot of it was about whether or not there would be, as the
4 Doha agreement called for, both the diminishment of violence but also a political process
5 related to the formation of, you know, new governing arrangements.

6 Q Do you receive any briefings or readouts on those negotiations in your role
7 as director of S/P?

8 A I was not -- I can't say I never was -- had visibility on it, but I wasn't a regular
9 kind of recipient of those briefings or present at them when he gave any readouts to the
10 Secretary. I will have seen some reference to aspects of it in intel briefs that I got, which
11 I get regularly, but it would have been more general. But I wasn't -- I wasn't following
12 the day-to-day negotiations that they may have been taking place with them.

13 Q Did you request any briefings or readouts after receiving the Dissent
14 Channel?

15 A I did.

16 Q How frequently?

17 A I can't recall the exact frequency, but what I can say is that my own
18 involvement went up precipitously after that, enough so that I had that conversation with
19 Ambassador Khalilzad more generally, not only about the cable but just trying to
20 understand where things were, and he invited me to join him to this meeting with the
21 U.N. envoy.

22 Q Thank you. And --

23 A That was early August when that meeting took place.

24 Q That's helpful. Thank you.

25 Did you or others in S/P ever engage directly with the Taliban?

1 A I did in those 2 weeks in Doha. I didn't engage with them outside of the
2 meetings that Ambassador Khalilzad was having with them, so I was present at some of
3 them. I wasn't present at all of them. I did not meet with them independent of him.

4 Q And do you recall which Taliban officials you engaged with?

5 A Baradar was the senior most official there in the meetings that Khalilzad had.
6 I'm not recalling all their names right now, but it was largely the people with whom he
7 were meeting were the people who were assigned to basically staff the Taliban office in
8 Doha.

9 As the weeks -- as the days passed though, eventually a lot of them started
10 moving into Kabul and to Kandahar, and so their presence started to thin, but Baradar
11 was the most senior of them. I don't even know if I knew all the names of the people
12 that were necessarily back benching, you know.

13 Q Of course. And all this is to the best of your recollection.

14 A Yeah.

15 Q We understand that time has transpired since then.

16 Do you recall what the circumstances of those engagements were or what -- the
17 goals, more specifically?

18 A When I originally went out, the goal initially was prior to the Taliban having
19 actually entered Kabul, and so it was to see whether that could be forestalled. But by
20 the time I arrived, you know -- when I arrived they had already -- the President had
21 already left. The Afghan forces had already basically decided not to contest the Taliban.
22 The Taliban were already in Kabul.

23 So the objectives of the meeting, when I -- those that I participated in were largely
24 about communicating to the Taliban that they should not interfere with our ability to
25 effectuate the withdrawal, and that they had to do whatever they could to facilitate it.

1 And it was about putting in place coordination arrangements on the ground in Kabul so
2 that people could be designated to take those discussions forward since, you know, it
3 would be very difficult to do from Doha at a distance, and it was the wrong people to try
4 to have operational conversation.

5 Those were the primary focus of the discussions, and it was also to communicate
6 to them our expectations about not interfering our CT interests. But frankly, so much of
7 the time I was there in those 2 weeks the intense focus was making sure they didn't
8 obstruct our withdrawal.

9 Q Was there any consideration of the other requirements of the Doha
10 agreement, specifically violence toward Afghan civilians?

11 A I think that there were definitely occasions where it was communicated to
12 them -- well, one was trying to avoid giving them the impression that somehow they get
13 to be recognized, you know, or that we were all going to continue with business as usual,
14 but it was, in fact, the opposite, to make sure they understood that by having chosen the
15 path they did they had consigned themselves to new dispensation, i.e., that don't have
16 false expectations about everyone basically being okay with this.

17 And more than that, making sure they understood that their behavior towards
18 their responsibilities that were already outlined in the Doha agreement, their
19 responsibilities on CT, their responsibilities to women and girls will all be things that
20 everyone would be watching very carefully. But frankly, you know, that was not -- yeah.
21 But so much of the conversation was about the withdrawal as it was ongoing.

22 Q Thank you. And I'm going to pivot toward the Dissent Channel now and
23 specifically some broader institutional questions. Can you please briefly explain to us
24 what the Dissent Channel is?

25 A Sure. The channel is a creation of the Vietnam war era, early 1970s, which

1 was to provide an opportunity for officers within the Department, particularly more
2 junior officers who didn't necessarily have access to senior leadership, to be able to
3 communicate to them directly where they either did not agree with the policy that was in
4 place or they didn't agree with how the existing policy was being implemented, even if
5 they happen to be okay with the policy itself.

6 In the early days, it covered a broader range of issues, but it -- with the creation of
7 the Office of the Inspector General and other mechanisms for taking up questions of
8 waste, fraud, and abuse, and management issues, and et cetera, its focus consistently
9 became much more on substantial foreign policy related matters, as opposed to
10 management and oversight related issues in the resource management realm.

11 So it's been in existence for, you know, 50 years. The -- and the intention is that
12 it should be available to people to use when the existing policy channels are not the
13 appropriate mechanism to communicate through or they're not able to get them through,
14 or they fear that for some reason or another there would be retribution if they were to
15 express the views, and therefore the confidential channel allows for individuals to be able
16 to communicate to the highest levels what their concerns may be, including if they have
17 recommendations for rectifying them, but to do so in a way where they're -- it's
18 anonymized so that that fear of retribution from others in the chain or from the higher
19 levels may be -- you know, is at least addressed to some degree. The channel is meant
20 to make sure that -- I can -- should I talk further about like how it works or --

21 Q I would love to hear a bit more as to the policy planning staff's role in
22 managing the channel.

23 A Yes. So the -- we are assigned the role of managing it. When it was first
24 created the chairperson of the open forum also had a role to, like by formal history and
25 statute at the time or the foreign affairs manual, but that position was eliminated quite a

1 lot afterwards, so -- although we've reinstated something along its lines.

2 But in any event -- so in other words, I'm saying that some of this has evolved, but
3 basically now the role is that I -- the director of the policy and planning staff is the
4 recipient of the cable. And it's understood that the director's job is to make sure that
5 the senior officials who are supposed to get it get it, and that are -- those are the
6 Secretary, the two deputy secretaries of state, and the under secretary for political
7 affairs, to make sure they get it, make sure that the drafter receives an acknowledgment
8 ideally within 48 hours, the drafter or drafters, to assign members of the staff to then
9 work on a response to seek the drafters' concurrence to share the cable with others
10 beyond those designated, whether in redacted or unredacted form, where others' input
11 may be needed in order to get them an answer.

12 And it's to consult with those concerned who have the most knowledge about
13 being able to address the issues that they raise, and to then make sure that there is a
14 response received by the drafters. We endeavor to do so ideally within 30 to 60 days.
15 It's generally what we do do. There may be some cases where we miss that mark,
16 but -- and to do it quicker if it's something that is more time sensitive.

17 Q That's helpful. Thank you.

18 A And to maintain the confidentiality and to make sure that, you know, the
19 documents are handled with the care needed so that the drafters' identities are not
20 divulged to where they're not supposed to be and where they have not agreed for them
21 to be.

22 [REDACTED]. Thank you for that. That's very helpful. And I have some
23 followup questions, but I see we're out of time, so I'm going to stop. And if we could go
24 off the record.

25 [Recess.]

1 [10:45 a.m.]

2 [REDACTED]: Okay. We'll go back on the record.

3 EXAMINATION

4 BY [REDACTED]:

5 Q Salman, thanks again for coming today. My name's [REDACTED]. I'm the
6 [REDACTED] for Mr. Meeks on the Democratic side of the committee staff. And,
7 again, we're very glad that you're here voluntarily. We appreciate your answering our
8 questions.

9 I just want to note at the top we will endeavor to be as clear as we can in our
10 questions. I think you're already doing this. But if at any point any of our questions
11 mischaracterize your previous testimony, please do correct us. And to the extent you
12 are able to give firsthand knowledge or general knowledge of something as opposed to
13 speculation, that's going to be helpful for us to develop a clean record.

14 So with that, I want to go back to the beginning a bit. I just want to make sure
15 we have a complete picture of your, I think, 30 years of experience, you said --

16 A Yes.

17 Q -- in the Foreign Affairs field.

18 [REDACTED] I don't know if the clock's running.

19 [REDACTED] Sorry.

20 BY [REDACTED]:

21 Q So just to get this straight, you said that you previously, prior to this
22 administration and your assuming the role as the head of S/P, you had previously served
23 in government in which capacities?

24 A I was the senior director for Strategic Planning at the National Security
25 Council.

1 Q And what were the dates?

2 A From 2013 to 2017 -- or January of 2018.

3 Q And could you previously characterize your duties and responsibilities in that
4 role?

5 A Sure. I think -- wait, I'm confusing my dates. This is the second term of
6 the --

7 [REDACTED]: January 2017?

8 Mr. Ahmed. 2017, yeah.

9 The primary duties of that role?

10 BY [REDACTED]:

11 Q Uh-huh.

12 A It was to look at broad questions of the National Security general -- National
13 Security Strategy in general, long-term trends in the international system, in general, that
14 would affect U.S. interests and our ability to undertake them around the world, and
15 where there were individual policies that we were asked to weigh in on as a strategic
16 planning shop that were of a crosscutting nature, to do so.

17 Some examples included the developing the counter-ISIL strategy, where we
18 worked with our CT colleagues and the NEA colleagues on counter-ISIL strategy, Arctic
19 tech and national security, so big thematic issues.

20 We also worked on convening outside expert meetings with the President where
21 he asked to get views from constructive critics from the outside on any issue that he
22 happened to want to talk about.

23 We also were the point people for OMB on translating the President's national
24 security priorities into some of the -- to making sure that they were reflected in the
25 budget requests.

1 Q And is it fair to characterize that that role was focused on strategic issues
2 more so than in operational or implementing role in terms of --

3 A Very much so. It was a strategic role. There were moments at which I
4 had on a personal basis some operational engagement, but that was sometimes asked to
5 do that more based on my prior experiences in other capacities.

6 Q Uh-huh.

7 A But the institutional role of strat plan was much more strategic.

8 Q And could you explain other types of previous government experience you
9 had?

10 A Yes. I served previously in government as initially the senior advisor at the
11 U.S. Mission to the U.N. on international peace operations, in general, in responses to
12 conflicts. I subsequently became the chief of staff of the U.S. mission to the U.N. --

13 Q Uh-huh.

14 A -- in New York.

15 Q And --

16 A So 8 years in government.

17 Q Okay. And then outside of government, can you describe the roles that
18 you've held?

19 A Prior to coming into government, I taught at Princeton at the
20 Woodrow -- what was then the Woodrow Wilson School of International Affairs. The
21 name's since changed. I taught graduate classes on international conflict, management,
22 and peacekeeping.

23 Prior to that, I had served as, you know, at the Department of Peacekeeping
24 Operations in the equivalent of the chief of staff for the head of the U.N. Peacekeeping
25 Operations, which at the time there were about 100,000 personnel on the field, a \$5

1 billion budget.

2 I had undertaken, prior to that work, I'd worked with -- the Secretary General of
3 the U.N. had asked Ambassador Brahimi to lead a review of peacekeeping reform. I was
4 involved in that, in addition to having served with him on Afghanistan.

5 In 2003, I had deployed to Iraq with then the Special Representative to the U.N.
6 Sergio de Mello and his team in order to help establish the U.N. presence in Baghdad that
7 was intended to work with the Coalition Provisional Authority. I was, of course, very
8 fortunate to have left just before a truck bomb went off at the U.N. headquarters and
9 killed Mr. de Mello and 21 other colleagues that -- many of whom I had helped to recruit.

10 Went back to Iraq a year later with Lakhdar Brahimi when -- in order to help get
11 the Iraqi interim administration in place.

12 I've undertaken also in the nineties an investigation. I was a co-lead of
13 investigating the massacres at Srebrenica in the failure of the U.N. safe area policy. I
14 served a number of years myself in Bosnia on the implementation of the Dayton Peace
15 Accords. So that was for 2 years initially in Gorazde, one of the former safe areas where
16 I'd helped facilitate some of the first postwar contacts between Bosnia and the Serbs and
17 Bosnia and Muslims, getting water and electricity restarted. And I also served in
18 Bershka (ph), which was a town under international administration, working on the
19 formation of a multiethnic police.

20 In the early nineties, I was in South Africa. In the role, I was to support the South
21 Africans on the conduct of their elections that led to President Mandela's election and
22 end of apartheid and working on looking at flash points of violence.

23 I served in Cambodia in '92 for a year in the conduct of elections, conducting civic
24 education.

25 There are other roles. I don't know.

1 Q Well, it's 30 years.

2 A Yeah.

3 Q It's a lot to flesh out.

4 I think we missed -- moving forward in time again, did you also hold any roles at
5 think tanks?

6 A Think tanks. I did. When I left government, I served for 4 years at the
7 Carnegie Endowment for International Peace where --

8 Q What were the dates?

9 A The dates would be February of 2017 until July of 2020.

10 Q Okay.

11 A I -- when I was there, I led the research on and chaired bipartisan task force
12 on how U.S. foreign policy affects the American middle class.

13 Q Okay. So from the testimony that you've just given of previous roles that
14 you held and the activities that you performed in those roles, do you consider yourself a
15 foreign policy expert?

16 A I do.

17 Q Do you consider yourself well-versed in conflict and crisis situations?

18 A I do.

19 Q Would you characterize the majority of your work as -- let me back up.

20 You mentioned that you've led reviews. You've written investigative reports,
21 looking at --

22 A Uh-huh.

23 Q -- particular situations. Would you characterize the bulk of your experience
24 as strategic, top-level foreign policy analysis, or would you characterize it more as an
25 implementing or operational function?

1 A I would say that it's been both. Later on in my career, it's been increasingly
2 more strategic, more systemic.

3 Q Uh-huh.

4 A And when I started in my early 20s, I was in a more operational role. So,
5 you know, I think it's covered a gamut.

6 Q Uh-huh.

7 A But later on in the career have been strategic and also scholarly as well.

8 Q Okay. So then it's a fair characterization to say that as your career has
9 progressed and you've gotten more experienced and more senior, you have developed
10 that expertise with respect to strategic roles.

11 A Correct.

12 Q Have you received any awards for your contributions related to foreign
13 affairs?

14 A I don't think so, but --

15 Q But would it be fair to say that people have consulted you throughout your
16 career for your expertise on foreign affairs?

17 A Yes.

18 Q Has your work on foreign affairs ever been published?

19 A Yes.

20 Q Can you describe?

21 A Sure. I've -- I've -- other work I did at the think tank was published on -- we
22 did case studies on the impact of foreign policy on middle class in Ohio and in Nebraska
23 and in Colorado. We did a summary report of that. I was the main author of that, the
24 lead author and editor of it.

25 I've done other work published in foreign affairs on how we think about our

1 response to conflicts in general. I -- my piece -- pieces that have been published on
2 mediation as well.

3 Q So is it fair to say that your written products on foreign affairs have been
4 publicly available and consulted by members of the public?

5 A Yes.

6 Q Okay. And with respect to Afghanistan, do you consider yourself an expert
7 in Afghanistan?

8 A I would say that I do not consider myself an expert on Afghanistan. I've had
9 familiarity with Afghanistan at discrete periods over the last 20 years, but a lot of people
10 in the U.S. Government have.

11 Q Okay. Thank you.

12 I want to move on to the roles and responsibilities of the Policy Planning office,
13 S/P.

14 A Uh-huh.

15 Q We did talk about this a little bit in the last round, but I want to fill in some
16 gaps and make sure we're clear.

17 [REDACTED] I'd like to introduce -- I think this is exhibit 1.

18 [Ahmed Exhibit No. 1

19 Was marked for identification.]

20 BY [REDACTED]:

21 Q So this is -- well, as you can see at the top of the page, this exhibit says
22 "Unclassified," and it says 1 FAM 020 Office of the Secretary of State (S).

23 Does this look to you like a portion of the Foreign Affairs Manual --

24 A Yes, it does.

25 Q -- that relates to the structure of the Office of the Secretary?

1 A Yes.

2 Q Are you generally familiar --

3 A Yes.

4 Q -- with this?

5 Can you state for the record what is the Foreign Affairs Manual?

6 A For the record, it's the document that provides policy and direction and
7 guidance that guides the activities of the Department of State.

8 Q And is it expected that employees should adhere to the guidelines and rules
9 in the Foreign Affairs Manual?

10 A Yes.

11 Q Okay. And let's turn -- I've dog-eared the page so that you can find it, but
12 let's turn to section 1 FAM 023 Policy Planning Staff (S/P).

13 Are you familiar with this section of the Foreign Affairs Manual?

14 A Yes.

15 Q Have you consulted it over the course of your work in S/P?

16 A Yes.

17 Q Frequently?

18 A Frequently, no, but --

19 Q But multiple times?

20 A I've seen it, yes.

21 Q Okay. And the roles and responsibilities that it stipulates, do those
22 comport with your earlier testimony when you characterized the role of S/P? I think you
23 broke it down into three main buckets. But were those informed by the FAM?

24 A It was informed by the FAM. I gave a shorthand answer to try to --

25 Q Okay.

1 A -- convey the breadth in a succinct way.

2 Q So I believe you had characterized previously that S/P's roles essentially
3 were strategic planning and coordination, the big picture and long-term trends that the
4 Department needs to look at. The second bucket was related to policy development
5 and debate, particularly among cross-regional or cross-functional issues. And the third
6 was to manage the Dissent Channel, the Ideas Channel, the Open Forum, the Foreign
7 Policy Advisory Board.

8 And I'm sorry, there were four. You also --

9 A Policy and messaging.

10 Q Policy and messaging. Okay. That's three. So that included
11 speechwriting and messaging.

12 So is it fair to say that those activities are not voluntary or optional but are, in fact,
13 required of you in your role at S/P?

14 A Yes.

15 Q Okay. And to what extent are you aware of any statutory basis that
16 undergirds the roles and responsibilities that S/P performs?

17 A I don't recall offhand.

18 Q But is it fair to say that the FAM is generally --

19 A Response --

20 Q -- drafted in a way to respond to statute?

21 A Yes. Yes.

22 Q Okay. Thank you.

23 I want to go back to your earlier description of S/P's roles and responsibilities. I
24 believe you mentioned that you and your staff engage in, quote, think work, and that
25 sometimes in the course of your duties you're asked to give a, quote, independent read

1 on issues.

2 A Uh-huh. Yes.

3 Q In order to engage in such activities, is it necessary for you to be somewhat
4 removed from the operational day-to-day diplomacy of the Department?

5 A I think that it's a combination of being -- in order to offer an independent
6 take, sometimes it's helpful that you haven't been part of the day-to-day activities.

7 Q Uh-huh.

8 A But you do have to have some familiarity about what's been going on so that
9 the -- any take you provide is at least cognizant of some of that debate too. So it's both.

10 Q And I believe you testified earlier that you and your staff proactively, quote,
11 make the rounds with regional bureaus?

12 A Yes.

13 Q Is the purpose of that to synthesize the strategic work that you are doing
14 with the more operational policy work of the Department on a daily basis?

15 A It is. And to ensure that advice we provide, that they will have to
16 implement is informed by their judgment as well, since we're not the implementing arm
17 of policies.

18 Q Uh-huh. And regarding your earlier testimony that S/P is often the one to
19 give a, quote, independent read to the Secretary or other Department officials on policy
20 matters, in order to perform that function, is it based on the premise that there should be
21 a debate about policy issues inside the Department?

22 A I think as a general matter, yes, but there can't be a debate on every issue all
23 the time.

24 Q Uh-huh.

25 A And so often it's responsive to what the Secretary or others around him

1 might have asked for.

2 Q And so then is it fair to say that S/P exists precisely to create a safe space for
3 such debate and deliberation?

4 A Yes, especially if there are people in the Department who have a different
5 view and feel like it's hard to express it otherwise.

6 Q Uh-huh. And do you or your staff in S/P have the opportunity to challenge
7 assumptions in the Department in your -- in your work?

8 A We do.

9 Q And does that occur on a periodic or regular basis?

10 A Yes. So we have a deliberate process in place now which looks at twice a
11 year synthesizing the range of areas in which -- it's not only if assumptions to challenge
12 them but to simply to say if they no longer hold because circumstances change.

13 Q Uh-huh.

14 A If your policy is based on these five assumptions and three of those five
15 could end up changing through your action or through other means or a different
16 understanding, then it would lead to rethinking the policy.

17 And so we try now on a systematic basis to summarize what we've, based on our
18 judgment, input from bureaus, intel, outside sources to say here are our take on maybe a
19 dozen or 15 cases where it's worth at least us thinking about what would be the
20 consequences if.

21 Q Okay. And would you describe S/P's stewardship of the Dissent Channel as
22 part of that effort to foster robust debate, scrutinize assumptions, and do a big-picture
23 think?

24 A Very much so.

25 Q Okay. And in the FAM excerpt that I gave you earlier, I just want to point

1 to -- pardon me -- the first paragraph (a), it states: The Director of the Policy Planning
2 Staff (S/P), with rank administratively equivalent to an Assistant Secretary, and members
3 serve as the basic staff for the Secretary and other principals, providing substantive staff
4 analysis, review, and advice, including recommendations for alternative courses of action
5 on major ongoing and prospective policy issues, the interrelationship between issues, and
6 the strategic or longer term consequences of actions.

7 None of those responsibilities stipulated in that paragraph are specifically linked
8 to specific countries or regions, correct?

9 A Correct.

10 Q And that is because, as you said, S/P's role is to be cross-regional and
11 cross-functional?

12 A Yeah, and then particular added value as well.

13 Q Okay.

14 A But it doesn't preclude specific issues.

15 Q And as you testified earlier, you did become increasingly engaged on
16 Afghanistan as a dissent was registered in the Dissent Channel.

17 A That's correct.

18 [REDACTED]. Okay. Did you have anything?

19 Go ahead.

20 BY [REDACTED]:

21 Q So there's a discussion earlier about S/P's role in the Department. How
22 would you describe -- you talked a little bit about some of the engagement that S/P does.
23 But how would you describe S/P's visibility into the work of the Department overall?

24 A So the fact that S/P is on the clearance line for much of what goes to the
25 Secretary gives us an idea of what bureaus are submitting to the Secretary. We have

1 access to the cables that come in from posts. I personally try to read many of those
2 cables.

3 Where there are papers prepared by the Department on specific items that are
4 going to, let's say, the interagency discussions, we have access to those. We have
5 regular engagement with people in the Department, and then we have participation in
6 regular daily meetings as the case may be.

7 My own staff are also participating in maybe in the front office of a bureau that
8 they're covering. We'll invite them to sit in on meetings or to -- and sometimes they're
9 a participant in lower level -- you know, others of my members may be participating in
10 interagency meetings.

11 Q Thanks. And you mentioned S/P is still on the clearance line for much of
12 the paper --

13 A Uh-huh.

14 Q -- that goes to the Secretary.

15 When we talk about the paper, that's memos, action memos --

16 A Yeah.

17 Q -- all kinds of -- essentially, any paper that flows to the Secretary of State.

18 And are you aware of the other Seventh-Floor Principals, the offices anyway, that
19 also were on the -- on every clearance line? Would it still be the Under Secretary of
20 Political Affairs?

21 A Yeah. I think that the Deputy Secretary or what they call as D staff and P
22 staff for the Under Secretary for Political Affairs tend to be on even probably even more
23 clearance lines but certainly on clearance line. Counselor, or C staff, as they say, can be
24 on a clearance line as well on the Seventh Floor.

25 Q And would it be typical -- I think we talked about this a little bit. There

1 were some questions about S/P staff dealing with embassies. Would it be typical for S/P
2 on a day to day to deal with post staff, staff at the embassies, or more likely to have
3 contact directly with the desks?

