

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

**ROOM SD-G50
DIRKSEN SENATE OFFICE BUILDING
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To receive testimony on the situation in Afghanistan

(As Prepared for Delivery)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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