4 A Much more likely to be in touch with the desks for S/P staff.

5 Q Okay. And you mentioned a little bit earlier, and I just wanted to clarify
6 this. You said you did not have an Afghanistan-specific staffer when you began. Did
7 you have a staffer when you started who worked on Asia?

8 A I had different people because we had rotations over the time who might
9 have been covering Afghanistan as part of South Asia.

10 Q Okay.

11 A Yes.

12 Q And do you know if that South Asia staffer was linked up with the desk,
13 the -- any of the sort of SCA desks, so but particularly on Afghanistan?

14 A They would have had some contact, but it wasn't like a primary area of
15 focus.

16 Q Okay. And do you know if there was contact with the SRAR office?

17 A Likewise, in the Afghanistan case, the SRAR office covered a lot of the
18 functions on the political and diplomatic side that might normally be covered by a
19 regional bureau.

20 Q Okay.

21 A So in that case, you know, the engagement would be as more -- as likely as
22 SRAR as with SCA.

23 Q And if there were SRAR or SCA papers, memos, action items that went up to
24 the Secretary, your office would have been on the cc line?

25 A Very -- very likely.

1 Q Okay. And you also mentioned you started an effort to look at 6 to 18
2 months out with the Seventh Floor Principals.

3 You've been doing strategic planning now seems like for almost a decade.

4 A Uh-huh.

5 Q Are you aware of whether that vehicle existed previously before your
6 tenure?

7 A I was told that there had been an attempt made in the nineties to have S/P
8 attempt some effort along those lines, but it didn't -- didn't sustain. So -- but when I
9 consulted people on different mechanisms that we could use -- because the whole
10 question of red teaming is a subject of considerable debate as to how you best exercise it.
11 And so we arrived at a model in this instance based on consultation.

12 But so this particular iteration didn't exist previously, but different administrations
13 have used different vehicles which may or may not have included S/P.

14 [REDACTED] Thanks.

15 BY [REDACTED]:

16 Q So just to clarify, regarding the clearance line, when S/P is on the clearance
17 line for documents that go up to the Secretary or other principals, that's customary.
18 And it's -- is that accurate?

19 A Yes.

20 Q And is it customary for other Seventh Floor Principals staff to also be on the
21 clearance lines --

22 A Yes.

23 Q -- of documents? And is it fair to say that S/P's role as one of the clearing
24 offices affords it visibility into the work of the Department?

25 A Yes.

1 Q Is it also fair to say that being on a clearance line is not necessarily indicative
2 of S/P needing to prioritize or have a focus on that particular issue?

3 A Correct.

4 Q Okay. And regarding engagement with posts and bureaus, is it fair to say
5 posts and bureaus are implementing existing policy on a day-to-day basis? Is that
6 accurate?

7 A I would assume so, yes.

8 Q And is it accurate to say that S/P is, rather, looking at big picture trends and
9 developing new policy? Is that accurate?

10 A That's accurate, but also being alert to where there's a disagreement.

11 Q Uh-huh. Okay. With respect to S/P's role on Afghanistan, my colleague
12 touched on some issues already, but I want to dig in a little bit deeper.

13 Your prior testimony was that you hadn't worked intensively on Afghanistan prior
14 to the advent of the dissent cable in -- on Afghanistan in July 2021. Is that accurate?

15 A Correct.

16 Q Okay. And you testified earlier that at that point you were, quote, brought
17 in to discussions in the Department about Afghanistan.

18 Was your impression at the time that there was an existing deliberative process
19 about Afghanistan in the Department?

20 A There was an interagency process around a review of the Afghan policy --

21 Q Uh-huh.

22 A -- first related to the decision on the withdrawal --

23 Q Uh-huh.

24 A -- and then subsequently, I think it was April, on the implementation of that
25 decision. And the Department was part of that process.

1 Q So your understanding was that there had been an ongoing interagency
2 process on Afghanistan and the anticipated withdrawal prior to the advent of the dissent
3 cable in July 2021.

4 A Correct.

5 Q And can you describe when that process started, to your knowledge?

6 A The interagency? I think very early on in the administration, as far as I
7 recall, but I can't tell you the exact date.

8 Q Okay. And what was your impression of that process? Would you have
9 described it as robust? Substantive?

10 A Robust, substantive and, as I understood it, with different view points being
11 expressed both within and across agencies, that was the subject of deliberation in the
12 SITROOM.

13 Q Uh-huh.

14 A And some of which I think also made its way into public commentary.

15 Q Okay. You noted that for you and your staff in S/P, after your office
16 became involved in reviewing the dissent cable on Afghanistan in the summer of 2021,
17 that it was, quote, and all-hands-on-deck approach after that. Can you describe a little
18 bit more what you meant by that?

19 A Yes. And I wouldn't say that the cable alone was the advent of that. I
20 think the circumstances on the ground is what was the advent of that, which is that the
21 Taliban had made gains in the country and its approach towards Kabul was nearing.

22 So I think that, in general, the simple facts on the ground and the reality of the
23 date of U.S. troop withdrawal was approaching. And so the focus became greater for
24 more and more people, in any event, as a result of those trends.

25 The cable, since it was addressed to me and to S/P and had some

1 recommendations that we could actually act on, was also a triggering factor for us.

2 Q Okay. Thank you for that clarification.

3 So if I understand you correctly, what you're saying is that in mid to late summer
4 2021, at the same time that this dissent cable came to your office, events were unfolding
5 precipitously in Afghanistan?

6 A Yes.

7 Q And were these events unexpected?

8 A I think that some of them would have been anticipated and others may be
9 proceeding at a pace that exceeded, you know, some expectations, although I don't think
10 unanticipated in its entirety.

11 Q And would you describe then that period as necessitating more effort by the
12 Department which is why you described it as an all-hands-on-deck approach?

13 A Yes.

14 Q Okay. Did you have the sense that other offices within the Office of the
15 Secretary were also seized and pursuing similarly an all-hands-on-deck approach, given
16 the precipitous developments?

17 A Yes.

18 Q Okay. All right. So I want to go back to another role you held that we
19 talked about previously regarding the transition from the Trump administration to the
20 Biden administration. Could you explain what your role was in that transition?

21 A I was at the NSC at the time, and I was one of the people appointed to work
22 with the incoming team from the Trump administration. Are you -- or, I mean, I worked
23 on that transition and I worked on the transition coming back into government.

24 Q Good.

25 A So either one.

1 Q Why don't you start with the first one, and then we'll go to the second one.

2 A Sure. So the first one was that, you know, several months before the
3 election, it's normal that agencies prepare materials and prepare for briefing the
4 incoming team, whoever they may be, on what they might want to know or need to know
5 in order to conduct their job on day one.

6 I was one of the people that had a strat plan. It was not unusual, working with
7 the Executive Secretary, to be available to, you know, to help with the collection of that
8 material and to be available to the new team when they arrived. And so I was one of
9 the first people that met with the incoming Trump administration's transition team for
10 the NSC, because every agency has its own team with its own landing team. And so I
11 was involved in that effort at that point.

12 I think that contributed also to being asked to take on the role of being on the
13 transition team, coming the other way, having had the experience on the outgoing side.

14 Q Okay. Let's unpack your first experience with the transition from Obama to
15 Trump.

16 A Uh-huh.

17 Q What sort of activities did you undertake to prepare for that transition?

18 A One was to talk to the Bush administration folks who had done the outgoing
19 transition on their side and to talk to the Obama administration people who had come in
20 on that initial month to find out from both sides what was it about that transition that
21 had lessons learned that might be applicable for us.

22 Honestly, President Obama and his team described it as an exemplary effort by
23 the outgoing Bush administration, So they wanted to say how do we replicate that. That
24 was very much the instruction.

25 And so with that instruction was to make sure that the materials accounted for

1 what were the existing policies that the new team would inherit but also to present for
2 them a set of scenarios that, were they to arise in those initial 3 to 6 months when they
3 come into office, that could be crises that have -- they'd have to contend with and to,
4 therefore, let them know what contingencies already existed that they could draw upon
5 or what planning existed or what ones would we recommend that they initiate early.

6 Q So as part of that work, were you involved in the preparation of written
7 materials that were handed to the incoming Trump administration?

8 A I was. I didn't write them myself, but, rather, I oversaw the effort that
9 collected the material.

10 Q And approximately how many months did you undertake this
11 transition-related work?

12 A Several.

13 Q And approximately what volume of papers and materials were you aware of
14 that were provided to the incoming Trump administration?

15 A A great deal was prepared. Much of it was classified, and it was made
16 available in a secure space so that as and when they had people who were cleared and
17 appointed by the incoming team to be able to review the materials it was there for them
18 to read and also to put it on an iPad.

19 And then also the -- we also did briefings, too, so that they didn't only have to rely
20 on written material. And so I was participating in a handful of briefings.

21 Q Okay. So your testimony is that you saw or were involved in the
22 production of a great deal of written material, and you were involved in or were aware of
23 multiple briefings that were made possible with members of the incoming team.

24 A I was.

25 Q Okay. And as you testified earlier, some of the content that this body of

1 transition materials related to involved contingency planning for crises that they may face
2 early in their administration?

3 A That is correct.

4 Q Okay. So now let's pivot to the second time that you worked on a
5 transition.

6 Can you describe your role at the -- during the transition from the Trump
7 administration to the Biden administration? What was your role?

8 A My role was to oversee the agency review process. So it covered 10
9 agencies or so. So in addition to State and USAID and the development community, the
10 intelligence community, DOD, DHS, NASA, U.S. Agency for Global Media, it was to help
11 put together the teams that would essentially go into the agencies upon ascertainment of
12 the election result. So making sure people were -- we had a concept for what these
13 teams should consist of, i.e., what kind of people do you need? Then how do you go out
14 and get them? Most of them are volunteers. There's also COVID. So it's
15 complicated.

16 And then what guidance do they need for what are they supposed to do when
17 they get to go to that agency? What should they be asking for? What should they be
18 looking at? What should they be preparing for the benefit of the incoming leadership of
19 that agency once leadership is appointed?

20 Who are the people that need to be -- also, inform the personnel process, i.e.,
21 how many positions need to be recruited? And what kind of people are needed for
22 those positions, so that those personnel people know what they're recruiting for?

23 Q So you formulated teams and --

24 A Uh-huh.

25 Q -- then dispatched those teams --

1 A Uh-huh.

2 Q -- to the National Security Agency. Is that a fair characterization?

3 A That's correct. I mean, I did so under the leadership of the head of the
4 national security review, who was Avril Haines at the time.

5 Q And what was your knowledge of what those teams then experienced in
6 those agencies?

7 A Well, they -- there are two big issues that made this transition unique. One
8 was that the -- their ability to go in after the election day. They didn't go in right away
9 because the results had not been ascertained, and so many of them couldn't actually go
10 to the agencies.

11 And so a lot of it was us providing them instruction not to engage until there was
12 an ascertainment but indicating what are the preparations they could do, i.e., to talk to
13 the people who are on the outside, et cetera.

14 And then the other was COVID -- this was pre-vaccines -- and so also providing
15 guidance on that front but also linking them up with each other. Having talked to
16 people who had done previous transitions, they said this is a golden opportunity for doing
17 cross-agency talk and having people, like, if you're talking about a China policy, make sure
18 the intel people and the Defense and State can talk to each other so that they can share
19 information.

20 So -- but once -- so once ascertainment took place and they were able to go
21 ahead, it was basically to have reporting structures for them to be able to feed in periodic
22 reports or I convened virtual meetings for them to share information with each other and
23 to basically synthesize that for the incoming leadership.

24 Q So, basically, the teams that you had organized and dispatched, your
25 testimony is that they couldn't functionally engage agencies until the election results

1 were ascertained?

2 A That's correct.

3 Q But at what point were the election results ascertained?

4 A That's a knowable fact. I just don't happen to remember the exact date off
5 the top of my head.

6 Q Early to mid-November, approximately.

7 A Right.

8 Q And at that point in time --

9 A But not early November.

10 Q Okay.

11 A I think it was -- I think it was a little later than early November.

12 Q Okay.

13 A Because ascertainment was the formal designation that GSA had to do and
14 you'll recall this was contested.

15 Q Fair enough. Thank you for the clarification.

16 At any rate, at the point at which the election had been ascertained, the winner of
17 the election had been ascertained, what was the experience of those agencies -- of those
18 agency landing teams in engaging outgoing counterparts, to your knowledge?

19 A To my knowledge, the experiences were very varied. In some instances,
20 agency landing teams had counterparts who were designated to work with them in order
21 to share information, and the cooperation they got was fine. In other cases, access was
22 severely constrained or denied. The information that was provided to them was
23 minimal.

24 Q Do you --

25 A It varied. So there wasn't a single answer to that question.

1 Q Do you know what the situation was with respect to the State Department
2 landing team?

3 A With respect to the State Department landing team, I think the experience
4 was more positive than for the Department of Defense or DHS, because Ambassador
5 Smith had been designated as like the senior official with whom to engage.

6 Q Uh-huh.

7 A As to, you know, the breadth of information that was provided, I think it
8 really varied by topic.

9 Q And with respect to your previous testimony and prior experience on a
10 transition from Obama to Trump, are you aware of whether the State Department
11 landing team received materials from the outgoing administration related to
12 contingencies and potential looming crises?

13 A I -- I can't confirm the breadth of what the landing team got in terms of the
14 material relative to what was provided under previous circumstances.

15 Q But based on your experience with two transitions, the transition from
16 Obama to Trump you described as having been modeled off a, quote, exemplary
17 transition. You described many months of work and a great deal of materials prepared.

18 What was your characterization of the Trump-to-Biden transition in light of your
19 past experience?

20 A I would say that my past experience, where I was directly involved, was the
21 NSC.

22 Q Uh-huh.

23 A And I don't think it was comparable to the level of preparation that the Bush
24 administration did and what they made available to Obama and what the Obama
25 administration did and made available to the Trump administration. I don't think that

1 what was made available and prepared and the level of cooperation from the Trump to
2 the Biden administration was anything close of the quality or breadth at the NSC.

3 I wasn't involved on the transition at the State Department during the other
4 previous transitions in the same way. So I wouldn't choose to characterize it, but I
5 would also just say that there's a big difference between a transition at the NSC and at
6 the agencies because at the NSC there's a lot more of the people who turn over and who
7 leave because they're appointed, whereas in the agencies it's a little bit different since
8 you also have a career staff.

9 Q Okay.

10 A What's unclear as to -- yeah, I'll stop there.

11 Q I appreciate the point that State and NSC are two distinct entities.

12 [REDACTED] Let me move to enter into the record exhibit 2.

13 [Ahmed Exhibit No. 2

14 Was marked for identification.]

15 BY [REDACTED]:

16 Q This is a not-yet-final transcript from an interview that the committee did
17 with Ambassador Daniel Smith.

18 And I believe you testified to this previously, but do you know Ambassador Smith?

19 A I do.

20 Q What's your understanding of Ambassador Smith in terms of his professional
21 reputation?

22 A I mean, I know him by reputation, first and foremost, as having enjoying
23 extremely high regard across the Foreign Service and anyone who's worked with him in
24 government. He's got a distinguished career. He's knowledgeable. He's thoughtful.
25 I've engaged with him personally, not a lot when I previously served in government but

1 some interaction. On the transition, a bit more since he'd been the appointed lead,
2 although most of our interaction with him on the transition was done by our State
3 Department team as opposed to by me.

4 Q Uh-huh.

5 A In the early days of the Biden administration, he was present as the senior
6 official. I had a chance to engage with him then, and everything I saw of him simply
7 confirmed the reputation that he had. And I engaged with him when he was
8 undertaking this afteraction review.

9 Q So I want to direct your attention to page 125 in his testimony, and start on
10 line 15. And he says: And I was asked by the, actually, Under Secretary for
11 Management Affairs, Brian Bulatao, to serve as the Department's transition director and
12 did the job to the best of my ability.

13 Question: And in that capacity, would you have received instructions or been
14 aware of instructions that were sent out by the former administration to departments
15 and agencies to prepare transition materials for the incoming administration?

16 Answer: Yes.

17 And would you have been aware of or received such taskings with respect to the
18 State Department?

19 Answer: There were broad taskings, yes, that were sent out to the interagency
20 about the preparation materials.

21 Question: And were you aware of any taskings directed by the outgoing Trump
22 administration or outgoing officials, political appointees at the State Department, related
23 to the withdrawal from Afghanistan that was underway?

24 Answer: I was not aware of taskings per se, interagency, that were related to
25 that. There were documents that were prepared by the Department of State, as I'm

1 sure there were by other agencies, to prepare the new team for the challenges that they
2 were going to face in this context.

3 Question: And who directed the production of those documents?

4 Answer: Some of them we asked for -- quote, we, that is, as the transition
5 director, I asked for -- in anticipation of it. Some the incoming team, the Biden-Harris
6 team, asked for in anticipation of what they might need and information they might want.
7 And they also asked for briefings and other things.

8 Question: Okay. So to be clear, some of these products that were developed
9 inside the Department related to Afghanistan were the result of you, a career official,
10 anticipating what the incoming administration would need and requesting such
11 documents --

12 Answer: Right.

13 -- and others were the result of the incoming administration specifically asking for
14 it?

15 Correct.

16 Question: Are you aware of any that were produced at the behest of outgoing
17 officials?

18 Answer: There may have been cases where outgoing officials suggested that
19 certain information would be useful or would be necessary. There were certainly cases
20 where outgoing officials made themselves available for interviews and wanted to meet
21 with the new team to talk about some of these issues.

22 Question: Okay. But is it fair to say that the bulk of the written product that
23 you were aware of was produced because of what was anticipated would be needed by
24 the incoming administration or because they asked for it?

25 Answer: Yes.

1 Moving down to line 7 -- I'm sorry. Let's stop there.

2 So what Ambassador Smith is testifying to here, does this comport with your
3 understanding of the State Department landing team's experience?

4 A Yes. As I said, that was different than the NSC.

5 Q Okay. And that experience, as you understood it, was that, internally
6 within the Department, career officials had produced materials, but that generally there
7 was not a great deal of written material made available by outgoing officials.

8 A As far as I'm aware, but I would defer to our -- the people who were on the
9 State Department landing team to be more authoritative on that.

10 Q But you have no reason to doubt the credibility of Mr. Smith --

11 A I have no reason --

12 Q -- Ambassador Smith?

13 A -- to doubt Ambassador Smith's credibility, no, and he was the transition
14 director. So I trust his answers.

15 Q Okay. And I just want to go back to page 124 of the testimony, starting on
16 line 9. It starts: Over the course of your review -- interviews, document review -- did
17 you identify planning documents that had transpired under the Trump administration
18 related to the withdrawal?

19 Answer: We looked at everything that was available to us. What we
20 didn't -- what we didn't find -- I mean, there were plans that were going on, as we
21 discussed, about the evacuation of the embassy itself and various contingencies. What
22 we didn't find was a comprehensive plan for what it would mean to withdraw the military
23 and what might follow from that.

24 Question: And you testified previously that your review found that the previous
25 administration's interagency process was -- I believe you used the term "not

1 robust" -- and that decisions were made in narrow channels.

2 Does that assessment extend to the production of plans and documents as well
3 that the process was not robust and that it was fairly narrow in terms of who was
4 involved?

5 Answer: Yes. Certainly in terms of the absence of a robust interagency
6 process, which one would have expected in this environment.

7 Does that comport with your understanding of the State Department landing
8 team's experience during the transition?

9 A Yes.

10 Q Okay. In the few minutes left we have in this round, I want to pivot --

11 ██████████. Do you have anything else?

12 ██████████. Yeah.

13 BY ██████████:

14 Q I wanted to ask a little bit about in your experience entering the Department
15 in January 2021 and the transition aspect of it and Policy Planning, where we are thinking
16 strategically, just in line with some of the testimony we went over. Were there planning
17 documents, long-term strategic planning documents that were provided to you on
18 Afghanistan?

19 A Not that I recall, but I would defer to the landing team if they are privy to
20 knowledge of that, you know, information that I'm not.

21 Q But did you not see any --

22 A Personally, no.

23 Q -- upon entering.

24 And did you see any plans related to the planning for the Taliban taking over the
25 Afghan government when you took office?

1 A I did not. If anyone else did it, I -- I can't speak to that.

2 Q Okay. And were there any plans provided to you in the transition or that
3 you saw when you took office related to what would happen to our embassy personnel if
4 the Taliban didn't negotiate with the Afghanistan or Afghan government?

5 A Not that I saw.

6 Q And did you see any plans related to contingencies if the Ghani government
7 fell?

8 A I did not.

9 Q What about any planning for how to handle the evacuation or prepare for an
10 emergency evacuation if that were to happen? Any plans that you saw as you took
11 over?

12 A Not that I saw. Again, I'd defer to others if they did.

13 [REDACTED]: Okay. Thanks.

14 [Ahmed Exhibit No. 3

15 Was marked for identification.]

16 BY [REDACTED]:

17 Q Okay. I want to pivot to another exhibit. This is -- we're spending a lot of
18 time with the Foreign Affairs people in this first round.

19 So you see this exhibit? It says "Unclassified" at the top, 2 FAM 070 Dissent
20 Channel.

21 A Yep.

22 Q Are you familiar with this?

23 A I am.

24 Q What is this?

25 A Well, it's part of the FAM which accounts for how the Dissent Channel is

1 used and operates.

2 Q And you testified previously that the FAM, Foreign Affairs Manual, is
3 essentially the rule book for the Department.

4 A It is.

5 Q And Department employees have to follow the stipulations --

6 A Yes.

7 Q -- therein. Okay.

8 [REDACTED]: I just want to note for the record that the witness is not verifying
9 that what you're providing him is what is in effect today. We would have to -- you
10 know, this thing does change from time to time.

11 [REDACTED]: I appreciate that.

12 Mr. Ahmed. Correct. Yeah. And I -- I actually -- some of this is under review.

13 BY [REDACTED]:

14 Q Okay. Does this look generally familiar to you, though?

15 A Yes, it does.

16 Q Have you consulted the FAM -- a similar report similar to FAM in your
17 day-to-day work?

18 A I have.

19 Q Okay. And so you're familiar with it.

20 Do you need a minute to familiarize yourself with the contents?

21 A Yes. Okay.

22 Q Okay. So I want to start with 2 FAM 071, paragraph (b). It says: The
23 Department has a strong interest in facilitating open, creative, and uncensored dialogue
24 on substantive foreign policy issues within the professional Foreign Affairs community,
25 and a responsibility to foster an atmosphere supportive of such dialogue, including the

1 opportunity to offer alternative or dissenting opinions without fear of penalty. The
2 Dissent Channel was created to allow its users the opportunity to bring dissenting or
3 alternative views on substantive foreign policy issues, when such views cannot be
4 communicated in a full and timely manner through regular operating channels or
5 procedures, to the attention of the Secretary of State and other senior State Department
6 officials in a manner which protects the author from any penalty, reprisal, or
7 recrimination.

8 Are you familiar with this provision?

9 A I am.

10 Q Do you agree with the objective of the Dissent Channel as set forth in the
11 FAM?

12 A Yes.

13 Q Why?

14 A I think it's -- if you want policy to be informed by the benefit of your
15 workforce, and if your workforce is not comfortable with the policy being implemented or
16 in effect, having an environment in which they're able to express that is really important, I
17 mean, because otherwise you don't have the benefit of that viewpoint. That includes
18 without the fear of penalty or reprisal.

19 Q Okay. And FAM section 074.1, if we go to that. 2 FAM 074 on this page
20 stipulates the role of Policy Planning Staff (S/P) and the Inspector General.

21 The first paragraph in this section says: Consistent with this mandate to
22 stimulate innovation and creativity in the Department, the Secretary's Policy Planning
23 Staff is responsible for management of the Dissent Channel, including receipt, storage,
24 distribution, and acknowledgment of all Dissent Channel messages received, and drafting,
25 clearance, and timely transmission of all Dissent Channel responses.

1 Have you seen this paragraph before?

2 A I have.

3 Q And does that comport with the understanding you have of your role and
4 S/P's role in the process?

5 A It does.

6 Q Anything that you'd like to add regarding the contours of S/P's role in
7 managing this channel?

8 A No, not on that provision.

9 There's one I could speak to, but -- the Secretary's open forum provision is when I
10 was mentioning that, you know, when this was done, the Secretary -- the chair of the
11 open forum is not a position that has been staffed for many years. For example, in
12 2018, when this refers to this provision as having been updated, that position hadn't been
13 filled at the time.

14 And so there'd been evolutions in the channel where some of the specifics in here
15 needed to be updated and they are being updated. I just don't know the status of
16 where that stands right now.

17 Q Okay. So your testimony --

18 A But the spirit of this hasn't changed, but there are some technicalities that
19 are.

20 Q I see. So your testimony is that in paragraph (b), which I haven't yet read,
21 but the reference to the chair of the Secretary's open forum technically can apply if that
22 position is not filled.

23 A Yeah. If it happens to be filled now, but it hadn't been for years prior to my
24 arrival.

25 Q Okay. Do you know when it was filled?

1 A It -- within this year. I don't remember the exact date.

2 Q Okay. Thank you.

3 Let's dig in a little bit more to the role that your office plays in paragraph (b). I'll
4 save some time, since you seem to be familiar with this material. I won't read it
5 explicitly into the record. But it notes that, upon receipt of all incoming Dissent Channel
6 messages, your office then distributes it to senior officials at the Department.

7 What's your understanding of the rationale behind the FAM rules in paragraph (b),
8 stipulating distribution to these individuals?

9 A I think it's twofold. One is to ensure that the senior-most decision-makers
10 who could -- who should be privy to that information and who could act on it or comment
11 on it do indeed get to see the cable. But it equally to make clear that, in such a
12 restrictive list, that you're not indicating that it's there for wide distribution.

13 So I think it has twofold purpose. One, to ensure the material is read. The
14 other is to make sure that the integrity of the channel and the anonymity of the drafter is
15 preserved, unless otherwise indicated by them.

16 Q So do you agree with the rationale for the specific and narrow distribution to
17 senior officials on the Seventh Floor?

18 A I do.

19 Q Okay. And in general terms and based on your experience in S/P
20 overseeing the management of the Dissent Channel, when these officials stipulated in
21 paragraph (b) -- the Secretary, the Deputy Secretary, the Deputy Secretary for
22 Management Resources, the Under Secretary for Political Affairs, the Executive Secretary,
23 and, if in existence, the Chair of the Secretary's Open Forum -- when they receive the
24 copy of a Dissent Channel communication, does it go to their office or to them
25 personally?

1 A It goes to them personally, although in the case of the Secretary, we may
2 have to ask a staff member to give him the physical copy if he's not in the office.

3 Q And in general terms and based on your experience managing the Dissent
4 Channel, do these senior officials generally review those cables that are sent to them?

5 A Yes.

6 Q What informs your understanding of that?

7 A Usually we say, you know, want to make sure you've seen this cable.
8 They're like, yeah, I got it. Thank you.

9 Q So you have evidence that they're prepared to acknowledge the substance in
10 these cables and discuss them with you?

11 A Yeah, and that they've seen them.

12 Q Okay. And the FAM Task Policy Planning was providing substantive replies
13 to the dissent cable within 30 to 60 days.

14 Based on your own experience, how frequently do communications -- let me
15 restate that.

16 Your office is in charge of formulating and transmitting that response back to the
17 dissent cable drafters?

18 A We are responsible for transmitting the response. We are responsible for
19 gathering input on the response and, yes, putting it together and clearing it with anyone
20 who needs it to be cleared with.

21 Q Okay. And what -- generally, what percentage of Dissent Channel
22 responses are cleared by the Secretary of State?

23 A In this Secretary's case, every single one.

24 Q So Secretary Blinken personally clears --

25 A Personally reads every dissent cable that comes in and he personally clears

1 the response.

2 Q And how often are responses sent within the 30- to 60-day timeframe?

3 A Most of them are. We endeavor to do that. There may have been some
4 cases where that slipped. The more time sensitive ones we try to do much sooner than
5 30 days.

6 Q So there are instances when you replied sooner than the 30 days?

7 A There are instances when we reply sooner. There have been instances
8 where the 60 days slipped, but we've tried and done our best to make it.

9 [REDACTED]. Okay. We don't have much time left, so I'm going to put a pin in
10 this, and we'll continue on our next round. But thank you.

11 [REDACTED]. We can go off the record.

12 [Recess.]

1 [11:54 a.m.]

2 BY [REDACTED]:

3 Q The time is now 11:54, and we're back on the record. I just had a couple
4 followup questions from the last round, the first being, am I correct in understanding that
5 the Biden administration conducted its own review of Afghanistan policy? Correct?

6 A Correct.

7 Q The withdrawal order came from President Biden, correct?

8 A Correct, based on the existing agreement, that it was a factor also.

9 Q And that was in April 2021, correct?

10 A Correct.

11 Q The actions the U.S. took in Afghanistan from January 20, 2021, onwards
12 were on orders or directives from President Biden and his officials, correct?

13 A Correct.

14 Q Thank you.

15 And I'm going to pivot back to our earlier conversation about the Dissent Channel.
16 I apologize in advance if some of this is redundant, but for purposes of the record, we're
17 just going to go -- walk through it.

18 A Sure.

19 Q Can you speak a bit more as to the process for responding to a dissent
20 message once the policy planning staff receives it?

21 A Yes. One is to make sure that it's distributed, and the two deputies and the
22 under secretary for political affairs and the Secretary being the most senior people that
23 need to see it right away; to acknowledge receipt to the drafters so that they know that it
24 was actually received; and to ascertain the drafters' concurrence with our view about
25 wanting to share it beyond what was prescribed in the FAM, since it's up to the S/P

1 director to distribute it elsewhere as well.

2 If we feel as if there are issues that are raised that are germane to specific parts of
3 the Department, whose input we would need in order to be able to generate a response,
4 but we say to the drafters here is the offices that -- do we have your permission to share
5 this with you, are you comfortable redacted or unredacted. Usually it's redacted.
6 They can of course say, I don't care, but very often they're like in the redacted form I'm
7 comfortable with having this go to X, Y, Z office.

8 Q Okay.

9 A We then work with those offices' concern to say, look, these issues have
10 been raised. We need to have your input on do they have a good point here, do you
11 have a good answer to that, is there action we're taking that is relevant to they're
12 proposing or are they making a recommendation that we haven't considered that we
13 should consider. We get all of that input, we pull it together into a draft response,
14 which we then consult with the under secretary for political affairs and with the deputies
15 and then ultimately the Secretary, and only with their concurrence and his concurrence
16 have we then decided to send the response to the drafters.

17 Q That's helpful. Thank you.

18 Is the person responsible for drafting the response the same individual who
19 manages the process of responding?

20 A So between my deputies and a member of S/P, they've put together a draft
21 drawing on input they've gotten from the different offices they've consulted. They
22 show it to me, discuss it with me. I, then, if I'm comfortable to have it moved to the
23 under secretary for political affairs and the deputies, say we'd like you to review this as a
24 response. They may have questions they come back to us on that may require us to go
25 back to the -- one of the offices we consulted, or maybe we know the answer ourselves.

1 When they're comfortable with those questions having been answered or with the
2 content of the responses, we then move it to the Secretary.

3 Q Thank you. And how many layers of review does it ultimately go through,
4 by "it" being the response?

5 A Outside of S/P, I would say it can include additional offices beyond
6 the -- those prescribed if they were involved in providing input. We want to make sure,
7 if they give us a lot of input, that they see what we did with it if they have a view. It
8 doesn't always have to be the case but is often the case. But then definitely reviewed
9 by the under secretary for political affairs, the two deputies, and the Secretary.

10 Q And what is your role specifically in considering and responding to the
11 Dissent Channel messages?

12 A Primarily to make sure that the process is followed, to make sure that the
13 drafters are sure -- even if I haven't spoken to them myself, but to make sure that one of
14 my deputies has or the career member. I often have the career people talk to them if
15 that may be more reassuring to them, you know, in some way, shape, or form.

16 But bottom line is make sure the integrity of the process is followed, people who
17 need to see it see it, people who shouldn't see it don't see it, and to ensure that the
18 issues that have been raised have been given a serious hearing, especially if what they're
19 saying might disagree with policies to say, yeah, but do they have a point, you know, have
20 you -- you know, with whoever may be the ones responsible for that item.

21 They say, yeah, they raise a good point here or they're suggesting action, are we
22 considering doing that. Or if there is germane information that we're not privy to, could
23 we tell them that, for example, they've raised an issue, and they may not even know that
24 it was under debate already, and why don't we inform them of it's interesting you've
25 raised this point, we want to let you know that this is where this was already discussed.

1 Q And how many Dissent Channel messages does S/P typically receive in a
2 year?

3 A That -- I mean, this is over 50 years, so I -- I --

4 Q In your experience.

5 A You know, I don't know if we've ever put that number out from my tenure,
6 so I'd want to just --

7 [REDACTED]: I'm not uncomfortable if you have a range -- just a sense just
8 during your tenure, or if you know from records.

9 Mr. Ahmed. Like from records that I can say is that the range would be, you
10 know -- can be in single digits to the dozens in a particular year. I don't think it's tended
11 to exceed that.

12

BY [REDACTED]

13 Q And is the response process the same for every Dissent Channel message?

14 A I can't account for what happened prior to my arrival in the role, but it's
15 generally been that case since I've been there. There's always a chance that there have
16 been a slight variation here or there, but generally speaking, we've tried to follow this
17 process.

18 Q And can you speak --

19 A Also, when I arrived in the job I inherited some dissents that were submitted
20 to the previous administration, so I can't account for how they were handled on receipt
21 prior to my coming into the job.

22 Q And how many authors and signatories does a typical dissent message have?

23 A It can range from a single author to multiple authors. It's really -- it spans
24 the gamut.

25 Q What is the difference between being a Dissent Channel message author and

1 a signatory?

2 A Sometimes there are lead drafters who have really taken the lead in putting
3 forward the ideas, but then they might seek other colleagues by association who
4 associate themselves with it and say, yes, I'd like to sign onto this as well, but they may
5 not have been as participant in drafting the message and in crafting it, et cetera. But
6 there may be colleagues who they've consulted along the way who they want to attribute
7 something to or to give them a chance to associate with it.

8 Q That's helpful. Thank you.

9 And are authors and signatories treated differently in any way?

10 A Often signatories could defer to the drafters to be the main interface with us
11 in S/P as we're consulting with them to say are you comfortable with X, Y, or Z. Often
12 the drafters take on that responsibility for a collective of signatories.

13 Q And I'd like to point you back to Exhibit 3, which was entered into the record
14 by the minority, which is 2 FAM 070, which address it is Dissent Channel in the foreign
15 affairs manual. And, again, I apologize if some of this is redundant, but it will all make
16 sense. I'd like to point you to 2 FAM 04.1 -- 074.1.

17 A Yep.

18 Q And specifically sub bullet point B, which states, "Immediately upon receipt
19 of all incoming Dissent Channel messages, S/P distributes copies to the Secretary, the
20 Deputy Secretary, the Deputy Secretary for Management and Resources, the Under
21 Secretary for Political Affairs, the Executive Secretary, and the Chair of the Secretary's
22 Open Forum."

23 I believe you had testified to this earlier, but this is the process that S/P generally
24 follows, correct?

25 A Yes, with slight technical, you know, nuance differences, which is being

1 updated in the FAM for the primary recipients of this, the Secretary, the two deputies,
2 and the under secretary for political affairs.

3 Q And can you speak to how the messages are distributed to these designated
4 individuals?

5 A They can be walked a hard copy or sent an email, either case, depends
6 because sometimes they're on the road and --

7 Q Of course.

8 A And in the Secretary's case, it's not going to be emailed but someone will
9 bring them a physical copy.

10 Q And in terms of their response, what does that look like? Specifically, is
11 that process formalized, or is it conducted in a more ad hoc sort of iterative manner?

12 A So they receive the documents and they read it, and if they have any initial
13 thoughts that they want to provide to me or my team, they're able to do that. But
14 otherwise, generally their engagement with it will then tend to await a draft from us that
15 might -- that has benefited from those particular offices in the building, or senior most
16 officials in the building, which may include them as well, depending on the issue, have
17 provided input on a response. And so then they'll see the response. But as I said, at
18 any point in the process, they can offer review to me directly or to my team.

19 Q That's helpful. Thank you.

20 And we spoke to -- you spoke to previously the Secretary's role in reviewing and
21 responding. And am I correct in understanding that the Secretary would review and
22 respond to each Dissent Channel cable as necessary?

23 A The Secretary reviews every cable. He reviews the response to every cable,
24 which I send on his behalf and the senior staff's behalf.

25 Q Thank you for that clarification.

1 A But the response comes from me.

2 Q Of course. That's helpful. Thank you.

3 Can you speak to what the deputy secretary's role is in the process of reviewing
4 and responding to the dissent messages?

5 A Both deputies?

6 Q Uh-huh.

7 A It's the same. I mean, they -- they're reviewing the incoming, offering any
8 initial views if they want to on the front end of the response being prepared, reviewing
9 the draft response to the authors, to the drafters prior to that going to the Secretary.

10 Q And is that the same for the under secretary for political affairs?

11 A Correct.

12 Q So the foreign affairs manual identifies a chair of the Secretary's Open Forum
13 as a predesignated recipient. You had made mention of this earlier, but can you please
14 explain what the Secretary's Open Forum is?

15 A Yes. During the Vietnam War era, essentially there were two processes
16 that were set in motion in the early 1970s to contend with generational differences
17 within the workforce over our policy on Vietnam and Southeast Asia. One was this
18 channel to communicate in writing a difference of view with policy; the other was to
19 create a forum there could be a discussion, whether with members of the workforce itself
20 or inviting people from the outside in order to engage in debate.

21 It has taken many forms over the years, including not being existent at all for long
22 stretches of time. The Secretary actually chose to relaunch it, so it didn't exist I think,
23 you know, in the last several years prior to our arrival. So, you know, to answer the
24 question is it -- its advance was at the same period in the Vietnam War era, its purpose
25 similar in scope. The manner in which it was utilized varied, but unlike the case of the

1 Dissent Channel, which has been more or less continuous over this 50-year period, the
2 Open Forum has been more sporadic.

3 Q Interesting. Thank you. That's what leads me to my next question:
4 Who was the chair of the Open Forum in July and August of 2021?

5 A There wasn't one.

6 Q There wasn't one. When was the chair appointed to that position?

7 A Well, first, we had to reinstate the position. So the position itself wasn't
8 there anymore. We had to get an FTE for it and then recruit against it. I don't
9 remember the exact date, but it was some months subsequent to the summer of
10 July 2021 certainly.

11 Q That's helpful. When was the position reinstated?

12 A I could find out, but I don't -- the position, again, subsequent to then.

13 Q Okay.

14 A Even though the process of doing so may have started earlier, but the actual
15 formal reestablishing the post that had been discontinued prior to my arrival, you know,
16 it takes time in the State Department to create an FTA and FTE, and recruit against it.

17 Q Do you recall what the justification or reasoning for the reinstatement was?
18 Was it --

19 A Yes. The Secretary had made it a priority to, as part of his modernization
20 agenda, to revitalize the Dissent Channel, to relaunch the Open Forum, and to create an
21 Ideas Channel alongside of it anew, all in the same spirit of, you know, fostering an
22 environment in which ideas, including dissenting ideas and new ideas, could have a space.

23 Q That's helpful. Thank you.

24 And I want to point you back to 2 FAM 074.1(b), which states that, "With due
25 regard for the sensitivity of the message and the wishes of the drafter, the director of S/P

1 may also distribute the dissent message to other senior officials of the Department, both
2 for information purposes and for helping drafting response. No additional distribution
3 may be made without the authorization of the S/P director."

4 How frequently are dissent messages distributed to additional recipients by the
5 director of S/P, so yourself?

6 A Outside of those specifically indicated together?

7 Q Uh-huh.

8 A Reasonably often.

9 Q And in the past, can you speak to how many have been sent to additional
10 recipients?

11 A I would say the majority of cases --

12 Q Interesting.

13 A -- because there's generally a senior official who's the line responsible for
14 that item. It may not be one of those three or four senior seventh floor officials that I
15 mentioned.

16 Q Have you as director of S/P ever forwarded messages to additional
17 recipients?

18 A Like me personally?

19 Q Uh-huh.

20 A No, but I've directed it.

21 Q How often?

22 A It's -- it's a conversation -- like the career deputy has generally, when we've
23 had that career deputy, been in the position to kind of manage the day-to-day of the
24 management of the channel. But it's done in consultation with me, so they'll say this
25 and, you know, we'll discuss who should see this, and then they'll say, yeah, I'll make sure

1 I get it to them.

2 Q In instances where dissent messages are distributed to additional recipients,
3 which officials typically receive access?

4 A It's fairly tightly controlled, so it'll tend to be the senior most people. For
5 example, if it's going to a bureau, it would be to the assistant secretary; if it's going to the
6 envoy to the envoy, sometimes a deputy as well.

7 Q And is the process the same as the predesignated recipients?

8 A No, because the predesignated recipients get an unredacted version. The
9 additional recipients often will get a redacted version.

10 Q And is that at their request or something that you determine from the
11 outset?

12 A At -- in consultation with the drafters. The default that we have is to redact
13 rather than not when sending it to additional offices to preserve the confidentiality of the
14 drafters so that they don't face any potential, you know, back -- you know, blowback.

15 Q Of course.

16 BY [REDACTED]:

17 Q What information is typically redacted?

18 A Oh, the names.

19 Q And --

20 A Oh, so when I say redacted, what I mean is just the names of the -- of the
21 drafters and signatories. We generally don't redact anything else other than their
22 names and things that might contextually allow you to guess who it is, like the title, the
23 function or something that would be like, okay, even though you redacted the name, you
24 know who it is.

25 BY [REDACTED]

1 Q Thank you. And do the additional recipients have the option of retaining
2 the message, or does it have to be returned back?

3 A If it's sent to them via email, I think it exists in the system. So I don't think
4 there's any requirement for them to expunge it from their system --

5 Q Can you --

6 A -- nor do I think they can if it's in email, so --

7 Q That's true.

8 What are your considerations in determining if another official should be granted
9 access to a dissent message?

10 A Whether the response requires their input, you know, and including if there
11 are recommendations being made, you know. They'd need to act on them, you know,
12 to have the benefit of having that conversation with them.

13 Q And to what extent are State Department officials informed of the existence
14 of dissent message but not granted access to the actual message?

15 A It's very tightly held, so it's very likely that most people are not aware of the
16 existence of the cable, if we've maintained the integrity and the sanctity of the
17 documents.

18

BY [REDACTED]

19 Q Is there anything in place to control if a copy is shared with a recipient,
20 including electronically? Let's say the assistant secretary doesn't share it with, you
21 know, their deputy or, you know, the senior person -- the senior line person, something
22 like that.

23 A The understanding is even within the bureau that we're discussing who's
24 getting it and that we have a chance to talk to the drafters about it. Now, is there a
25 chance that we've said, yes, you can share this with your deputy and then they choose

1 not to do so, is that what you're asking?

2 Q Or that, you know, if you send an email to the assistant secretary, is there
3 any mechanism to, you know, prevent them from calling in a deputy and saying, hey,
4 what you -- what do you think of this?

5 A I can't confirm if that's happened or not. So is it possible that they show it
6 to people that we're not aware of, yes, it's possible.

7

BY [REDACTED]

8 Q Are dissent channel messages ever shared with the legal adviser or attorneys
9 in L?

10 A There have been cases where the response is consulted with L before it goes
11 out because it has legal implications for the Department if we are considering something
12 that's being recommended, you know. It's not always the case. It's case by case. But
13 L is not an automatic recipient on the incoming.

14 Q Thank you. And pointing back to 2 FAM 04 -- 074.1(b), the provision also
15 states that, "If the author of a dissent message is employed by an agency other than the
16 Department of State, e.g., USAID, S/P will also distribute a copy of the dissent channel
17 message to the head of that agency."

18 In such an instance, what are the Agency heads' involvement in the process of
19 considering and responding to the message?

20 A I don't have enough data points to give you a generalized answer on that,
21 because generally other agencies have not been -- a lot of incoming has not come from
22 other agencies. But I don't want to give you that as a definitive answer covering
23 everything, but as a generalized answer.

24 Q Thank you. And are you aware of what the eligibility criteria are for
25 someone from another agency's author or sign onto a dissent message?

1 I'll give you a moment to take a look at it.

2 A Okay. Thanks.

3 Q Thank you. Of course. And I'll point you to the relevant paragraphs, of
4 course, as well. So if you look on the first page, I think it's on the first paragraph, the
5 article asserts that the cable warned, quote, of rapid territorial gains by the Taliban and a
6 subsequent collapse of Afghan Security Forces and offered recommendation on ways to
7 mitigate the crisis and speed up an evacuation.

8 Understanding that we're in an unclassified setting, can you speak to whether this
9 is accurate or not?

10 [REDACTED]: So the unauthorized disclosure of classified material does not
11 declassify it, A; and B, the Department, nor its employees, comment in any way on any
12 material based upon a potentially leaked or unauthorized disclosed Department record.
13 So there would be some things in a classified setting that I would not object to him
14 answering, but anything going to the authenticity of this is going to be a problem, and we
15 do need to be in a classified setting for an answer to your exact question.

16 BY [REDACTED]:

17 Q Noted. Thank you.

18 So I want to transition to a next point, still related to the dissent channel cable,
19 and to the extent there are issues, we'll, of course, take that into consideration. Can
20 you speak to what the process was for responding to that specific dissent channel cable?

21 A Yes. It was to make sure that the deputies and the under secretary for
22 political affairs and the Secretary saw the cable right away.

23 [REDACTED]: Um --

24 Mr. Ahmed. Sorry.

25 [REDACTED]: No, please, continue.

1 BY [REDACTED]:

2 Q When did you become aware of the dissent cable?

3 A I believe on the -- on the 13th of July or -- I can't recall of the --

4 Q That was the date that it was transmitted?

5 A I believe so. I believe so. And to the best of my recollection, within the
6 day of receipt, made sure that the deputies and the under secretary and the Secretary
7 saw the cable.

8 Q And how soon after you became aware of it did you receive access to read
9 it?

10 A I think it was on the day. I -- what I can't tell you is the time --

11 Q Yeah.

12 A -- of that day, but I believe that on the day it was received in our system I
13 read it and made sure that it got to the people who needed to get it.

14 Q And did they read it that day as well?

15 A I can't confirm whether they read it that day or the next day. They may
16 well have read it that day. They got it that day. I talked to them about it, made sure
17 they were aware of it, they acknowledged it. So I would say within 24 hours to the best
18 of my recollection, but I -- you know, give or take some hours.

19 Q Were any meetings held to discuss the cable?

20 A There wasn't a formal meeting to discuss the cable, but there was an
21 opportunity to acknowledge it. And I think it might have been an evening wrap-up
22 meeting or, you know -- or a regular meeting to say, look, this has been received, we need
23 to get a response out really quickly, this is what we're intending to do. But there wasn't
24 like a formal meeting on the cable itself.

25 Q Was there substantive discussion of the contents of the cable aside from just

1 the need to, you know, address it as a urgent issue?

2 A I think that the reactions that I recall from the recipients were they've raised
3 important points. We need to make sure we tackle each one and to get a really
4 thoughtful, correct response out as soon as we can. I recall, to the best of my
5 knowledge, you know, indicating, you know, that we wanted to also share it with
6 Ambassador Khalilzad and his deputy given that issues that were raised in it were very
7 germane to their role, and we needed to have some input from them.

8 Q And that deputy was Tom West?

9 A Correct.

10 Q And was that shared in redacted form or with any redactions?

11 A It was shared with the concurrence of the drafters. I honestly can't confirm
12 to you right now if what was shared with them was with the names redacted or not.

13 Q Okay.

14 A Either way, it was with the wishes of the drafters respected.

15 Q And could we get confirmation of that either way as a get-back?

16 [REDACTED]: So I'm going to defer to [REDACTED] but if you have a request for
17 information to the Department, you're free to provide it. I'm not going to have a
18 witness after the end of a transcribed interview responding to you.

19 [REDACTED]: Well, we'll address that separately.

20 [REDACTED]: Okay.

21 [REDACTED]: Yeah, we can address that separately.

22 [REDACTED]: Thanks.

23 BY [REDACTED]

24 Q And upon receipt of the cable, what steps did the Policy Planning Staff take
25 to address it?

1 A It was to work with the two senior-most officials whose input was most
2 germane to addressing the points that had been raised in the cable, and those were the
3 Deputy Secretary for Management and Resources Brian McKeon; and the Special
4 Representative's Office, being Ambassador Khalilzad and Tom West.

5 Q And what were the takeaways of those discussions?

6 [REDACTED] So, again, the takeaway of those discussions I think we will find
7 more informed the response, and so I would ask that that be deferred to the classified
8 setting.

9 BY [REDACTED] :

10 Q So was there a review process after the response was drafted?

11 A There was.

12 Q And who -- who was involved in that review process?

13 A The under secretary, the two deputy secretaries, and the Secretary himself.

14 Q And was any proposed content from the response cut in the review process?

15 A I'm sure that there was input during the review process that was taken into
16 account. I don't recall anything being expunged so to speak.

17 Q And how long did it take to draft the response?

18 A It took -- the totality of drafting, getting all the information, double checking,
19 confirming that things that had been raised, clearing it, and then getting it back to the
20 drafters, the total process was 7 days --

21 Q And --

22 A -- i.e., the drafters received a response, as far as I recall, within 7 days, give
23 or take time differences, you know, and from the time they sent it.

24 Q And who within the Department were the principal drafters of the
25 Department's official response?

1 A The -- well, the synthesizers were the Policy Planning Staff, so it was
2 my -- my deputies, I reviewed, but a lot of the input, some of the substance came from
3 others, but we put it together as a draft. We then moved that draft to review, and we
4 made sure that any comments received on review were addressed in the revisions that
5 went forward to the Secretary.

6 Q Did officials involved in drafting the response communicate with any of the
7 dissenters prior to sending the official response?

8 A Yes, in two instances, one to acknowledge receipt, and the other to make
9 sure that they were comfortable with those we would share it with and to keep them
10 abreast of the process.

11 Q And did they communicate with, you know, all of the authors and signatories
12 or a subset of them for this purpose?

13 A I can't speak for them.

14 Q And did the officials involved in, you know, in responding from S/P and, you
15 know, of the substantive experts and principals, did they -- any of them seek more
16 information regarding the situation on the ground before sending the official response?

17 A I think, as far as I recall, may have looked at the intel at the time germane to
18 issues that were there.

19 Q Per 2 FAM 074.1, you, as the director of the Policy Planning Staff, have this
20 the authority to distribute the dissent message to other senior officials in the
21 Department, as you testified, and no additional distribution may be made without your
22 authorization.

23 You mentioned that it was distributed to Ambassador Khalilzad and to Tom West.
24 Did the following officials have access to the cable, Ambassador Ross Wilson?

25 A Not that I'm aware of.

1 Q Was he consulted in the process of responding to it at all?

2 A I don't know if others with whom we interacted consulted him. He was not
3 directly consulted by us.

4 Q And was Ambassador John Bass consulted, or what did he have access -- or
5 did he have access to read the cable?

6 A I don't recall at the time if he read it or was consulted in it, because we had
7 consulted the Deputy Secretary DMR, who was his boss overseeing the effort. I can't
8 confirm what Deputy Secretary McKeon did or did not discuss with John Bass. I did not
9 have a direct conversation with John Bass about that cable myself, nor did my team.

10 Q So would it be within the discretion of one of the designated principals, the
11 Secretary, the two deputy secretaries, and the under secretary for policy to discuss the
12 contents of the dissent cable with -- or any dissent cable with their subordinates without
13 your authorization or --

14 A It is certainly within their discretion to raise an issue to say it's come to my
15 attention that we may have a problem with X, Y, or Z. I'd like to get your take. Or, you
16 know, they don't have to identify the dissent cable as the basis on which they are seeking
17 clarification of -- or input. They are -- they are, of course, able to do so, but they would
18 normally check with us to say, listen, we would like to share this with X, Y, and Z. Are
19 you okay with that? And we would normally just check with the drafters and say, listen,
20 we want to expand the list we initially talked to you about to include X, Y -- you know,
21 additional -- additional offices.

22 BY [REDACTED]:

23 Q And did that -- did that happen?

24 A Not that I recall in this instance.

25 Q Okay.

1 BY [REDACTED]:

2 Q So as far as you're aware, are the only two -- the only two individuals that
3 received access to the cable itself outside of the -- outside of the predesignated recipients
4 or Ambassador Khalilzad and his deputy Tom West?

5 A As far as I'm aware, what I can't speak to is if the drafters -- any of the
6 drafters shared it with others or if any of those recipients shared it with others that I'm
7 not aware of.

8 Q At any point, whether in the immediate response or later on, was acting
9 legal adviser Richard Visek given access to the cable?

10 A I don't recall.

11 Q Were any other L officials, to your knowledge, given access to the cable?

12 A Not to my knowledge.

13 Q Was Assistant Secretary for Legislative Affairs Derek Hoglu given access to
14 the cable at any point?

15 A Not to my knowledge. Although, I don't know in the processes subsequent,
16 both in the case of L and in H, whether they ended up -- when the cable was made
17 available to members to review in camera. I don't know if at that time they had a
18 chance to review it and who -- who may have done so at that time, because that was a
19 process outside of the normal thing that we manage.

20 Q So you were not consulted on that?

21 A As to who would or would not see it during the process of it --

22 Q Uh-huh.

23 A -- being made available to members? I was privy to some conversations,
24 but I don't recall being the one saying, yes, L or H can see it or not.

25 Q Okay. And you also would not have knowledge if any other H officials,

1 aside from the assistant secretary, saw it?

2 A I believe that others may have seen it at the time of it being shared with
3 members, but I can't confirm to you who -- how many and when exactly, because that
4 wasn't the process I managed at that stage.

5 Q And why do you believe that others had access to it at the time that it was
6 granted access to members?

7 A I -- I don't know or not. What I'm saying is that if they were facilitating
8 members review of it at the time, were there one or more H people who ended up seeing
9 it who had never seen it before, I assume that's possible. I just can't -- I can't confirm
10 that to you. I just don't know.

11 Q Did any State Department officials request that you authorize access to them
12 or to others?

13 A I do know that -- I mean, the cable was made available to -- actually, we
14 were asked to make available the cable to L and to H when -- in the context -- not at the
15 time of the response, but in the context of making it available to members, so they have
16 to get it from us and we did share it with them.

17 Q Okay. So you authorized. And was that authorization just institutionally
18 for H and L, or was that specific to the assistant secretaries or, you know, particular
19 individuals?

20 A It was institutionally to H and L. If it included others at the time, and it may
21 well have, I wasn't the manager of the process at that stage.

22 Q Did -- you know, aside from the response to Congress in the substantive
23 response, did any State Department officials request that you authorize access to them or
24 others?

25 A Not that I recall, to me.

1 Q Were any State Department officials who were not given access to the
2 dissent cable itself otherwise briefed on it or informed of its contents to the best of your
3 knowledge?

4 [REDACTED]: I'm sorry, would you please make clear the time period --

5 [REDACTED]: Sure.

6 [REDACTED]: -- your question relates to.

7 BY [REDACTED]:

8 Q During the response, the immediate response to the dissent cable.

9 A Oh, okay. Not that I recall.

10 Q In the period following the response to the dissent cable with -- you know,
11 when the congressional inquiries were presented?

12 A At some point during the process of congressional inquiries, additional
13 people sought access to the cable to know what the item was in question that was being
14 requested. I cannot confirm to you how many people ultimately saw it. I can simply
15 confirm to you the institutional sharing of the document with those who needed to
16 consider it.

17 Q Did any other U.S. Government officials outside of the State Department
18 have access to the cable?

19 A Not to my knowledge. If it was shared with them either at the time or
20 subsequently, I'm not aware of it.

21 Q What -- would there -- would it have been possible for them -- for it to have
22 been shared with them without your knowledge?

23 A It's, of course, possible.

24 Q But directly by a recipient or holder?

25 A Correct.

1 Q Were any executive branch officials who were not given access to the
2 dissent cable itself otherwise briefed on or informed of its contents?

3 A It is very possible that in the context of their ongoing review and interagency
4 discussions that recipients of the cable internalized the information that was in the cable
5 in the discussion. Were they referred to it or not, I wasn't present at the time, so I can't
6 confirm that.

7 Q And would you have any knowledge of, you know, at the time in which the
8 cable was being responded to in July and August 2021, Secretary Austin or Chairman
9 Milley had access or were briefed on contents of the cable?

10 A Not to my knowledge.

11 Q And National Security Advisor Sullivan or President Biden?

12 A I can't speak to if anyone else briefed them on it.

13 Q And was the U.S. military informed of -- in any way of the dissenters'
14 warnings or the content of their warnings?

15 A It's quite possible that the -- the drafters themselves had conversations with
16 people in the U.S. military on the ground, but only they would be able to confirm if that
17 was the case or not. As to the actual product, was that briefed to anybody, not to my
18 knowledge. Of course, I can't confirm if someone did.

19 BY [REDACTED]:

20 Q To what extent did Department officials who read the cable agree with its
21 contents?

22 A We're probably drifting close to where I'd want to have this conversation --

23 Q Okay.

24 [REDACTED]: No, I understand. But if it's, I mean --

25 Mr. Ahmed. What I can say is that I think that those who read it at the time their

1 immediate reaction was there's a lot in here I agree with, and there's a lot of things
2 they're raising in here that, in fact, we are already working on or doing. They've added
3 some details that are very helpful.

4 So I think it was more a question of like having information that the drafters didn't
5 have in some cases; in other cases, getting information from the drafters that was helpful.
6 But I think that generally the reaction was this is a constructive document, it's helpful,
7 and I didn't hear them saying this is, like, I completely disagree with this.

8 BY [REDACTED]:

9 Q Thank you. And was there any discussion of changing the withdrawal date
10 in reaction?

11 A This is where I can answer your question more specifically and thoughtfully if
12 I can do it in the classified setting.

13 Q Okay. Did any Department officials meet or engage with the dissenters
14 either individually or as a group?

15 A Again, if I could speak to that in the classified setting.

16 Q Can you speak to how the dissenters reacted to the Department's response
17 to the cable?

18 A There was an expression of appreciation for having gotten a quick,
19 expeditious, and a thoughtful response.

20 Q To what extent were they satisfied --

21 A I can't speak to all of them, though. I can just tell you in the case of the
22 communication I had.

23 Q Of course. And to what extent were they satisfied with your assessment?

24 A Again, I don't want to speak for their characterization. All I can say is that I
25 received a response to their response, and said thank you for the response, and we'd

1 indicate that they appreciated the response.

2 Q Can you speak to whether there were any differences in opinion among the
3 dissenters regarding the sufficiency of the Department's response?

4 A I can't. It's well possible that there are differences. I -- I can't speak to
5 that.

6 Q And to what extent did Department officials involved in the response remain
7 in contact with the dissenters following the transmission of that response?

8 A I don't know honestly, because people went on to new jobs in a new
9 capacity, so it's very possible that they're engaging with some of those people now in a
10 new capacity. Like the men and -- the people who work in the Department, so --

11 Q Of course. Have there been any other dissent cables relating to
12 Afghanistan during your tenure as director of S/P?

13 [REDACTED]: That's an issue that really should be addressed to the State
14 Department in the same way that the committee addressed to the Department its desire
15 to see the July 13th cable.

16 [REDACTED]: We can move on to the next questions.

17 I do actually have one followup on that point. Can you speak -- so the committee
18 has to address the existence of other cables directly to H. Is that what we're stating
19 here?

20 [REDACTED]: Well, what I'm suggesting is that the original request from the
21 committee in regard to the particular dissent channel cable that we have accommodated
22 access to for Members was not directed to an individual in the context of a transcribed
23 interview, because individuals do not own or control those things. And therefore, we
24 would be most comfortable, and I've advised the witness that he should be most
25 comfortable, if that type of request is addressed to the Department who owns and

1 controls that information.

2 [REDACTED]. Okay. Thank you.

3 BY [REDACTED]:

4 Q Thank you, sir. How was the decision made to send you to Doha in
5 August 2021?

6 A The Secretary -- I was asked to go see the Secretary. And he had said,
7 listen, I'd like, if you'd be willing, to head out to Doha to help reinforce the team. At the
8 time, Kabul hadn't fallen yet, and there was a sense that it's possible that there were
9 negotiations that would be required involving the U.N. envoy and President Ghani, and
10 given my personal prior relationship with both of them that those relationships could be
11 helpful in such a negotiation. And I was asked therefore if I'd be willing to go. I don't
12 know how many people were involved in that conversation prior to him making that
13 request. They were making a lot of decisions at that time in that fluid moment.

14 Q Sure. So the negotiation that you referred to there, what were the
15 specifics of the negotiation that was potentially going on at that time?

16 A Prior to Kabul's fall, it was -- it was on how to avoid a blood, you know,
17 bloodshed in Kabul itself on the understanding on the -- on the understanding of the
18 possibility in those days, the second week of August, that the Taliban could seek to launch
19 an assault on a city with the Afghan troops resisting and it -- there could be a fight leading
20 to a question of how is that fight resolved and what are the arrangements that'll pertain
21 to avoid the bloodshed and also address the issue of the security of our people and
22 Afghans at risk.

23 Q And what was Secretary Blinken's plan that he gave to you to address that
24 issue?

25 A It was to join Ambassador Khalilzad who was leading that negotiation with

1 the Taliban to be available to the extent that we needed to bring the U.N. into the
2 process. The U.N. envoy at the time was Jean Arnault. It would be able to work with
3 the U.N. to see how can we get the U.N. to play a role as well, including the role the U.N.
4 could play in dealing with other countries who might be able to bring pressure to bear as
5 may be needed or who might have influence on the situation, and to the extent it might
6 require any conversations with the President Ghani where the fact that I had a prior
7 relationship could be helpful was to be a participant in those as well.

8 Q Was there -- was there a specific goal that you had in mind, a specific
9 outcome that you were seeking related to the relationship between the Taliban and the
10 Afghan Government?

11 A Well, I mean, the most significant outcome one would've been seeking is to
12 prolong as much time as possible to avoid the Taliban's entry into Kabul, and as a
13 consequence also would have significant bearing on the security of our people and of
14 Afghans at risk in Kabul.

15 Q And can you provide the date, if you're able, the date that you had this
16 conversation with Secretary Blinken, the date that you got on a plane to go to Doha, the
17 date that you arrived in Doha?

18 A I think the conversation was on the 14th, and I believe I arrived on the 15th,
19 so I think I was on a plane the same night.

20 Q Was there -- was this --

21 A I may -- I may have, you know, 12 hours here or there not quite right, but,
22 you know, I was --

23 Q When you -- when you took off, the Taliban had not taken control of Kabul
24 yet, but when you landed in Doha --

25 A Shortly thereafter, yes.

1 Q Was there -- was there concern among State Department leadership about
2 SRAR Khalilzad's efforts in Doha?

3 A I -- I don't want to characterize what State Department views were on that.

4 Q Did Secretary Blinken communicate to you specific issues that he had with
5 Khalilzad?

6 A Secretary Blinken conveyed to me that he would find it helpful to have me
7 reinforce the team.

8 Q Were there specific concerns that he had raised about the work that SRAR
9 Khalilzad and his team were doing?

10 A I think that -- the fact that I had good relations in some quarters might be
11 helpful, you know, was the consideration there. He had stronger relations with some
12 areas than in others.

13 Q But did he raise, though, concerns about Khalilzad's efforts?

14 A He mainly raised with me that having me out there would be helpful.

15 Q But besides the main part of it, were there concerns that were raised to you
16 about Khalilzad's efforts?

17 A I think there were -- I want to put this in context, because pretty much as I
18 said earlier it was an all-hands-on-deck, and so people were being sent out to a lot of
19 different places. A team was sent out, you know, to Kabul to assist with the evacuation.
20 Teams were sent out to countries that were receiving, you know, Afghans who were
21 coming out and our people coming out, what they were called lily pads, and people were
22 sent out to reinforce the team, and I think that was the context and a view that my
23 presence could be helpful.

24 I also knew Ambassador Khalilzad previously, and so my -- the choice of me was
25 not only that I knew the envoy and President Ghani, but I also knew Ambassador

1 Khalilzad. Again, all these people I knew from the period of 2001, from when Kabul fell
2 the first time and when the Taliban were dislodged.

3 BY [REDACTED]:

4 Q What was Ambassador Khalilzad's reaction to your reinforcement?

5 A I believe he was comfortable with it because he knew me, and he knew that I
6 had some value to bring. He himself had suggested that I join him in the meeting with
7 Jean Arnault, the U.N. envoy, in New York, some weeks earlier.

8 So it was -- that was, I think, probably contributed to the decision as well that I
9 had been recently at a meeting with the U.N. envoy in New York with Ambassador
10 Khalilzad, so had been involved more in the kind of discussions that were ongoing in
11 trying to build an international -- some international effort to try to bring pressure to bear
12 on the Taliban.

13 BY [REDACTED]:

14 Q Were you sent there -- as you saw it, based on your conversation with
15 Secretary Blinken, were you sent there to replace Khalilzad as a lead, or were you there to
16 supplement him and he was still the lead?

17 A The latter.

18 Q The latter.

19 A Absolutely. I was not there to replace him.

20 Q When you arrived what did Khalilzad say about the state of the negotiations
21 with the Taliban?

22 A He had indicated to me when I arrived -- I just wanted to get up to speed on
23 where things were and what meetings were taking place. And not only did I talk to him
24 but also to his deputy, Tom West, and others on the team. A lot of the focus was on a
25 pending meeting that was going to take place with Baradar and the team with General

1 McKenzie coming in primarily to send a message to the Taliban about not entering Kabul,
2 and in order for them to understand what the consequences would be if they were to fire
3 on U.S. personnel in the process of trying to take Kabul. And so a lot of it was originally
4 to try to prepare for that meeting and understand what issues the Taliban might raise.
5 The context of that meeting changed clearly by the time it took place.

6 Q Were you present in the meeting between General McKenzie and Baradar?

7 A I was.

8 Q Can you describe what occurred in that meeting?

9 A I think --

10 [REDACTED]: I think it's probably going to be class.

11 Mr. Ahmed. Yeah.

12 [REDACTED]: I believe that General McKenzie has publicly testified about this
13 meeting and recounted that he had presented a map of Kabul and the surrounding area
14 telling the Taliban not to enter that area and that Baradar said that actually the Taliban
15 had already entered that cordon around Kabul. Is that accurate?

16 [REDACTED]: So, again, I think that -- and I -- I defer to DOD to police the
17 unauthorized release of classified information by their flag officers. We will be
18 answering this in a classified setting.

19 Mr. Ahmed. I'm happy to come back to it when we're in --

20 [REDACTED]: We'll move on to the next question.

21 [REDACTED] Sure. What did SRAR Khalilzad tell you about the state of play
22 with negotiations with the Taliban when you met with him in early August, 2021.

23 [REDACTED]: I just -- please, be -- early on. Do you have -- we -- he's got two
24 different meetings in two different times in two different places working with Zal, so I just
25 want the record to be really clear that we know exactly which meeting and location

1 you're talking about.

2 [REDACTED]: Indeed. I had mentioned early August 2021.

3 [REDACTED]: Okay. But where? Do you know where the meeting was?

4 [REDACTED]: Yes. It was in New York, as he referred to.

5 [REDACTED]: Thank you. That's --

6 Mr. Ahmed. At the New York meeting a lot of the focus of the discussion was on
7 the engagement with the international envoys, with Jean Arnault, who was the U.N.
8 envoy who had contact with them. And the question was could a message be sent to
9 the Taliban quite -- what would -- what could be conveyed to the Taliban that could
10 potentially deter them from continuing to try to take more territory, including moving on
11 Kabul, although, at that stage, you know, there was still other places that were under
12 threat; and whether, you know, messages along the lines of the fact that they should not
13 expect X, Y, and Z were they to violate the Doha agreement as this would be so flagrantly
14 and to try to take territory in Kabul itself, a power by force, that they should understand
15 that they're not going to get the recognition, the assistance, and X, Y, Z, that they might
16 seek. And the question is if you could build a unified front in delivering that message,
17 could it potentially have any deterrent effect on them.

18 The other area of discussion was what kind of negotiations were ongoing among
19 themselves about -- you know, there had been a political process under discussion with
20 the advent of the Doha agreement to try to see if any government of -- you know, what
21 kind of a new governing arrangements could be negotiated, and the question was, is
22 that -- was that something that was -- that they were entertaining at all.

23 [REDACTED]: So we've got to put a pause. We're out of time. If we can go
24 off the record.

25 [Recess.]

1 [1:02 p.m.]

2 [REDACTED]: Okay. We'll go back on the record. And I'm starting the clock
3 correctly this time.

4 BY [REDACTED]:

5 Q So I wanted to hopefully get us out of the weeds of the Foreign Affairs
6 Manual. So thank you in advance for your patience, and hopefully we can move through
7 this as quickly as possible.

8 But I want to call your attention back to minority exhibit 3 and the rules that apply
9 broadly to the Dissent Channel.

10 First of all, just some housekeeping from the last round. Was 2 FAM 071.3 on
11 applicability, was that the section you were searching for in response to majority's
12 questions about who's eligible to use the Dissent Channel?

13 A 073?

14 Q 071.3 on applicability.

15 A Yes.

16 Q Okay.

17 A Thank you.

18 Q Anytime.

19 A It's big letters too.

20 Q So just for clarity in the record, your understanding based on this FAM
21 provision is that any U.S. citizen who's a regular or reemployed and new employee of the
22 Department of State or Agency for International Development may use the Dissent
23 Channel.

24 A Correct.

25 Q And, in fact, it stipulates explicitly that contractors may not use it.

1 A Correct.

2 Q Okay. Another housekeeping item, 2 FAM 073, Dissent Channel
3 Transmission, paragraph (a): Users are encouraged, but are not required, to discuss
4 their dissenting or alternative views with their supervisors and to show Dissent Channel
5 messages to them. A Dissent Channel message requires no clearance. The COM, chief
6 of mission, PO, principal officer, or a designated subordinate must authorize prompt
7 transmission of any Dissent Channel messages provided to them, with the understanding
8 that authorization of its transmission does not imply concurrence with its views.

9 Is that relevant to the exchange you were having earlier with the majority about
10 Ambassador Wilson and the visibility or the role that he would have played in
11 transmitting the July 2021 cable? And is there anything you want to clarify based on
12 that?

13 A Yes, thanks for flagging that. The drafters could have discussed it with him.
14 It was their prerogative to but not an obligation. I can't speak to whether they did or
15 not.

16 Q Okay. But, in fact -- go ahead.

17 A But transmission was an obligation, but whether he personally transmitted
18 or it was transmitted by a designee, as a technical matter, I cannot speak to.

19 Q But under the FAM rules, the chief of mission or the appropriate designee is
20 required to transmit. And the drafters are not required to seek substantive clearance
21 from --

22 A That is correct.

23 Q Thank you. Okay.

24 Let's go to -- now I'm having trouble navigating.

25 The first page of this exhibit, 2 FAM 071.1, paragraph (c). It reads: Freedom

1 from reprisal for Dissent Channel users is strictly enforced; officers or employees found to
2 have engaged in retaliation or reprisal against Dissent Channel users, or to have divulged
3 to unauthorized personnel the source or contents of Dissent Channel messages, will be
4 subject to disciplinary action. Dissent Channel messages, including the identity of the
5 authors, are a most sensitive element in the internal deliberative process and are to be
6 protected accordingly.

7 Are you familiar with this --

8 A I am.

9 Q -- paragraph? And would you -- sorry.

10 What is your understanding of the rationale for this paragraph and this -- the rules
11 stipulated therein?

12 A My understanding is that you don't want to create any impediment or
13 disincentive to people making use of the channel to communicate the views if, as their
14 identity is known, they end up regretting it because supervisors or others up the chain
15 resent that they've decided to express disagreement with the policy or its
16 implementation in ways that may implicate people up the chain.

17 And so in order to make sure that the channel is used and that people are not
18 worried that it could be used against them, they need to be assured that we are really
19 very, very careful in preserving the identity of the -- of the dissenters and the signatories
20 and only really with their consent beyond those who are required to receive the cable in
21 unredacted form with their names to, you know, to preserve that.

22 Q Okay. And would you agree that these safeguards you've described
23 informed by this paragraph (c) are critical to the effectiveness of the Dissent Channel?

24 A It's very important, absolutely.

25 Q Why? What informs your opinion?

1 A If the -- if the precedent is established that the cables are shared casually,
2 the drafters' identities are discussed freely, the likelihood that people have some sense of
3 assurance that their identity will indeed be preserved understandably would erode.

4 Q Uh-huh.

5 A And so the fact that people are not aware of the existence of a cable or, you
6 know, who the drafters might have been in totality at least gives them, hopefully, some
7 sense of assurance that this very provision and its spirit is taken very seriously.

8 Q Okay. And 2 FAM 074.1, I know we've discussed a few things in that
9 section of the rule book already. I want to draw your attention back to paragraph (b).
10 About halfway down that paragraph, the sentence begins with: Due regard for the
11 sensitivity of the messages -- With due regard for the sensitivity of the message and the
12 wishes of the drafter, the director of S/P may also distribute the dissent message to other
13 senior officials in the Department, both for information purposes and for help in drafting
14 a response. No additional distribution may be made without the authorization of the
15 S/P director.

16 Are you familiar with that provision?

17 A I am.

18 Q And how do you generally determine the wishes of the drafter in your role as
19 director of S/P?

20 A We asked them.

21 Q And in the absence of knowing -- sorry. Let me go back.

22 Is it customary that you consult with every -- consult with the drafters in each
23 dissent cable that is received?

24 A Yeah, not me personally. It's generally either my deputy or one of the
25 members who's assigned. Usually it's a career member, not always, but generally, yes.

1 Q And is it customary that part of that consultation process by you or your staff
2 involves assessing the wishes of the drafter in terms of how the dissent cable is handled?

3 A Yes.

4 Q In the absence of knowing firsthand the wishes of the drafter, are you
5 allowed to assume anything as to the drafter's wishes?

6 A We have a general approach to default to being more careful if we
7 have -- we don't have confirmation of the drafter's comfort.

8 Q So the assumption you make is to safeguard the cable contents and
9 signer's --

10 A Identity.

11 Q -- unless there's explicitly a conversation with the drafter to move beyond
12 that.

13 A That's generally the case, yes.

14 Q And even if the author of a Dissent Channel message were to wish that their
15 views as expressed in a cable would be made public, would S/P or anyone else in the
16 Department be allowed to publicize a Dissent Channel cable?

17 A The -- the cable is meant to be an internal document. And if it's classified,
18 it can't be made public in any event. And many of the dissent cables, though not all, are
19 classified but by very nature of their content. So it's meant to be an internal document.

20 Q Okay. And 2 FAM 075.1, I promise this is the last FAM piece we'll go over.
21 Impermissibility of Penalty or Reprisal. Are you familiar with that paragraph?

22 A Yes.

23 Q And the FAM here states that officers or -- in paragraph (b): Officers or
24 employees found to have engaged in acts of reprisal or retaliation against Dissent
25 Channel users, or who have improperly divulged the use of the channel by discussing the

1 content or identifying the user to unauthorized personnel, will be subject to disciplinary
2 action, which may include administrative, such as a letter of reprimand, suspension, or
3 termination, civil and, in rare cases, criminal penalties.

4 Are you familiar with that paragraph?

5 A I am.

6 Q Are these meaningful deterrents, in your view, to anyone violating the
7 confidentiality of the Dissent Channel?

8 A I hope so.

9 Q What informs that opinion?

10 A I think the fact that there is disciplinary action that could be involved in
11 countermanding, you know, the prescribed, you know, author's use of the channel and
12 the fact that it could involve the OIG as well, I would assume had some deterrent effect.

13 Q And have you ever firsthand observed anyone violating these rules?

14 A I have not observed it firsthand, no.

15 Q On the contrary, do you --

16 A Actually, that's not true. I have not observed it in my current role as the
17 director of S/P. I have observed in prior administrations multiple cases where drafters
18 have chosen to make public the documents in full --

19 Q Okay.

20 A -- or to share it more widely, but that was not in my time as director of S/P.

21 Q Okay. Thank you for that clarification.

22 Okay. We can move on from that.

23 [REDACTED]: Can I -- I have a couple of questions just on the dissent cable.

24 BY [REDACTED]:

25 Q I think predating some of the guidelines, it seems like they are a result of

1 past practice. Are you aware of any historical Dissent Channel cables that have become
2 public where the authors have had retribution or reprisal?

3 A I have not observed firsthand retribution or reprisal for people using the
4 Dissent Channel, including when they even made it public, at least from my time in
5 government. I have heard from others that there have been cases, however, when
6 people in the Department issued a Dissent Channel cable and which it did invite the ire of,
7 you know, administration officials.

8 I have personally not seen it in the time I've served in government, but I've heard
9 that it has happened.

10 Q Okay. If I just recall correctly now, I think there was an instance where
11 there was a statement, potentially I think from the White House, where they said if
12 people don't like the State Department, then they can leave. I think it was in response
13 to a Dissent Channel cable.

14 But I did want to ask you if you're familiar with the Blood Telegram and Archer
15 Blood.

16 A I am. He was the consul general, if I -- consul in Dhaka, if I remember
17 correctly from history, and is credited with having, potentially with his team, written the
18 first dissent cable, because it was never called the dissent cable originally. So that's the
19 lore is that he was the first.

20 Q And are you familiar or aware of whether or not there was any reprisal
21 against him for when the so-called Blood Telegram was made public?

22 A I -- look, I don't want to misremember history, but I know the historians's
23 office of the State Department has looked into this.

24 I know in the early days there were times when the channel was invoked. I don't
25 know if it was in the case of Archer Blood or if I'm conflating it with other cases where

1 there were people in the White House who reacted extremely negatively. So it's part of
2 the lore where that did indeed invite that kind of a response.

3 Q I'll just add, I'm a little bit of a South Asia geek. So the history here is that
4 he actually was removed from his position following the publication of that cable and it
5 becoming public. And I think he was then assigned to the State Department's personnel
6 office as a result of that. This, of course, predated the new guidance, but I just wanted
7 to make that clear for the record.

8 A No. Thanks for reminding, yes.

9 BY [REDACTED]:

10 Q Does that history comport with your understanding?

11 A Yes.

12 Q Okay. A few more questions related to the Dissent Channel itself. You
13 testified previously that the majority of Dissent Channel cables do get sent to individuals
14 beyond those individual recipients explicitly stipulated in the FAM, correct?

15 A Correct.

16 Q But you also testified that the process overall, the channel overall, is fairly
17 tightly controlled, correct?

18 A Correct.

19 Q And you testified previously that individuals beyond those stipulated in the
20 FAM who receive a Dissent Channel cable get a redacted version as a general matter. Is
21 that accurate?

22 A As a general matter, that's accurate.

23 Q Okay.

24 A Unless the drafters explicitly indicate otherwise.

25 Q So why would you disseminate a Dissent Channel cable to someone beyond

1 the individual stipulated in the FAM?

2 A Because you would -- you would distribute it beyond that because you need
3 those other senior officials' input in order to be able to actually provide a thoughtful
4 consideration of the incoming message and on any recommendations it makes in order to
5 be able to provide a thoughtful response and an informed response.

6 Q And do you and your staff seek information to contribute to a thoughtful,
7 informed response, to the extent possible, without further distribution of the cable?

8 A There have been instances where the designated recipients actually are the
9 ones who have the most pertinent information and so, therefore, you don't need to, but
10 that's not the general case.

11 Q Uh-huh.

12 A There's usually -- there's usually at least one or two offices who have
13 responsibility for the item and have specific knowledge that you need to access.

14 Q But it's fair to characterize that, while in the majority of cases you move
15 beyond the stipulated recipients, once moving beyond that, it is a very judicious and
16 narrow group to whom you might move a cable.

17 A Yes, that is correct.

18 Q Okay. So I do want to move us to the specific cable from July 2021 that you
19 were discussing previously. But just to -- just to get us out of the weeds of the FAM
20 here. In a nutshell, am I characterizing correctly the Dissent Channel process? A
21 Dissent Channel lands with you. You distribute it to a limited group, as stipulated in the
22 FAM, potentially slightly beyond that, for the purposes of informing a thoughtful
23 response. You are charged as S/P with that thoughtful response, drafting that and
24 disseminating it back to the drafters. You consult to inform that response. And you
25 respond within 30 to 60 days, sometimes sooner, sometimes later. Is that a fair

1 characterization?

2 A That's correct.

3 Q And this entire process, as a general matter, is tightly controlled to prevent
4 reprisal against individual employees. Is that an accurate characterization?

5 A It's accurate.

6 Q Do you consider this process to be reasonable?

7 A I do.

8 Q And this process and the rules that undergird it in the way that we've just
9 summarized, do you find those rules and guidelines something that you are able to
10 generally and readily follow and observe?

11 A Yes.

12 Q Okay. So now let's pivot to a specific Dissent Channel cable sent regarding
13 Afghanistan in July 2021. I take the Department's point that we will endeavor not to
14 question you on content that is better discussed in a classified setting, but I want to just
15 clarify a few points from your earlier testimony.

16 First of all, is it accurate that you have firsthand knowledge of only two additional
17 individuals beyond those stipulated in the FAM who received the Afghanistan dissent
18 cable with the concurrence of the drafters?

19 A Two offices, as opposed to individuals, so, yes, the Deputy Secretary, but in
20 the SRAR case, not only Ambassador Khalilzad but also his deputy.

21 Q So two individuals --

22 A Yes.

23 Q -- beyond the stipulated in the FAM --

24 A Oh, actually, yes, because he's already -- he is already in the FAM, yeah.

25 Q And you have no firsthand knowledge that anyone else received the cable or

1 was given access to it?

2 A As far as I recall.

3 Q Okay. And your understanding is that it was disseminated to Ambassador
4 Khalilzad and Tom West with the concurrence of the drafters?

5 A Yes.

6 Q And it was to inform a thoughtful reply by S/P back to the drafters?

7 A Yes.

8 Q Because otherwise the process is tightly controlled, correct?

9 A Correct.

10 Q And I believe you testified earlier that the response that S/P furnished back
11 to the drafters of the July 2021 Afghanistan dissent cable was furnished within a few days.
12 Was that your testimony?

13 A The response to that cable was submitted within a week.

14 Q Within a week. Thank you.

15 And that is an instance when the turnaround was sooner than the 30- to 60-day
16 window stipulated in the FAM, correct?

17 A That is correct.

18 Q So what were the reasons for that hastened timeline for a response?

19 A Because of the urgency of the issues that it was raising --

20 Q And --

21 A -- and the seriousness of it.

22 Q So is it fair to say that the quickened response was because S/P and senior
23 officials at the Department who had received the cable took its content seriously?

24 A Very.

25 Q And is it fair to say that they prioritized your responding in as swift a fashion

1 as possible?

2 A Yes.

3 Q And in your assessment, did you do so?

4 A Yes.

5 Q While still maintaining the necessary procedural steps to ensure an
6 informed, thoughtful reply?

7 A Yes.

8 Q Okay. And I believe you also testified earlier that your understanding was
9 that the points that the cable was raising -- some of the points that the cable raised were
10 helpful to the Department's ongoing deliberations.

11 A That's correct.

12 Q And did you also testify earlier that the substance, as you recall it, was
13 related to or not dissimilar from ongoing conversations that were already underway at
14 the Department?

15 A Yes.

16 Q Okay. So I'd like to go back to Minority Exhibit No. 2, Ambassador Smith's
17 testimony. Do you have that?

18 A Yeah.

19 Q So I'd like to draw your attention to page 33, line 21. And it begins:

20 Question: Did the AAR team have the opportunity to review the July 2021
21 Dissent Channel cable sent by numerous officials at U.S. Embassy Kabul?

22 Answer: I reviewed it.

23 Question: Did anyone else on your team have the opportunity to review?

24 Answer: No.

25 Q: Why not?

1 Answer: The Dissent Channel message is and the Dissent Channel itself is a very
2 carefully guarded tradition in the Department of State going back to the Vietnam war.

3 It's something that I think every Foreign Service and Civil Service employee of the
4 State Department wants to protect the integrity of that process, the confidentiality of
5 that process, the ability of the State Department employees, which is unique in the
6 Federal Government, to speak truth to power or at least to raise concerns that they might
7 have at a very senior level.

8 So protecting the integrity of that Dissent Channel was vitally important from the
9 standpoint by all of us.

10 Prior to my reading you this excerpt from Ambassador Smith's testimony just now,
11 did you have knowledge that Ambassador Smith had seen the dissent cable as part of his
12 afteraction review?

13 A I did, and I should have mentioned it, other than I was focusing on at the
14 time of the response when I answered the question originally or at the time of making it
15 available to members. But thank you for reminding me of this because I absolutely am
16 aware of it.

17 Q Okay. Fair enough. And glad we could clarify that.

18 And do you think it was worthwhile that Ambassador Smith be able to review the
19 cable as part of his afteraction review?

20 A I do.

21 Q And do you agree with his characterization of the Dissent Channel and
22 Dissent Channel messages and the importance of the integrity and the confidentiality of
23 this process, as he testified?

24 A I do.

25 Q And now I'd like to draw your attention to page 35 in his testimony. Line 6

1 begins:

2 Question: Do you believe, having the opportunity to review it, that it would have
3 increased -- I'm sorry. Let me go back.

4 Let's start at the top of that page, 35, line 1.

5 Question: Did anyone on the AAR team request access to it?

6 Answer: No. I mean, they knew that I had seen it.

7 Question: Was the team otherwise briefed on it or given a summary of its
8 contents?

9 Answer: We may have discussed it in general terms, but they were not given a
10 summary of it or saw any reference to it otherwise.

11 Question: Do you believe, having the opportunity to review it, that it would have
12 increased the AAR team's insight into the withdrawal?

13 Answer: In my opinion, no. I think that what the Dissent Channel did was
14 underscore some concerns that were being expressed in various channels at the time and
15 by various people and that the light that it would shed on those concerns was not that
16 significant or different from what was being heard in other ways.

17 Does Ambassador Smith's testimony in this excerpt comport with your
18 understanding of the broader policy deliberations and debate around Afghanistan at that
19 time?

20 A It does.

21 Q It does.

22 Okay. And finally, I'd like to call your attention back to the majority's exhibit --

23 [REDACTED] 4.

24 BY [REDACTED]

25 Q It was exhibit No. 4.

1 A The Wall Street Journal, yeah.

2 Q Appreciating the Department's earlier interjection that you can't verify this
3 reporting or what it refers to, I nevertheless want to try to move through a couple of
4 discrete pieces.

5 On the first page of that exhibit, the last paragraph reads: The cable was sent to
6 Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Director of Policy Planning Salman Ahmed.
7 Mr. Blinken received the cable and reviewed it shortly after receipt, according to the
8 person familiar with the exchange, who added that contingency planning was already
9 underway when it was received, and that Mr. Blinken welcomed their feedback.

10 Without commenting on the substance of the cable itself in an unclassified setting,
11 are you aware that contingency planning was underway with respect to Afghanistan in
12 July 2021?

13 A Yes.

14 Q And are you aware, again, through sources other than the classified contents
15 of the cable, that Secretary Blinken welcomed the feedback of dissenters?

16 A Yes. And I believe he said that publicly.

17 Q Okay. On the next page, first full paragraph: State Department
18 spokesman Ned Price declined to address the cable but told The Wall Street Journal that
19 Mr. Blinken reads every dissent and reviews every reply.

20 Is your personal understanding that Mr. Blinken, Secretary Blinken, reads every
21 dissent and reviews every reply?

22 A That is my understanding.

23 Q And moving to the third page of this exhibit, second full paragraph begins:
24 On July 14th, a day after the cable was sent, the White House announced Operation Allies
25 Refuge to support the relocation of interested and eligible Afghan nationals and their

1 immediate families who supported the U.S. Government for the Special Immigrant Visas.
2 Evacuations didn't kick into high gear until last week and have been complicated by the
3 Taliban takeover of Kabul on Sunday.

4 And again for the record, the date of this article is August 19th, 2021. I should
5 have clarified that.

6 Were you aware of Operation Allies Refuge?

7 A Yes.

8 Q Is this an accurate description of when it began and what it entailed?

9 A Yes.

10 Q In broad strokes?

11 A In broad strokes, yes.

12 Q And if the date of the dissent cable were July 13th and Operation Allies
13 Refuge was launched July 14th, in your professional assessment, would it have been
14 possible to launch that program only in response to or at the behest of concerns that may
15 have been raised in the cable?

16 A No.

17 Q And why is that?

18 A Because you couldn't launch an operation of that magnitude in 24 hours. It
19 was something that was ongoing -- part of an ongoing discussion about what needed to
20 be launched for well before the cable was received.

21 Q So, in fact, is this an example that relates to your earlier testimony and the
22 testimony you heard from Ambassador Smith that, again, without speaking specifically to
23 the contents of the classified cable in this setting, the issues and points that it was making
24 referred to subject matter that was already under discussion at the Department?

25 A Generally speaking, yes.

1 Q And on which there were already actions entrained to address those
2 challenges at the Department.

3 A Again, generally speaking, yes.

4 Q Okay. Next paragraph: Several other actions that have since been taken
5 by the administration were consistent with some of the requests and recommendations
6 in the cable, the person familiar with the cable exchange said.

7 [REDACTED]. I'm waiting for [REDACTED] to interject.

8 [REDACTED] Yeah, I was going to let you finish. But I think that is a little
9 different than the two preceding excerpts and questions.

10 [REDACTED] Okay.

11 [REDACTED]. But is addressable in a classified setting.

12 [REDACTED]. Okay. So before I move on, let me officially give you the
13 opportunity, in light of the State Department's counsel's interjection just now, if there's
14 anything you would like to say in response to that paragraph in this unclassified setting,
15 please do. Otherwise, we'll move on.

16 Mr. Ahmed. Yeah, I'm happy to take it up in the classified setting.

17 [REDACTED]. Okay. Then we'll proceed to the fifth paragraph, fifth full paragraph
18 on that page: The person familiar with the contents of the cable said that the actions
19 ultimately taken by the administration were even more drastic than what embassy
20 staffers recommended in the internal memo a month earlier.

21 I'm not asking you to speak to the substance of those actions. But in terms of
22 intensity, does this paragraph comport with your understanding?

23 [REDACTED] So I'm going to -- I think you will too. I'm going to be more -- he
24 can give a fulsome answer in great detail and have followup in a classified setting.

25 [REDACTED]. Yeah, I think we'd like the non-fulsome answer, if possible, in

1 response to that. And then we can take it up with more details in the classified. I'm
2 not sure what's classified in that piece.

3 [REDACTED]. So we won't know what's classified until he tries to answer it.
4 And I would not like -- one of the principal reasons I'm here is to not put him at jeopardy
5 of handling information in the way in which evidently somebody at DOD did.

6 [REDACTED]. So let me just take one more run at this. And we agree, and we're
7 happy to discuss the substance of a classified cable with you in a classified setting. That
8 is appropriate, and we look forward to doing so.

9 Let me just ask: Not as a with reference to the substance itself but in terms of
10 what you observed to be the Department's overall effort on some of these concerns that
11 you've already said were raised in other channels and were not unique to the dissent
12 cable, would you describe the intensity of the Department's efforts as drastic?

13 Mr. Ahmed. In some of the instances, yes.

14 [REDACTED] Okay. Thank you.

15 Anything else?

16 Okay. I'm going to turn things over to my colleague.

17 BY [REDACTED]:

18 Q So I just wanted to talk a little bit about some of the policy discussions. Are
19 you familiar with the November 29th, 2020, Doha Agreement?

20 A I am.

21 [REDACTED]. I'm just going to introduce this as -- I don't know where we are. 5?

22 6? -- 5.

23 [Ahmed Exhibit No. 5

24 Was marked for identification.]

25 BY [REDACTED]:

1 Q And so just to level set a little bit, the basis on which the Afghanistan
2 withdrawal occurred was on this agreement, correct?

3 A Correct.

4 Q And are you familiar with the terms of this agreement?

5 A Yes.

6 Q How would you characterize the terms of, you know, generally speaking, of
7 the deal?

8 A It stipulates a date for U.S. withdrawal, and it stipulates the obligations of
9 the Taliban with respect to counterterrorism, to diminish violence, and to engage in a
10 political transition process.

11 Q And to the best of your knowledge, was this supposed to be a -- or is slated
12 to be a conditions-based agreement?

13 A It was both time-based and conditions-based.

14 Q And the conditions, if I could just maybe state them broadly, were essentially
15 the United States would agree to withdraw all troops in 14 months. And in return, the
16 Taliban said that they would cease violence and not allow its territory to be used for
17 terrorism.

18 A That's correct, although I think the exact terminology was diminish violence,
19 as opposed to cease it. But I'm sure it's in the agreement. One can look at it. But
20 that's generally it, yes.

21 Q And would you assess that the agreements -- the withdrawals, as they were
22 phased, were actually based on the Taliban affirmatively meeting conditions?

23 A I'm not going to characterize each one of the withdrawal -- the drawdowns
24 as corresponding to the Taliban having met its conditions, because there were -- one
25 could easily make the argument that there were moments at which it did not meet the

1 conditions.

2 [REDACTED] Are you aware of people who have made that argument, that it
3 didn't meet the conditions at the time troops were drawn down?

4 Mr. Ahmed. Sure. I mean, it's been a matter of public debate.

5 [REDACTED]. Okay. And --

6 Mr. Ahmed. I mean, and this includes preceding the current administration.

7 [REDACTED]. And specifically are you aware of this point being raised with respect
8 to drawdowns under former President Trump?

9 Mr. Ahmed. It was a matter of public debate, yeah.

10 [REDACTED]. Okay. And is it your sense that -- just to get the timeline correct,
11 the Biden administration took office on January 20th, 2021. Are you aware of further or
12 any kind of announcement of a withdrawal of additional troops in the 10, 15 days prior to
13 the administration taking over?

14 Mr. Ahmed. I don't want to speak to -- I just don't recall --

15 [REDACTED]. Okay. Just for the record, on January 15th, 2021, there was an
16 additional drawdown to 2,500 troops.

17 [REDACTED]. Does that comport with your recollection?

18 Mr. Ahmed. It does.

19 BY [REDACTED]

20 Q And are you -- do you recall that any condition -- additional conditions were
21 met that led to the further withdrawal of the 2,500 troops?

22 A I don't recall any additional conditions having been met or reversal of areas
23 of concern on their implementation of their obligations that corresponded to the
24 announcement of going down to 2,500.

25 Q Okay. And based on your, like, strategic thinking and, you know, your

1 decades of experience, how would you characterize this agreement?

2 A That's a pretty broad question. Could I ask you to narrow it?

3 Q Sure. Let me see if I can -- I mean, it is a -- it is a broad question.

4 If you were to negotiate this agreement, how do you think that this agreement
5 placed the Afghan government? What impact do you think elements of this agreement
6 had on the stability of the Ghani government at the time?

7 A I think a lot depends on how the agreement was actually implemented, to be
8 honest, because one could make the argument that it provided leverage to the Afghan
9 government if indeed the conditions were interpreted as hard and fast. Then if the
10 Taliban didn't diminish violence, if it didn't engage, you know, on the political process in
11 good faith, if it didn't meet its obligations with respect to counterterrorism, then it would
12 see a prolonged and significant U.S. military presence. It arguably could provide some
13 leverage.

14 On the other hand, if the withdrawal or the drawdowns continued apace without
15 those conditions having been met, it could arguably erode the Afghan government's
16 position as well.

17 Q And how do you think it played out in practical terms? Do you think it
18 helped or eroded the Afghan government's position?

19 A The fact that the conditions part of it were not more firmly adhered to as
20 tied to the timeline for withdrawal probably eroded its position.

21 Q And what impact do you think the United States Government negotiating a
22 prisoner release had on the tone and tenor and the stability of the Afghan government?

23 A I don't know if I would link prisoner release to the stability of the
24 government per se. You know, I think there are too many other factors that would go
25 into making that determination.

1 Q Okay. How would you -- how would you judge the impact or do you
2 believe that the Taliban was engaging in a good-faith negotiation with the Afghan
3 government?

4 A No.

5 Q Sorry. I cut you off.

6 A That's it. No, I don't believe they were engaging in a good-faith
7 negotiation.

8 Q And that was a precondition to additional troop drawdowns.

9 A Well, I mean, I don't think good faith is a stipulation in the agreement per se.
10 But if one were to characterize how they proceeded with its implementation, I wouldn't
11 characterize it as good faith.

12 [REDACTED] Okay. Okay. That's all I have.

13 BY [REDACTED]

14 Q All right. I want to move to one more topic. Are you familiar with the
15 Department's After Action Review on Afghanistan?

16 A I am.

17 Q And were you involved in the researching or drafting of the afteraction
18 report?

19 A I did talk with Ambassador Smith as he was preparing his report.

20 Q Okay. Can you say a little bit more? You sat for an interview with him?

21 A I did.

22 Q Just him or him and his staff?

23 A I don't -- to be honest, I don't remember who else was with him. Certainly
24 with him.

25 Q Do you recall how long the interview was?

1 A I don't recall how long, but it was, you know, a decent amount of time.

2 Q And did you feel like you had space within the interview to raise points and
3 concerns clearly and honestly?

4 A Absolutely.

5 Q Okay. As you know, the unclass- -- or as you may know, the unclassified
6 portion of the AAR has been since released to the public. Were you aware of that?

7 A Yes.

8 Q And have you reviewed the afteraction report unclassified version?

9 A I have.

10 Q Have you reviewed the full afteraction report, to include the classified
11 portion?

12 A I have not seen the final classified version of the report in full. I saw
13 excerpts of earlier versions of it --

14 Q Okay.

15 A -- in classified form.

16 Q So at any rate, you do have a sense of the findings in the report in totality,
17 both as classified and in unclassified --

18 A I do.

19 Q -- unclassified portions?

20 Does the report's substance -- and, again, recognizing that you can only refer
21 directly to unclassified substance here. Does the afteraction report and its findings
22 comport with your experience working on Afghanistan-related issues over the time
23 horizon that the report covers?

24 A On the issues with which I have familiarity, yes.

25 Q And do you have any reason to dispute the credibility of the report or its

1 findings?

2 A I do not.

3 Q Are you aware of any individuals who were able to share their concerns, who
4 wanted to, with respect to the After Action Review process?

5 A I'm not aware of that.

6 Q And for context, the After Action Review, is it fair to say that that's not the
7 only channel somebody would have had if they wanted to express concerns at any point
8 in time about anything related to Afghanistan policy? Correct?

9 A That is correct.

10 Q And some additional channels could include the Dissent Channel that your
11 office manages. Yes?

12 A It could. And I should add also the front channel.

13 Q Tell us more about that for the record.

14 A Yeah. And perhaps I should have said it earlier. Another thing with the
15 Dissent Channel that we're looking at is, is there a reason why the message could not
16 have just simply be sent as a front channel message that's widely shared with people?
17 Did the dissenters, if they were the authors, have a reason why they wanted to use a
18 more restricted channel?

19 But where authors want to actually have wide distribution, you know, they have
20 other channels available to them to provide that information, including sending an email.

21 Q Uh-huh.

22 A So there are channels that exist. And so you're looking at, you know, is
23 there a reason why they really felt that the Dissent Channel was the appropriate channel?

24 But to answer your question, of course, there are many -- there are many ways in
25 which people can express views. The afteraction report was a very important way to try

1 to bring it all together.

2 Q Uh-huh.

3 A But, of course, there are other avenues that are always available.

4 Q Uh-huh. And the Office of the Inspector General, to your knowledge, is
5 that another channel for employees at the Department to raise concerns specifically with
6 respect to violations of law or waste, fraud, and abuse?

7 A Fraud and abuse? Yes.

8 Q Okay. Just to quickly unpack a bit more the point you made about the front
9 channel. Is that a regular consideration when you review Dissent Channel cables and
10 engage drafters and inform a response that you would think about the extent to which
11 these concerns can also be addressed front channel?

12 A Yes. And we'll often ask the drafter, have you raised these issues, you
13 know, in the normal course of discussion?

14 Q Uh-huh.

15 A You know, is there a reason why you want to use this channel as opposed to
16 other channels?

17 Q Uh-huh.

18 A Sometimes what happens is people will often say, Oh, no, I did raise it in my
19 channels, or, I've raised it in the discussions at my level. But often they're not sure if the
20 message has reached the highest levels.

21 Q Uh-huh.

22 A And so what we've found is sometimes people have turned to the Dissent
23 Channel to be able to be assured that, in fact, it's getting to the Seventh Floor and to the
24 senior-most officials.

25 And so we'll say, look, if -- you know, if you have reason to believe that that has

1 not gotten through or you really want to be assured that it does, of course, we don't
2 discourage that at all. But we just want to know if they've tried through other normal
3 channels.

4 Q Okay. So then based on your testimony just now, is it fair to assume that
5 the Dissent Channel is one significant mechanism to voice dissent to the highest levels of
6 the Department but that, more broadly, there are other ways in the Department to
7 express dissenting views?

8 A Absolutely. And ideally, part of promoting a culture of dissent is not to
9 have greater use of the Dissent Channel but more front channel cables that simply say,
10 Oh, by the way, there are differences of views here on the team and I want to let you
11 know what they are.

12 Q Okay. All right. I think we're going to give you 13 minutes back. But
13 before I do, I just want to ask: Is there anything else that we haven't asked you about
14 today that you think is important for us to know?

15 A I think I just added that point that I hadn't raised earlier, just saying how
16 there are -- there are multiple ways in which people can express their views. I think
17 that's an important piece of the understanding.

18 Q And that we should infer from that that, just because there's a Dissent
19 Channel cable, doesn't mean that the issues in a cable like that aren't already being
20 discussed and deliberated and dissented to --

21 A Correct.

22 Q -- potentially --

23 A Correct.

24 Q -- in the Department?

25 A You know -- you know, maybe some of the ideas have already been

1 submitted by some of the drafters. And I'm not saying in this cable. I'm just saying as
2 a general matter they could be already, having been entered into an interagency
3 discussion or raised at certain levels, you know.

4 So, yeah, I wouldn't -- I wouldn't characterize the dissent cable as the sole place in
5 which a set of views may exist. They may exist in multiple places or having -- or have
6 been internalized as part of a conversation ongoing already.

7 Often dissenters -- one of the benefits of the response that dissenters receive
8 sometimes is to get insight into discussions that are ongoing at the highest levels to which
9 they may not have been privy. And they can at least be reassured that, oh, so you're
10 confirming to me that people at the highest levels are aware of this and are actually doing
11 something about it.

12 And in getting that response, at least they can be assured, okay, at least the
13 people at the top do know about this, but I don't want to be -- have not exhausted that to
14 make sure I did my responsibility to make sure they're aware, including by taking the
15 extraordinary step of sending this cable.

16 That is a part of the, you know, the exercise or, you know, the experience as well.

17 BY [REDACTED]:

18 Q So in this instance, are you aware of this discussion happening in a front -- in
19 front channel vehicles?

20 A Without getting into what I think we'll get into in a classified setting, I would
21 just say, in general, general issues that were raised, as is often the case in other cables,
22 I'm aware that some of them are already the subject of ongoing discussion and action.

23 Q And just to clarify, when you say ongoing discussions, that would include
24 members of the State Department and members of the interagency.

25 A Correct.

1 Q Okay. Including DOD.

2 A Yeah. When I say DO -- when I say interagency, I'm generally meaning NSC,
3 convene meetings that include State, the IC, DOD, and other members of the national
4 security committee --

5 BY [REDACTED]:

6 Q Thank you for clarifying that.

7 A -- community.

8 Q Let me just close then with this question. You testified earlier that
9 Secretary Blinken has sought to revitalize dissent and the dissemination and free flow of
10 ideas at the Department. You mentioned the Ideas Channel, which was stood up in
11 addition to a Dissent Channel. You mentioned restoring the open forum.

12 So first question for you: Are there any other steps that you or officials at the
13 Department have taken that further that objective to broaden space for dissent and
14 deliberation?

15 A I would say, in addition to those mechanisms, the creation of what we've
16 called the -- the contingency planning exercise that I referred to earlier where we now,
17 S/P chairs this group twice a year but with ad hoc meetings in between -- I don't want to
18 give the impression that it's just twice a year and that's it -- is I think another avenue in
19 which by canvassing bureaus, by canvassing the IC, by reaching out pretty widely to make
20 sure if people feel as if our assumptions need to be challenged or we need to think about
21 scenarios that maybe may seem fantastical but nonetheless deserve, you know, to be
22 entered into the imagination, I feel like that's also a very important step in the right
23 direction. And I think it's directly responsive to the very kind of recommendation that
24 Ambassador Smith has made.

25 Q And so, generally speaking, is it your view that this administration, Secretary

1 Blinken and members of his team like yourself, have been successful in fostering a more
2 open, deliberative culture at the Department?

3 A I think we've definitely made progress. I think we've definitely had a
4 positive impact. We can always do more and will continue to do more.

5 Q And do you think others at the Department share that view?

6 A You know, as in all things where progress is made, I'm sure there are people
7 who would say, Look, I welcome that. That's great. Others might say, Yeah, but you
8 should do more and more can be done. And that's probably legitimate too.

9 Q But in terms of what informs your opinion, do you see engagement by
10 Department officials more broadly in some of these channels and mechanisms that
11 you've -- that you've stood up or expanded?

12 A What I've seen is that when we have engaged officials, both those formally
13 designated and those we bring in on a case-by-case basis, they've taken the Dissent
14 Channel incoming and the response very seriously. I've been very encouraged by that as
15 a general matter.

16 I believe that, in general, I would like to believe that those who have used the
17 channel at least during my tenure, they would feel as if it was, you know, managed
18 appropriately and seriously and that they were taken seriously on issues that raised and
19 they got a thoughtful response.

20 But given how tightly controlled the process is, I can't tell you that the majority of
21 the workforce would have that view, because they don't know about the cables or the
22 process that went around a lot of them. And so the community of people who have the
23 experience of that would be a matter of hearsay for more of them than practical
24 experience, and that's just the reality of what we're dealing with.

25 Q But with respect to the other mechanisms, the Ideas Channel, the open

1 forum, these contingency --

2 A I -- I --

3 Q -- planning, you know, kind of afteraction type exercises --

4 A Yes.

5 Q -- do you see uptake and engagement by Department officials, broadly
6 speaking, and in a positive way in response to those mechanisms?

7 A I believe that all of those are seen as positive, but I also will be honest. I
8 think all of them, it's still a relatively short period of time in which we've tried to
9 introduce and revitalize things. So while welcome, I imagine if you ask different people,
10 they'd say, yeah, great, love to see more and see it grow, et cetera.

11 Q So fair to characterize the administration's efforts here as a work in
12 progress?

13 A A positive work in progress, I hope.

14 [REDACTED] Great. I have no further questions.

15 [REDACTED]. I don't want to -- no. We can go off the record.

16 [REDACTED]. We can go off the record.

17 [Recess.]

1 [2:33 p.m.]

2 [REDACTED]. The time is now 2:33, and we're back on the record.

3 BY [REDACTED]:

4 Q I just had a followup question on the prior round. You had distinguished
5 between, sort of, the front channel, the dissent channel, and the various avenues by
6 which employees of the Department could, sort of, express their concerns, some more
7 public than others.

8 A Uh-huh.

9 Q Did you ask the dissenters why they used the dissent channel?

10 A I personally did not. That was a conversation my deputy had with the
11 drafters, again, because, as I said, I tended to want to have the career officials, to the
12 extent they could, have that conversation with them.

13 What I recall her representing to me from that conversation is wanting to be
14 assured that their views, even if had been discussed with others, in other channels, were
15 indeed getting to the highest levels.

16 Q Did they express why they were concerned that it wouldn't? Or, if I'm not
17 characterizing it properly, is there a reason why they were concerned about it getting to
18 the appropriate people?

19 A There are -- you know what? There are a couple of issues that are germane
20 that I could explain a little bit more easily if I could do it when we're in the classified
21 setting, and I can point to the reasons why they thought that using the channel was
22 important.

23 Q Okay. So one followup question, to the extent you're able to answer.

24 A Uh-huh.

25 Q Did they express any concern with Ambassador Wilson?

1 A I don't recall, honestly, it being represented to me that they did or they
2 didn't. Like, I don't recall that.

3 Q Okay. Thank you.

4 BY [REDACTED]:

5 Q You had testified earlier that, while in Doha, you engaged with the Taliban.
6 To your knowledge, did Secretary Blinken ever engage with the Taliban?

7 A Not that I recall.

8 Q Do you know which State Department officials did?

9 A Sure. Ambassador Khalilzad did. Tom West did. Dante Paradiso, I think,
10 was the representative of the Department who was based in Doha; he did.

11 That's not the sum total. I think there may have been a few more junior people
12 who would've been present or staffing those meetings. But those were the primary
13 ones that I recall during my tenure.

14 There were certainly others, prior to, that had engaged as well, that were involved
15 in the Doha negotiations, like Ambassador Molly Phee, as well. But that was prior to my
16 tenure.

17 Q During your time in Doha, were you aware of Ambassador Ross Wilson
18 engaging with the Taliban?

19 A I fully assumed that there were those in Kabul who had some interaction
20 with the Taliban, but I wasn't in Kabul, so I can't give you firsthand knowledge of who was
21 engaging with them.

22 Q Okay.

23 And are you able to name any of the other Taliban folks that you were engaging
24 with besides Baradar?

25 A I'm just for the moment blanking on it, but there's one very clear

1 interlocutor who was there after Baradar left, and he subsequently became Foreign
2 Minister at one point. And I'm just blanking on the name right now. If I looked it up, I
3 could find it for you.

4 Q Okay. But the Taliban official that you're referring to went on to become
5 Foreign Minister?

6 A I believe so, or at least another one of the senior positions there.

7 Q Okay. Do you recall when Baradar departed for Kabul?

8 A It would've been -- I don't remember the exact date, but it was within a
9 week of -- a week or less of my arrival then.

10 Q Okay.

11 While in Doha, who were you communicating with in the U.S. Government?

12 While in Doha, who were you communicating with in the U.S. Government, back
13 in the United States?

14 A Communications I sent back would've included Wendy Sherman, Derek
15 Chollet, Tom Sullivan, my deputy. Victoria Nuland would've been on my
16 communications. And the Secretary would've been a recipient to them.

17 Q Is perhaps --

18 A Suzy George would've been as well.

19 Q Suzy George?

20 Is perhaps the Taliban official that you're referring to that took over for Baradar
21 Amir Khan Muttaqi?

22 A Muttaqi.

23 Q And you testified earlier, I believe, that, while in Doha, the U.S. and the
24 Taliban designated folks in Kabul to coordinate as well. Is that an accurate summation?

25 A Yes.

1 Q Okay. Are you able to say who the U.S. leaders --

2 A Oh, no, I'm sorry. I would go back. It was Stanikzai, not Muttaqi. It was
3 Stanikzai who was in Doha at the time that I was there.

4 Q Okay. Thank you. That's very useful.

5 A And there was a Stanikzai who worked for the Afghan Government, and
6 there was a Stanikzai who worked for the Taliban.

7 Q Okay.

8 A So just to --

9 Q Thank you. So it was not Muttaqi?

10 A It was not Muttaqi. Or, if he was there, I'm just not recalling that. But, I
11 mean, it was Stanikzai who was there.

12 Q Okay. Thank you.

13 So who were the U.S. designated leaders in Kabul to carry out this coordination
14 between the U.S. and the Taliban?

15 A So Tom West was deployed. He had originally been in Doha, and he was
16 sent to Kabul to join Ambassador John Bass, who was overseeing efforts at the airport.

17 And there were additional people designated by DOD, as well, who were there as
18 interlocutors. I don't remember the names offhand.

19 Q Okay.

20 A But Tom West was the one from the Doha team who had been sent out to
21 very specifically be there to engage with the Taliban interlocutors.

22 Q And do you remember who the Taliban interlocutors were in Kabul?

23 A You know, I'm not remembering offhand. If I'm consulting my -- you know,
24 if I started googling or something, I'd remember, but I don't remember offhand.

25 Muttaqi may have been among them, but he had not -- the reason why I'm not

1 totally remembering everyone in each instance is because Tom West had been engaged
2 with multiple actors on the Taliban side, and I don't want to mislead you in saying who
3 were the precise ones on the ground at the time versus those that he was talking to in
4 Doha or by phone.

5 Q During this timeframe, did the U.S. communicator negotiate with members
6 of the Haqqani Taliban?

7 A During the time period I was there, I'm not sure. The Haqqani group ended
8 up moving into Kabul, and so whether there were subsequent communications, I can't
9 pinpoint when that would've been taken place or who would've been there.

10 Q But between the August 15th and the end of August, would it be your
11 understanding that it was, at least in large part, the Haqqani Taliban that were sort of
12 controlling the Kabul area and the Kabul Airport area?

13 A Many of them were, but they weren't our appointed interlocutors, so to
14 speak. Because the people who are interlocutors have been those that have been part
15 of the Doha process and those who'd had relationships previously. So, again, I don't
16 want to mislead you, but Tom West would be able to give you a clear answer on that.

17 Q Do you recall the Taliban official Hamdullah Mukhlis?

18 A I don't personally.

19 Q Okay.

20 Sir, do you believe that the Haqqanis and the Taliban were separate entities?

21 A I think they were a faction among the Taliban. And there was an
22 ongoing -- yeah. I mean, they were part and parcel of the Taliban. They had identities
23 over the course of the 20 years that had a distinct identity to them, but they were part of
24 the Taliban that ultimately took control.

25 Q So would it be fair to conclude that you would disagree with State

1 Department spokesman Ned Price's claim that the Haqqani and the Taliban were separate
2 entities?

3 A The Haqqanis had a distinct character that developed over the course of the
4 20 years, including associated with the terrorist activities they'd undertaken. But as far
5 as the Taliban themselves were concerned, they were also part of the debate among the
6 Taliban as to how Kabul would be -- and Afghanistan would be governed.

7 So there are certain aspects of what he's saying is absolutely the case. There's
8 also the fact that some of them became members of the ruling Taliban, you know, regime
9 post-Kabul's fall.

10 Q So to consider them fully separate entities probably would not be an
11 accurate way to describe them?

12 A They're a separate character, but they also ended up becoming part of the
13 government too, but --

14 Q So I'd like to --

15 [REDACTED]. I have one question.

16 Did you ever become aware of negotiations by the U.S. military with the Taliban in
17 Kabul?

18 Mr. Ahmed. The U.S. military were actively engaged with the Taliban directly on
19 the coordination of, you know, the practical realities of our withdrawal and the people
20 entering the airport. So, in those coordination arrangements that I mentioned, there
21 were DOD personnel that were also engaged directly with the Taliban, including with Tom
22 West.

23 [REDACTED]. Uh-huh.

24 Mr. Ahmed. As to any negotiations between DOD and the Taliban that was prior
25 to that period, I wasn't personally privy to them.

1 BY [REDACTED]:

2 Q While in Doha, did you become aware of the fact that the Taliban had freed
3 thousands of ISIS-K prisoners from Bagram prison on or around August 15th?

4 A Yes.

5 Q Okay. Did you ask the Taliban why they did that?

6 A Well, the -- I personally did not, because I was not the one leading any of the
7 discussions. So I had no discussions with the Taliban directly, myself. I was present at
8 discussions that Ambassador Khalilzad had with them, or General McKenzie in that
9 instance.

10 It was definitely a topic of conversation, but the primary focus was on all the
11 actions they were going to need to take to prevent ISIS from in any way, you know,
12 imperiling the withdrawal.

13 Q So did someone from SRAR Khalilzad's team pose this question to them?

14 A They very well may have when I was not present. As I said, I was not
15 present at every communication they had with them.

16 Q Do you recall learning the Taliban's explanation for why they had freed
17 thousands of ISIS-K prisoners?

18 A What I recall -- and I don't recall necessarily believing them, but what I recall
19 their explanation being was that those prisoners broke out. As I said, I don't recall
20 necessarily believing that explanation. I'm just saying I recall that being the explanation.

21 Q Were you ever briefed on ISIS-K threats to Hamid Karzai International
22 Airport?

23 A Yes.

24 Q And did the team that you were part of discuss the ISIS-K threat with the
25 Taliban?

1 A Yes.

2 Q And are you able to speak to what those conversations were?

3 A No. I mean, not in this setting.

4 Q Were there discussions with the Taliban regarding the continued operation
5 of Kabul Airport?

6 A Yes.

7 Q And who was involved in those discussions?

8 A There were conversations that were taking place in Kabul. I wasn't party to
9 those, because I was in Doha. In Doha, Ambassador Khalilzad was the primary one.

10 Q And what was the agreement, if any, that was reached between the U.S. and
11 the Taliban?

12 A So the conversation that I was privy to in Doha that Ambassador Khalilzad
13 was having was in -- it included the Qataris as well, in terms of getting Qatar Airways to
14 be able to fly into the airport in order to be able to continue to have people fly out
15 after -- even after we had left. And so that was one part of the conversation, which was
16 in order to have a continued route available and a means of people being able to leave.
17 So that was one of it.

18 Another conversation that I recall having taken place was around the actual
19 operations of the airport and who could operate it, including internationally, that would
20 have the technical means to be able to keep the airport and the air traffic control running,
21 but also who the Taliban would accept undertaking that role.

22 Q Were there other agreements between the U.S. and the Taliban that
23 extended beyond the end of August 2021?

24 A There were certainly discussions that took place about ensuring that people
25 who had not already been able to leave by the end of August would continue to be able

1 to leave and that there would be airport operations ongoing in order to enable that to
2 take place.

3 And so there were discussions around who would operate the airport, who would
4 be able to fly in, how would people be allowed to leave -- all the details of which
5 wasn't -- I wasn't involved in those negotiations, but, as a general matter, what I'm aware
6 of, the primary purpose of them was to maximize the chances for people to continue to
7 be able to leave or at least have avenues to be able to do so.

8 Q Were any of the conversations that you were part of related to any sort of
9 intelligence-sharing between the U.S. and the Taliban, like, security cooperation between
10 the U.S. and Taliban, anything like that?

11 A I was not personally part of those conversations.

12 Q But do you believe that those conversations were taking place?

13 A I believe that conversations took place on making available to them certain
14 information that helped make clear our concerns about the ISIS-K threat.

15 I understand, subsequently, conversations took place over the longer term,
16 questions about how our CT concerns could continually be addressed.

17 I was not in those conversations, and I don't want to mislead you by trying to
18 represent them, and certainly not in an unclassified setting.

19 BY [REDACTED]:

20 Q Are you aware who was in those conversations?

21 A So, certainly, the SRAR team --

22 Q Uh-huh.

23 A -- joined by relevant interagency colleagues, will have had some of those
24 conversations, many of which did not necessarily take place during those 2 weeks but
25 subsequently. I wouldn't go into more here.

1 Q Would it have involved DMR McKeon or anyone else back in D.C. in those
2 conversations?

3 A I am not aware of DMR McKeon having conversations with the Taliban on
4 these questions. It doesn't mean that it didn't happen. I'm just not aware of that to be
5 the case.

6 Q Let me reframe it, in terms of the substance of that discussion. Would
7 others at the State Department have been involved in what could be communicated to
8 the Taliban or what could be offered or engaged with them on?

9 A I would say that, normally, the kind of -- people on the ground or even in
10 SRAR wouldn't be, of their own accord, deciding what could be communicated to them of
11 things of this import, and, normally, it would be the subject of some deputy-level
12 interagency discussion, normally, at least, if not higher.

13 Q Okay.

14 [REDACTED]. Were you then or are you now familiar with any sort of historical
15 relationship between the Haqqani Taliban, specifically, and ISIS-K?

16 Mr. Ahmed. Haqqanis and ISIS-K? I couldn't speak to that.

17 [REDACTED]. Okay.

18 BY [REDACTED]:

19 Q We're going to pivot a bit. And I believe we're on exhibit 6 now, if I'm not
20 mistaken. This is your biography on the State Department website. Great photo.

21 Here you go.

22 A I can confirm it's not a great photo.

23 Q So I'd like to, as I noted, introduce exhibit 6 into the record, which is your
24 official biography on the State Department website.

25 [Ahmed Exhibit No. 6

1 individual selections.

2 Q Okay.

3 Were you involved or privy to the decision to retain Ambassador Ross Wilson as
4 chief of mission at Embassy Kabul?

5 A I was privy to that discussion.

6 Q What --

7 A But I wasn't involved in it, again, because I had, you know, the entire system
8 of agencies, so --

9 Q To the best of your abilities, can you elaborate on the discussion that took
10 place surrounding that decision?

11 [REDACTED] So, depending on who was involved in the discussion, this could
12 well implicate executive-branch confidentiality issues. He was on a transition team for a
13 soon-to-be POTUS.

14 And until we would know what the answer and the content would be -- I'm not
15 asserting any privilege, but at this point I would ask that he not provide that answer until
16 we've had the opportunity to know whether or not privilege is implicated.

17 BY [REDACTED]:

18 Q Were there any discussions within the Department, specifically, regarding
19 the decision to retain Ambassador Ross Wilson as chief of mission?

20 A I believe that, as was the case with each agency review team, the review
21 teams themselves had a chance to engage with the nominees. In some instances, most
22 of that engagement was about preparation for hearings.

23 Q Uh-huh.

24 A But once those nominees were confirmed and were able to make decisions,
25 they were there, available to give their recommendations.

1 And so the agency review teams had ongoing engagement with new agency
2 leadership. In some cases, they ended up, themselves, entering into the team of those
3 agency heads. In other cases, they were not in those roles but they were available to
4 brief them.

5 Q So can you speak to why Ambassador Wilson was retained then?

6 A In that particular instance, I wouldn't want to give you an exact answer on
7 that one case, because, you know, I don't want to mislead you.

8 But, as a general matter, where there were ambassadors who were career
9 ambassadors, who were on a live file which was fluid and active, I think there was a
10 general tendency not to have people leave and then end up having a gap for how long it
11 would take to then end up getting a newly confirmed ambassador.

12 So that may well have been the case in this instance, but I don't want to assert
13 that that was specifically so.

14 Q And there was a deputy chief of mission on the ground in Afghanistan at that
15 point, correct?

16 A I assume -- I believe so, but I don't recall offhand. It's been a while. It's
17 3 years ago.

18 Q To the best of your knowledge, was any consideration given to nominating a
19 permanent ambassador to Afghanistan prior to the military's withdrawal?

20 A I don't recall that. I was not part of that conversation, if it did take place.
21 I'm not saying it didn't, but I wasn't part of that conversation.

22 Q Were you privy to or involved in the decision to retain Ambassador Zalmay
23 Khalilzad as Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation?

24 A I was privy to it, yes.

25 Q And can you speak to why he was retained?

1 [REDACTED]: So I just want to be clear. Is this internal departmental
2 conversations, or conversations with you as a member of a Presidential transition team
3 involving the NSC and other non-State Department people?

4 Mr. Ahmed. So -- I don't want this to sound like, you know, splitting hairs, but --
5 [REDACTED]: No, I'm splitting the hairs, not you.

6 Mr. Ahmed. -- on the transition team, the process I oversaw was to identify the
7 decisions that would need to be taken by new leadership once in the job.

8 I'm absolutely aware that one of the issues that was flagged by the agency review
9 team as an early decision that would need to be made was how to handle the staffing of
10 the SRAR function and whether or not to retain Ambassador Khalilzad and, if so, for how
11 long, as was the case with other envoys and other key players who were involved in very
12 active files.

13 So the job of the review teams were to flag for the incoming team, what's the
14 decision you're going to need to make. We weren't necessarily involved subsequently,
15 as the transition agency review, on to how that decision would be made and whether that
16 incoming leadership, you know, would have conversations with the White House, to
17 which I may not have been a party to.

18 BY [REDACTED]:

19 Q Of course. But can you speak as to the, sort of, departmental discussions
20 that took place surrounding his retaining?

21 A So the departmental conversations that are taking place -- again, I don't
22 know if this is getting into privilege or not, but generally -- I'm going to broaden your
23 point beyond Ambassador Khalilzad.

24 [REDACTED]: So, I'm sorry, I have to ask you, factually, were you with the
25 Department at the time you're about to talk about?

1 Mr. Ahmed. I was.

2 [REDACTED] Okay. Sorry.

3 Mr. Ahmed. I was there -- yeah, that's why I --

4 [REDACTED]. Thank you for the question.

5 Mr. Ahmed. I was with the transition until the day I entered the Department.

6 It was the next day, right, from the 19th to the 20th of January, so --

7 BY [REDACTED]:

8 Q During your time with the Department, can you speak to the decision --

9 A Right.

10 Q Just for the record, just to clarify, can you please speak to the decision to
11 retain Ambassador Khalilzad as SRAR?

12 A Yeah. So, as the policy planning head, I was not making and part of
13 personnel decisions of that nature. But I can generally categorize that the factors that
14 went into those considerations were weighing the potential downside risks of having to
15 bring in someone totally new in a process that was live and ongoing versus whether or
16 not having someone new was necessary in order to have a complete break, you know.
17 And you have to just weigh those two considerations as a general matter.

18 Q Of course. Can you speak to the upsides of replacing him that were
19 discussed? I imagine it was a balancing act.

20 A Like I said, I was not in the conversation on whether or not to make a change
21 there, so I can't speak factually to what happened. That's why I can only keep the
22 general comment and assume that it's applicable, which is, you know, if you're going to
23 go a totally different direction, sometimes that's a reason to make a totally different
24 change.

25 Q Uh-huh.

1 A But, on the other hand, in an incredibly fluid situation which is ongoing and
2 where prior experience and knowledge is highly relevant, it would come at a cost if you
3 make a change.

4 Q Uh-huh. Thank you.

5 So I want to pivot again. I'd like to focus a bit more on the Doha Agreement,
6 which you addressed with my minority colleagues previously.

7 Did you believe the Taliban was meeting conditions of the Doha Agreement from
8 January 2021 onward?

9 A I don't believe that they were meeting the conditions of the Doha
10 Agreement prior to January 2021. And that, in turn, established a precedent in terms of
11 what they considered to constitute compliance or not.

12 Q Uh-huh.

13 A So the behavior that they had managed to essentially get away with
14 previously, I believe, was continuing.

15 Subsequent, I don't believe, whether it was post-January 2021 or prior to it, that
16 some of that behavior was consistent with the agreement.

17 Q And, as you noted earlier, it was in April 2021, though, that the President
18 announced the full military withdrawal from Afghanistan, correct?

19 A That is correct.

20 Q Do you believe the Taliban was living up to its commitments to cut ties with
21 terrorist groups from January 2021 onward?

22 A In its entirety? No. In some ways, yes; in some ways, no. And in the
23 case of the violence too, some ways, yes; some ways, no.

24 Q What was your assessment of the Taliban's commitment to and engagement
25 in negotiations with the Afghan Government?

1 A My assumption was, at the time, that they were unlikely to make a deal on
2 the formation of a government that was truly broad-based and representative of
3 Afghanistan.

4 Q Did you believe the Taliban to be a reliable and trustworthy partner?

5 A Generally, no. Where it's in their interest to make a deal and follow it, they
6 tend to follow it because it's in their interest.

7 My assessment usually with dealing with people in negotiations is, is it in their
8 interest to understand why it's in their interest? And, there, there might be a chance
9 they'll therefore follow through on it. But where something is in your interest but not in
10 the other person's interest, my assumption is they're unlikely to do it if they can get away
11 with it.

12 Q Did you believe the U.S. should adhere to the Doha Agreement?

13 A I think that, look, there were aspects of the Doha Agreement with which the
14 Taliban was complying. One substantial one was that they were not attacking and killing
15 U.S. troops. There were instances in which there were clashes that took place, but as a
16 general matter, one big part of the agreement was the safety of our people. And so,
17 therefore, to the extent that our compliance with it, to their mind, was help sustaining
18 that reality, we had an interest to do.

19 Q Were you aware that the Taliban conducted indirect fire attacks on U.S. and
20 coalition bases both before and after President Biden's April 2021 withdrawal
21 announcement?

22 A I don't dispute that at all.

23 As a -- and thank you for giving me the opportunity to clarify. I'm saying, as a
24 general matter, they were not attacking U.S. troops -- i.e., not with the intent of, like,
25 inflicting lots of casualties.

1 Were there, nonetheless, instances of them directing direct (ph) fire? I do not
2 dispute that at all. I just don't remember all the exact dates at this stage.

3 Q What did you assess the sustainability of the Afghan Government and
4 military to be without a U.S. military presence in Afghanistan?

5 A The likelihood that it could continue to sustain the fight against the Taliban
6 would go down -- would go down precipitously without U.S. troop support.

7 Q Did you communicate these assessments to the Department at any point?

8 A I was seeing those assessments already being communicated in different
9 forms. I don't think anyone really disputed the notion that the ability of the Afghan
10 Government to sustain the fight against the Taliban would go down subsequent to the
11 withdrawal of U.S. troops. The question really was, for how long could they sustain that
12 effort without us, even if their ability to do so was eroded?

13 And so I was aware that those conversations were live and were under debate and
14 there was intel that was generally -- and analysis and assessment that was the subject of
15 debate. So I could've shared it, but, I mean, I already was aware that what I would've
16 shared was being shared, so --

17 Q Uh-huh. So is it fair to characterize it as not a matter of if but a matter of
18 when? And the "when" being Kabul falling into the hands of the Taliban versus the
19 Afghan Government.

20 A I think there were certainly debates among people as to how you would
21 define the "if." For some, it was, on the matter of Kabul falling, it's not if but when.
22 Others might say the government could hold out in Kabul but much of the rest of the
23 country and the countryside would end up falling into the hands of the Taliban.

24 The "when" was certainly a subject of debate, and how long. For some, you
25 know, I think the prevailing view was several months -- the dominant view, but it wasn't

1 the exclusive view.

2 Q So, on April 14, 2021, as we mentioned, President Biden announced the
3 U.S.'s unconditional withdrawal from Afghanistan by September 11, 2021.

4 When did you first learn that that would be the President's course of action?

5 A I remember the decision being taken in April. The date -- oh. Well, the
6 withdrawal. Then the question was the extension of the date.

7 Q Uh-huh.

8 A I'm honestly not recalling exactly when I first learned of that.

9 Q How did you learn of it?

10 A Probably in a roundup of out-briefs of -- would've been discussed in a
11 principals meeting or a deputies meeting. Again, like I said, I would check in with
12 colleagues who were party to those discussions, and it was just generally trying to get a
13 sense of what are major decisions coming down the pike.

14 Q And what did you think of that decision?

15 A I wasn't surprised that the President took that decision. He'd been pretty
16 clear in various settings, including before becoming President, that it was something that
17 he was -- you know. I'll just leave it at that.

18 Q Following the President's decision of an unconditional military withdrawal,
19 what direction, if any, did S/P receive toward assisting in its implementation?

20 A As I said, there had been a general division of labor among those of who us
21 who were around. And so the division of labor was such that I -- you know, so we don't
22 all end up working on the same thing and we divide labor, there were others who were
23 working work on that, and I wasn't asked to directly be involved on that.

24 Q Are you aware of what a noncombatant evacuation operation, or a NEO, is?

25 A Yeah. I am.

1 Q Were there any discussions about conducting a NEO when you received the
2 dissent channel cable?

3 A Can we leave that one for the next -- for the classified setting?

4 Q To the extent you're able to discuss it in an unclassified manner, were there
5 discussions within the Department more broadly?

6 A There were very active ongoing discussions taking place on embassy security
7 and contingency planning for embassy security. The full range of what that entailed, I
8 was not in those discussions, so I don't want to mislead to say what precisely was being
9 discussed when. But, as a general matter, that was absolutely a subject of discussion at
10 that time.

11 BY [REDACTED]:

12 Q You had mentioned in your testimony earlier that you became more
13 involved in the Afghanistan issue once you received the dissent cable. Can you talk
14 about what your involvement was from that time period until you went to Doha?

15 A Yes.

16 Shortly after the cable came in and was responded to, policy planning staff,
17 together with other offices in the Department, multiple, engaged in a contingency
18 exercise on the political implications of the potential scenario of a Taliban takeover,
19 whenever that might occur, whether it was sooner or later, as to what are all the issues
20 that one would need to navigate legally, politically, diplomatically.

21 It was not on embassy security, because there was a separate conversation
22 ongoing with other people who do embassy security, and generally that's not the policy
23 planning shop's role.

24 BY [REDACTED]:

25 Q Can you speak to --

1 A And then -- I'm sorry -- and then there was the other diplomatic
2 engagements that I had mentioned earlier that I joined. One, the meeting in New York
3 with the Envoy and with the U.N. Envoy, Jean Arnault; and then there's the Doha period.

4 [REDACTED] When was that planning exercise on the Taliban that you talked
5 about?

6 Mr. Ahmed. End of July.

7 [REDACTED] . And --

8 Mr. Ahmed. I mean, it initiated at the end of July and it continued, although
9 then, of course, until overtaken by events.

10 [REDACTED] . Do you know why a NEO wasn't declared, say, in July?

11 Mr. Ahmed. I was not a part of those conversations, so I don't want to comment
12 on it.

13 BY [REDACTED] :

14 Q And I'm sorry for interrupting you now twice --

15 A But at the time -- but at the time, you know, the general matter, I'd say, is
16 that everyone was operating under the assumption that certain security of Kabul would
17 remain while U.S. troops were there until the end of August, you know. So at least that
18 was one factor.

19 But when the conversation of NEO first began, I was not part of that. I don't
20 remember exactly.

21 Q Can you speak to why the NEO was launched days after Kabul fell?

22 A As opposed to?

23 Q As opposed to prior to Kabul falling, if there had been these discussions and
24 reportings and intelligence assessments and considerations?

25 A So none of the intel assessments or the discussions that I am aware of

1 envisaged Kabul's fall prior to the withdrawal of U.S. troops. None of them envisaged
2 the President of Afghanistan fleeing. None of them envisaged the Afghan forces
3 essentially allowing the Taliban to walk in.

4 So the notion that embassy security would end up being dependent not on the
5 Afghan forces supported by U.S. troops but all of a sudden have Taliban in Kabul were not
6 part of the scenarios that anyone raised, of which I am aware.

7 Q And by allowing -- if you could please elaborate. Because there have been
8 reports that, you know, the Afghan military did not have the necessary air support, that
9 the contractors they had relied upon when the U.S. presence was still there, that they had
10 no access to that.

11 So can you speak more to this allowing them to just enter the city, just to get
12 some clarification on that point, what's meant by that?

13 A The assumption had been that, while there was certainly going to be
14 limited -- as was already the case and evident in the month prior -- that the Taliban were
15 making gains in different cities in the country, that they would not be able to take Kabul,
16 because Afghan forces, with the capacities that they had, would be able to secure Kabul,
17 and certainly while American military presence was still there.

18 So the notion that they would potentially lose territory outside of Kabul was
19 certainly a subject of debate or an understanding, but in Kabul itself, while American
20 troops were there, that was not a contention that was made by anyone, as far as I'm privy
21 to.

22 BY [REDACTED]:

23 Q I'm actually interested in this point too. You're referring to "while U.S.
24 troops were still there." Was there some sort of plan to get rid of the final X number of
25 hundred of U.S. troops that were guarding the embassy and the airport?

1 A I meant the troops that were -- while those that were meant to withdraw at
2 the 30th of August were still there and subsequent to that, the understanding being that
3 they would be able to hold Kabul itself.

4 Q How many U.S. troops were still supposed to withdraw between the time
5 period of August 15th and the end of August?

6 A I don't remember the exact number right now. I don't want to mislead you
7 by saying it. But it was still -- certainly, the assumption was not, while they were
8 present, that the Taliban would enter and that the Afghans would not contest it.

9 Q What impact did the full withdrawal of U.S. troops have on the Afghan
10 military's ability to continue fighting?

11 A Well, I think -- I think the fact of the announcement of the withdrawal and
12 the subsequent actual downsizing, which had commenced well before April, would
13 already have impacted their psyche and their morale. So I think that was continuing to
14 erode from the drawdown that preceded even before 2021, but as it proceeded further,
15 it only further eroded that morale, I would assume.

16 BY [REDACTED]:

17 Q You had noted earlier -- and please correct me if I'm misstating your
18 testimony in any way -- but that, when engaging with the Taliban, it was clear what their
19 intentions were, or, at the very least, one could imagine what their intentions were, and it
20 wasn't necessarily to allow the Afghan Government to continue as it had.

21 Do you think that played any role in any of this?

22 A Wait. I'm sorry. Can you repeat that?

23 Q Of course. You had testified earlier that, when you had engaged with the
24 Taliban, it was sort of clear or one could predict what their intentions were in terms of
25 power-sharing with the Afghan Government and sort of, you know, acting in their

1 self-interest, et cetera, how they would behave.

2 This is me just trying to paraphrase, so please correct me if I'm missing anything.

3 Do you think that played any role in what you're saying, the Afghan military not
4 allowing the Taliban to essentially come in and take the capital?

5 A I think that -- I think that there is a distinction between what the Afghan
6 military's view of what their capacity would be to hold the whole country or some of the
7 country or portions of the country versus Kabul itself.

8 I think that on Kabul itself, the notion of what the Taliban intention would be, you
9 could argue it both ways -- could equally only further incentivize them to know that
10 they've got to hold what they have already and fight even harder, recognizing what the
11 Taliban intention may be were they to take over.

12 I do think that President Ghani fleeing had to have been also a factor in affecting
13 their decision on whether or not to contest the Taliban's move on Kabul or not.

14 But, look, I did not have the benefit of all these conversations to give you, you
15 know, an authoritative view. I'm giving you, you know, a couple of years later, my
16 recollection of my thoughts at the time.

17 Another thought I had at the time -- what struck me was the fact that they,
18 themselves, the Taliban, were not prepared to be in Kabul when they were. What was
19 clear then in those discussions in Doha is that they were surprised that they were there
20 already and that they were not met with resistance by the Afghan forces. They were
21 not prepared to govern. And so it struck me at the time that this was a surprise to
22 them.

23 Q I'm going to pivot now to another topic. I'd like to introduce exhibit -- are
24 we on exhibit 7 now? -- into the record.

25

[Ahmed Exhibit No. 7

1 Was marked for identification.]

2 BY [REDACTED]

3 Q This is a letter by Chairman McCaul to Secretary Blinken dated January 12,
4 2023. So I'll give you a moment to take a look.

5 A Should I read the whole thing?

6 Q It's just -- I'll ask you questions as we go through.

7 So, just to summarize, in this letter, Chairman Michael McCaul requested a copy of
8 the dissent cable, with a deadline of January 26, 2023. The dissent cable was
9 subsequently identified to the Department as one of the committee's top three priority
10 items from this request and its top priority item overall.

11 I imagine, given the substance of the request, that S/P was involved, at least in
12 some respect. Yeah?

13 A Yes.

14 Q And can you speak to the Department's reaction to this request?

15 [REDACTED]: So this one is strictly the Department. You are asking a question
16 about how the Department prepared to respond to a congressional inquiry which we are
17 still responding to and which we accommodated on the dissent channel in particular.
18 And I am saying, this information is privileged information. You are not entitled -- this
19 investigation is not an investigation of how we respond to your investigation.

20 And so, A, you are -- he has not been part of how we respond to the investigation
21 as a generic matter, so he's not even a competent witness to this.

22 BY [REDACTED]:

23 Q Let me ask another question, which hopefully -- and to the extent you're
24 able to answer, and, if not, we can move on.

25 Can you speak to when you first found out about the chairman's request? Was it

1 through the letter or through public reporting? Or how did you come to learn that the
2 chairman was requesting the dissent cable?

3 A I think, if I remember correctly, it would've been in a morning meeting or
4 another kind of regular meeting where H may have reported out, you know, to the
5 Secretary or other senior officials that a request had been received.

6 Q Uh-huh.

7 A I think that's how I found out, but it may have been also mentioned in the
8 public. I can't tell you which one triggered me first.

9 Q Can you speak to whether the signatories or authors supported or objected
10 to sharing it?

11 A I did not have that conversation myself directly, but my deputy did.

12 Q Uh-huh.

13 A I would be reluctant to characterize a view for all of the signatories because I
14 don't know if they all had the same view.

15 Q Were there differing views?

16 A I don't know, but there may have been.

17 What I do know is that the anonymity for -- what was represented to me is that
18 the anonymity for some was extremely important.

19 Q So, on April 25, 2023, the Department provided the committee with
20 summaries of the dissent cable in the Department's response.

21 Again, I don't want to tread into the territory that [REDACTED] just helpfully pointed out,
22 but can you speak to which officials were primarily responsible for composing these
23 summaries?

24 [REDACTED] So -- I'm sorry. I'm objecting.

25 Again, this was -- so there's an overall general point that's going to come at the

1 classified session as well, which is, you are trying to investigate a subsisting
2 accommodation that was made and that remains in place, as far as I know.

3 If you wish to reopen that accommodation, the committee is free to do so, but not
4 through interviewing this witness or any other particular witness. That is between the
5 committee and the State Department.

6 And that accommodation was extensively negotiated, as you all know. So, like I
7 say, if you're going to reopen it, then I think the committee will need to readdress it to
8 the Department at large.

9 [REDACTED]. And that is certainly not our intention.

10 BY [REDACTED]:

11 Q So, again, to the extent that you could, we'd appreciate the answer. To the
12 extent you can't without treading into this territory, then we will move on to the next
13 question.

14 A I'm sorry. I lost the -- I lost the plot.

15 Q I was saying, to the extent that you would have been able to answer it, we'd
16 welcome a response, but to the extent you can't, we're happy to move forward --

17 A Okay.

18 Q -- with the next question.

19 A Okay. Thanks. Yes, if we can just move on.

20 Q So I'd like to introduce as -- I lost count again -- exhibit 8 into the record, an
21 article in the Foreign Service Journal.

22 [Ahmed Exhibit No. 8

23 Was marked for identification.]

24 BY [REDACTED]:

25 Q So this is an article in the Foreign Service Journal regarding the 2022 Awards

1 for Constructive Dissent.

2 And if you turn to page 3 -- 3 and 4 will be the relevant pages here -- in this article,
3 you'll see that two State Department officials, Elisabeth Zentos and Anton Cooper, are
4 publicly identified as authors of the cable by the American Foreign Service Association.

5 You'll see that the text of the article describes the substance of the dissent
6 channel cable, including the likelihood of a swift deterioration of the security situation in
7 Kabul.

8 What was the Department's participation in the award process, if any?

9 A I'm not aware. I certainly wasn't involved in the award participation
10 process. I can't answer that question. I don't know. Because this is an award by
11 AFSA, not by the Department.

12 Q Did Ms. Zentos and Mr. Cooper choose to be publicly identified in that
13 manner, are you aware?

14 A I would assume they did with AFSA, but I don't know that.

15 Q Did anyone at the Department voice objections to this?

16 A I don't know if anyone in the Department voiced an objection to it. I didn't
17 insofar as I presumed that they were comfortable with being identified.

18 Q To the best of your knowledge, had any other signatories from the dissent
19 cable publicly identified themselves?

20 A I don't know the answer to that. The answer is, possibly some, yes. But I
21 don't know how many, so I don't want to mislead by misspeaking.

22 Q Okay.

23 BY [REDACTED]:

24 Q You had mentioned, I believe, a military veteran that joined your S/P team.
25 Could you just say specifically, if you remember, when that was?

1 A It would be with the -- it would've been the summer of 2021, I believe.

2 Q Are you able to nail down the month, do you think?

3 A I mean, a lot of the rotations happen in August. In his particular place, he'd
4 left Kabul shortly before. I don't remember the exact month.

5 Q Gotcha.

6 And you had said at the time that part of why S/P wasn't focusing specifically on
7 Afghanistan and the withdrawal was because you were more broadly focused on things
8 like broader strategic planning or things that are cross-cutting and cross-regional issues.

9 Did you consider at any point that Afghanistan might fall under this, given the role
10 that Pakistan and the Af-Pak region played -- Iran, China, the obviously international
11 coalition and NATO force presence? Did you consider things like the impact that the
12 withdrawal would have on the region in terms of the potential for a Taliban takeover, the
13 impact that that might have on regional or international terrorism, what role that might
14 have on emboldening any of our potential adversaries, like Russia and China?

15 A Broader implications of the withdrawal, both in opportunities it could create,
16 vulnerabilities it would reduce, risks it could create, were a factor in thinking about the
17 region in our overall strategy more generally, including our counterterrorism strategy and
18 what the implications could be.

19 So there were aspects of the broader implications that we did definitely consider
20 or factor, as distinct from getting involved on the actual withdrawal itself.

21 BY [REDACTED]:

22 Q So I want to briefly touch upon your preparation for this interview.

23 How did you first learn of the committee's interest in conducting this transcribed
24 interview?

25 A I think it was -- I think I was given a heads-up by H and L when the request

1 was received. And I was told that it didn't involve me only, and so, therefore, the
2 Department would be having conversations with the committee as to how we would
3 proceed.

4 I think I was -- and then I was like, yeah, I'll go, and whenever you have an
5 understanding, I'm happy to go and talk to the team.

6 Q And we appreciate the Department's engaging with us on this.

7 A Uh-huh.

8 Q What was your reaction to the request?

9 A Well, first is, I haven't done this before, so my first question is, what is a
10 transcribed interview? So I asked for clarification as to what it was.

11 And then I said, you know, help me understand how you proceed, and I got a basic
12 gist, and I said, sure, let me know when I'm supposed to go.

13 I asked for a rough timeline and did I need to plan my travel around it --

14 Q Uh-huh.

15 A -- because I have a lot of travel that I need to do. And when asked, well,
16 when would be convenient, I said, well, I'd like to do it sooner rather than later because
17 I'd like to continue the travel I've got ongoing.

18 Q Uh-huh.

19 A And that was generally it.

20 Q And which State Department officials were involved in your preparation?

21 A Mainly [REDACTED] and [REDACTED]

22 Q Uh-huh.

23 A And [REDACTED].

24 Q Uh-huh.

25 A And [REDACTED] from H.

1 Essentially, again, a lot of it was helping to alleviate my ignorance about how the
2 process works and, you know, generally the way in which one proceeds. I did talk to my
3 deputy and chief of staff just to, you know, see if I needed, you know, any documents, but
4 then I was told that there'd be documents here as well, so I didn't bring any.

5 Q And this leads me to my next question. What kind of preparations did you
6 take for this interview?

7 A I reread the dissent cable and the summary --

8 Q Uh-huh.

9 A -- and the response and the summary. I looked at testimony that the
10 Secretary had given to the HFAC. I think that was it.

11 Q Thank you.

12 And I believe my colleague [REDACTED] actually just had one more followup question,
13 which I want to -- if you'll indulge us.

14 [REDACTED]. Apologies for --

15 Mr. Ahmed. Yeah. No, I would just say on the preparation, I mean, I only got
16 the topics that would be covered -- I had an assumption of what might be covered, but I
17 didn't get the list until yesterday. So there wasn't, like, a lot of time to do much other
18 prep.

19 BY [REDACTED]:

20 Q So you had mentioned in your discussion here with us that, after
21 August 2021, S/P was involved in sort of, like, an assessment on what the impact of the
22 change in Afghanistan was, the Taliban takeover, that sort of thing.

23 Am I summarizing that correctly?

24 A Yes, but I would just clarify it, as I might, that, in the context of us doing an
25 assessment on the strategic environment in general, those were factors that we took into

1 account on looking at the totality of how we were seeing the strategic environment and
2 the risks and opportunities it would pose for the advancement of our national security
3 priorities.

4 It wasn't as if we had one product that was specifically related to that one thing
5 alone, but it was integrated into a wider set of issues. Because it was also triangulated
6 with what did we think Russia was doing, what did we think China was doing, how were
7 their relationships emerging with each other and with Pakistan, and where did Iran fit in,
8 but, also, where were the European -- you know, so a lot of things were interconnected.
9 So I would just say that it was factored into the interconnections that we were looking at.

10 Q Sure.

11 Did you look into what impact -- speaking of Russia, what impact the situation in
12 Afghanistan had, perhaps, on Russia's move toward and then decision to invade Ukraine?

13 A We did not have a specific product that we produced at the time on the
14 implications of one on the other. So, you know, I could offer you conjecture, but I'm not
15 referring to a document or something, an analysis we produced at the time.

16 BY [REDACTED]:

17 Q Can you speak to whether you consider the ultimate withdrawal a success, a
18 failure, or neither?

19 A Look, I think that there are multiple ways to answer the question.

20 Q Uh-huh.

21 A One is, you're looking at ending a 20-year involvement, and I don't know if
22 there's any way you can end a 20-year involvement without there being upheaval of one
23 kind or another and it being difficult.

24 And so, on one level, it is, is the withdrawal ultimately freeing up the United States
25 to focus on other priorities and to dedicate its resources as was necessary and reducing

1 vulnerabilities, recognizing, of course, that it also presents challenges, because you've got
2 a platform and a presence that had its purpose and in support to a government as well.
3 And I think it's a matter of time telling, over time and looking at the totality of things, how
4 that ultimately -- what the balance sheet looks like.

5 Q Uh-huh.

6 A From a strategic point of view, I understand the decision and the reasons
7 why the strategic benefits outweigh the risks, but they're absolutely risks,
8 unquestionably. In most of these decisions, there are.

9 In the implementation of the withdrawal, there are clearly issues that arose that
10 you can't possibly deny we need to learn from for the future. The fact that we lost 13
11 Americans at the airport was tragic. You know, I'm not going to use the word "success"
12 when something like that happens. You know, it was tragic. And there were scores of
13 Afghans who were killed at the airport too.

14 So, you know, I think that I would -- though, at the same time, you know, I think
15 it's -- a colleague in the Department -- I won't name him in case he wants to be
16 named -- said, you know, we all keep two numbers in mind in the Department. You
17 know, one is the number of people that the Department helped to get out of Afghanistan
18 in very trying circumstances, incredibly challenging circumstances. And the courage and
19 the bravery and the ingenuity that people employed to get those people out, it's hard to
20 not use the word "success" for what they did. But there's another number people keep
21 in mind, and that's the number of people that weren't able to get out and the number of
22 people whose situation, it's hard to deny, has worsened. And you can't use the word
23 "success" for that.

24 [REDACTED]. Uh-huh. Thank you for that.

25 We appreciate you answering our questions today. We have a lot more we

1 could ask, clearly, and I know we still have the classified segment. We understand we're
2 getting later into the day. Do you have any closing remarks?

3 [REDACTED] I think you guys are over time.

4 [REDACTED]. We can come back to the closing remarks after the minority
5 finishes their round. I want to give you an opportunity to address that.

6 Mr. Ahmed. Yeah. I'll stop there.

7 [REDACTED]. Okay. Well, on behalf of Chairman McCaul, thank you so much
8 for appearing here today. I just want to note that this investigation is incredibly
9 important to us, and the time we spent is intentional and deliberate. And thank you
10 again.

11 Mr. Ahmed. Thank you.

12 [Recess.]

1 [3:36 p.m.]

2 [REDACTED]. Okay. Are we ready to go back on to the record?

3 So I don't anticipate using a full round of time, and I will endeavor to be as quick
4 as possible. Because I agree, it's been a long day, and we know that the day is not yet
5 done in terms of your time with us. So I'll move as quickly as I can. Just a few cats and
6 dogs issues to follow up on.

7 BY [REDACTED]

8 Q First of all, I apologize, I failed to ask you this clearly in our last round. We
9 spent a lot of time discussing the rules around the dissent channel and how the channel is
10 used and how cables that are moved through that channel are handled.

11 With respect to the July 13, 2021, dissent cable on Afghanistan, was the handling
12 of that cable generally comporting with the rules and the practices on how you handle
13 most -- all dissent cables?

14 A As far as I recall, yes.

15 Q So you're not aware of any deviations or breaches of the FAM process with
16 respect to that particular cable?

17 A Not that I'm aware of. Not that I recall.

18 Q And, to be clear, your testimony earlier was that maybe one deviation was
19 that you responded sooner than the stipulated timeframe in the FAM.

20 A Yes. And the few I've already spoken to about how the emphasis on the
21 distribution and the process more generally is with the Secretary, the two deputies, and
22 the Under Secretary.

23 Q Okay.

24 Moving to another topic, our majority colleagues asked you quite a few questions
25 about Ambassador Wilson, so I just wanted to make sure some things were clear.

1 Just for our understanding and clarity, Ambassador Wilson, are you aware when
2 he became charge in Kabul?

3 A I don't recall. And I realize I probably misspoke in raising that. So I don't
4 remember the date when he became charge.

5 Q But, to your knowledge, was he charge in Kabul at the time that the Biden
6 administration took office?

7 A I believe so, but I may be misremembering. I don't know.

8 Q Okay. We'll move on.

9 I believe you were asked, with respect to the dissent cable contents, the degree to
10 which it dealt with Ambassador Wilson. I recognize you're not going to speak to
11 contents, at any rate, of a classified cable in this setting, but let me just ask you more
12 broadly: Is the dissent channel an acceptable channel under the Department's FAM for
13 personnel-related complaints?

14 A Generally, we refer matters like personnel to other offices where
15 appropriate when it comes in. One of the things that we look at is the channel they use
16 as opposed to if it's a substantive foreign policy matter.

17 Q Okay. So if somebody had concerns about someone in their management
18 chain, the dissent channel is not the mechanism by which they would raise those
19 concerns.

20 A No. But if someone raised it in that channel to me and asked me to refer
21 them to someone else, I would.

22 Q Okay.

23 And with respect to the questions you were asked about decisions the new
24 administration made, the Biden administration made, to retain, I think, Ambassador
25 Wilson and Ambassador Khalilzad in their respective roles, just, again, to level set for us

1 so we're clear, is it unusual that individuals would be retained in the near term in
2 significant roles for continuity's sake when a new administration comes in?

3 A It's not unusual.

4 Q Okay.

5 A At least in the cases that I've been associated with.

6 Q And that includes two prior transitions?

7 A Two prior transitions.

8 Q All right.

9 I just want to clarify and make sure we understand your earlier testimony. You
10 had testified previously that you were aware of draw-downs, troop draw-downs, that had
11 been directed by President Trump prior to January 20, 2021, correct?

12 A Correct.

13 Q And you were aware of multiple draw-downs, correct?

14 A Correct.

15 Q And you testified previously that your understanding was that these
16 draw-downs occurred regardless of a lack of full compliance by the Taliban with the terms
17 of the Doha deal?

18 A Correct.

19 Q But I believe you also testified that one area where the Taliban had been
20 compliant was with respect to ceasing attacks -- or, reducing its violence against
21 Americans?

22 A Yes, not fully, but to a large degree.

23 Q Okay. And I believe you testified previously that these successive troop
24 draw-downs starting under the Trump administration had eroded the Taliban's incentive
25 to comply with the Doha deal more broadly?

1 A I believe that those were among the factors that, yes, contributed to that.

2 Q Okay.

3 And I believe you testified in response to majority questioning that, obviously, you
4 were aware of President Biden's decision in April of 2021 to continue toward a full
5 withdrawal of U.S. troops --

6 A Yes.

7 Q -- in that year, correct?

8 And, to your knowledge, at that time, had Taliban attacks against Americans,
9 which had been reduced, did they -- did that trend reverse? Had attacks against
10 Americans increased at that time?

11 A Not that I recall, although I don't rule out, you know, different incidents.

12 Q And based on your knowledge and experience of the Taliban and the
13 contours of this country, did you believe that if there were a reversal of the ongoing
14 withdrawal that had started under President Trump that President Biden affirmed he
15 would complete, that if there were a reversal in that withdrawal, it could've resulted in a
16 resumption of Taliban attacks against Americans in the country?

17 A Yes.

18 Q And so to reverse the withdrawal that had begun under President Trump
19 would've resulted in potentially --

20 A That potential --

21 Q -- harm?

22 A -- was definitely there.

23 Q Okay.

24 All right. You got a lot of questions about a NEO. And I think, specifically, you
25 were asked why a NEO hadn't started in July.

1 But am I correct that you testified earlier that you were aware that on July 14th
2 Operation Allies Refuge began?

3 A Yes.

4 Q And was the purpose of Operation Allies Refuge to evacuate individuals,
5 American citizens and SIV holders, from Afghanistan?

6 A Yes.

7 Q And, to your knowledge, did flights to that effect occur under the rubric of
8 Operation Allies Refuge?

9 A Yes, they did, not on the 14th, but subsequently.

10 Q Okay.

11 And let me pivot to something you mentioned about the significance of Afghan
12 President Ghani's sudden departure from Kabul.

13 Were you aware that the Ghani government was concerned about the optics and
14 impact of U.S. withdrawal on its ability to sustain its hold on power?

15 A Yes.

16 Q And how were you aware of that?

17 A It may have been some combination of public statements by the President
18 himself, as well as standard diplomatic reporting as well, as well as intel.

19 Q So would a hypothetical NEO in July have potentially piqued those concerns
20 that President Ghani had reportedly alluded to with U.S. interlocutors, that the optics of a
21 precipitous withdrawal or a U.S. abandonment of the country would make his position
22 less stable?

23 A That's an absolutely reasonable supposition.

24 Q And I believe you testified earlier that Ghani's departure was sudden.

25 A That's --

1 Q Is that accurate?

2 A That is accurate.

3 Q Was it unexpected by most observers --

4 A Yes.

5 Q -- at that time?

6 A Yes.

7 Q And what impact do you think Ghani's sudden departure had on the morale
8 of Afghan troops and Afghan Government officials?

9 A It must've had quite a significant impact on their willingness and ability to
10 contest the Taliban, resulting in moving on to Kabul.

11 Q In your estimation, was the impact of Ghani's sudden departure on the
12 morale of remaining Afghan Government officials and Afghan troops more significant
13 than other developments that had occurred in recent months, including the continuation,
14 down to nearly zero, of U.S. troops withdrawing from the country?

15 A It was a very significant factor. I don't know if I would ascribe percentages
16 to the different factors. I would just simply say it was significant.

17 Q Fair enough.

18 A As I think a number of them have since, themselves, said publicly.

19 Q And was it your understanding -- or, has it become your understanding that
20 the Taliban, themselves, were surprised by the precipitous departure of Afghan President
21 Ghani?

22 A Yes.

23 Q Okay.

24 Anything else on that?

25 BY [REDACTED]:

1 Q Was the Taliban, to your understanding, also surprised by the precipitous fall
2 of the Afghan Government and the speed in which they were able to take control?

3 A Yes.

4 Q And how would you characterize the impact of President Ghani's departure
5 on, let's say, the Afghan Security Forces' ability to protect the airport?

6 A The airport, the city -- that, all together, it would've been significant.

7 Q So the airport essentially became vulnerable and the city fell because Ghani
8 left?

9 A That had to be a significant factor.

10 Q Okay.

11 BY [REDACTED]

12 Q Okay. Just a couple more items here.

13 Recognizing the Department's earlier interjection that we're not here to relitigate
14 an ongoing accommodations process with the chairman, I do just want to ask, you know,
15 your general knowledge. Are you aware that the dissent channel cable on Afghanistan
16 was ultimately made available for Members of Congress to view?

17 A I am aware.

18 Q Particular Members of Congress, members of this committee?

19 A Yes.

20 Q And do you have any awareness of whether Members of Congress who sit
21 on this committee have viewed it?

22 A I have awareness that members of the committee have viewed it. How
23 many exactly, I don't know offhand.

24 Q And do you know the specific members who viewed it, or no?

25 A I wouldn't hazard a comment. I think I was privy to that information, but I

1 don't want to misremember.

2 Q Fair enough.

3 And, again, just asking for your awareness here, not relitigating an
4 accommodations process, but are you aware of the classified summary the Department
5 furnished to the committee as part of an accommodation of Chairman McCaul's
6 subpoena for the dissent cable?

7 A I am aware of it.

8 Q And, to your knowledge -- or, are you aware of the contents of that classified
9 summary, not just that it exists?

10 A I am.

11 Q And, in your estimation, is the classified summary accurate in its
12 summarizing of the cable?

13 [REDACTED] So this needs to go into the next session, because you're --

14 [REDACTED]. I'm not asking about the substance of the classified summary, and I
15 wouldn't, because it's classified.

16 I'm simply -- you've testified that you're aware of it. You've testified that you're
17 aware of the contents. And we're about to move downstairs and discuss it in a classified
18 setting --

19 [REDACTED]. His view of the accuracy is a subsidy statement as to the content of
20 each. And so I don't have any problem with you asking the question, but I do think it
21 should be in a classified setting. Because there's a conclusion that can be drawn from
22 comparing two different things, both of which are classified.

23 [REDACTED]. And will never be discussed on record as a result. I take your point.

24 [REDACTED]. No, no, they will be discussed on record.

25 [REDACTED] Not on unclassified record. I mean here.

1 [REDACTED]: Right. That's why they're classified.

2 [REDACTED]: Exactly.

3 BY [REDACTED]:

4 Q I'm not going to belabor this. I'm simply trying to infer, you know, the
5 confidence with which members can attest to that classified summary, without going into
6 contents of what it actually says. And if you are prepared to answer that in an unclass
7 way in an unclass setting, please do. Otherwise, we'll move down stairs and continue.

8 A I'm prepared to say, a best-faith effort was made in order to ensure that the
9 summary was an accurate reflection of the underlying document, recognizing that it was
10 a summary and it wasn't a reproduction in full of the whole document.

11 Q Okay. Thank you. That's all I've got.

12 Let me also thank you on behalf of Ranking Member Meeks for being here. We
13 appreciate your time, and --

14 A Thank you.

15 Q -- we look forward to continuing the conversation downstairs.

16 A May I answer one question that was asked to me before, about, like, do I
17 have any one last thing to add?

18 Q I'm happy -- if there's any of your prior testimony that you want to clarify,
19 I'm happy to have you do that.

20 A Just one thing to clarify --

21 Q Please.

22 A -- that I have, over the course of these hours, spoken to certain issues where
23 others of my colleagues are more authoritative to speak on them.

24 So, for example, negotiations with the Taliban and what took place and who.
25 You know, Tom West, Ambassador Khalilzad who were much more involved in those, are

1 more privy to -- you know, who can speak more authoritatively as to what was happening
2 in Kabul, the people who were in Kabul, whether it was Ambassador Wilson, people who
3 were at the airport.

4 So I just want to make clear that I'm not trying to represent myself as the
5 authoritative voice on a number of cases where I wasn't the primary interlocutor. I may
6 have been privy for parts, and it was only, you know, portions. So I just don't want to
7 overstate, you know, what I know that some other colleagues would be able to speak to
8 authoritatively more so.

9 Q Thank you. We appreciate that clarification. And we appreciate your
10 engagement and your willingness to answer questions today.

11 And, with that, the minority is finished.

12 A Thank you.

13 [REDACTED]. Do you want to go off the record, or do you have anything more?

14 [REDACTED]. No. That was everything. Thank you.

15 [REDACTED]. We can go off the record.

16 [Whereupon, at 3:52 p.m., the interview was concluded.]

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Certificate of Deponent/Interviewee

I have read the foregoing 178 pages, which contain the correct transcript of the answers made by me to the questions therein recorded.



Witness Name

3/5/24

Date

Subject to submitted errata
attached hereto.

Errata Sheet for the Transcribed Interview of Salman Ahmed dated 10/12/2023

1) majority errata, (2) minority errata, (3) State/agency counsel, (4) private counsel (as applicable) and witness errata

Page	Line	Change	Reason
2	7	Change "Counsel" to "Counsel and Chief Investigator"	
2	8	Change "Staff" to "Investigator"	
2	9	Change "Staff Director" to "Senior Investigator"	
7	14-15	Replace "including [inaudible] government" with "including outside government"	
10	1	Change "is tended" to "has tended"	
19	13-14	Change "a day one" to "day one"	
27	12	Change "were representing " to " were represented"	
30	5-6	Change "where is it free to apply abilities, where has it create vulnerabilities" to "where is it creating opportunities free to apply abilities, and where has it created vulnerabilities."	
32	15	Change "Ambassador Khalilzad than his team" to "Ambassador Khalilzad and his team"	
40	2	Change first "in" to "an"	
41	18	Change "Bersjka" to "Brcko"	
54	17	Change "and" to "an"	
59	2	Change "National Security Agency" to "national security agencies"	
67	18	Change "people" to "Manual"	
70	21	Change "can" to "can't"	
83	5-6	"going to the envoy to the envoy" "likely should be changed to "going to the envoy, to the envoy"	
105	21	Change "and new" to "annuitant"	
114	23	Change "the" to "those"	
121	1	Change "entrained" to "in train"	
122	9	Strike "a"	
128	3	Change "were" to "weren't"	