

**Opening Statement of Senator John McCain
Chairman, Senate Armed Services Committee**

**Room SH-216
Hart Senate Office Building
9:30 am, Wednesday, February 11, 2015**

To receive testimony on Afghanistan.

The Committee meets today to receive testimony on Afghanistan and U.S. efforts to sustain the gains that have been made over the past 13 years. I want to thank each of our witnesses for appearing before us today:

- Ambassador James Cunningham, who was the U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan until he retired from the Foreign Service last December;
- Ambassador Ryan Crocker, former United States Ambassador to Afghanistan, and Iraq, and many other countries;
- Admiral Eric Olson, former Commander of U.S. Special Operations Command; and
- Mr. Michael Leiter, former Director of the National Counterterrorism Center.

All of our witnesses are national security professionals who have served loyally and with the highest distinction in both Democratic and Republican administrations, including the current administration. All of them also have years of experience working on, and often serving in, Afghanistan.

More than 2,200 Americans have given their lives in Afghanistan and thousands more have been wounded. And the progress they have enabled is extraordinary:

- The number of Afghan children in school has increased ten-fold since 2001—from less than 1 million to almost 10 million today. Forty percent of these students are girls, and 40 percent of Afghan teachers today are women.
- Life expectancy has increased by over 20 years in less than a generation – an achievement unheard of in modern history.
- Less than 10 percent of the Afghan population supports the Taliban, while over 70 percent express confidence in the Afghan military.

These gains, and others, are significant. But as General Mattis testified last month, “the gains achieved at great cost against our enemy in Afghanistan are reversible.”

Afghan National Security Forces are now leading the fight and responsible for safeguarding their country. They have made real progress as a fighting force. The Afghan Army and Police maintained their professionalism during the Presidential runoff last summer, upholding security and allowing the democratic process to play out without armed intervention. And while the casualty rates of our Afghan partners in their fight against the Taliban are high, there is no doubt—none whatsoever—about the Afghan willingness to fight, and die, for their country.

But like the Iraqi Security Forces at the end of 2011, the Afghan National Security Forces are still developing some key enabling capabilities. The shortfalls sound eerily familiar – intelligence, logistics, air lift, close air support, special forces, and institutional development. Our commanders on the ground in Afghanistan are developing plans to address these shortfalls, but they need the time, resources, and authorities to help our Afghan partners to develop these nascent capabilities.

As I've said before, wars do not end just because politicians say so. Indeed, in Afghanistan, we see an initial emergence of ISIS as well as the residual capabilities of Al Qaeda wrapped in the support network of the Taliban insurgency.

The world walked away from Afghanistan once, and it descended into chaotic violence that became the platform for the worst terrorist attack in history against our homeland. The threats are real, and the stakes are high. We cannot let Afghanistan become a sanctuary for Al Qaeda or ISIS. Failure in this manner would destabilize the region, especially by undermining the security of a nuclear-armed Pakistan. Worse still, failure would condemn millions of Afghans, especially women and girls, to live again under the tyranny of violent radicals.

We cannot turn the clock back in Iraq, but we can, and we must, apply the tragic lessons that we learned in Iraq to Afghanistan. To preserve the progress enabled by our troops and the Afghan people, President Obama must replace his plan for unconditional withdrawal from Afghanistan with a conditions-based drawdown and a clear commitment to maintain a limited residual force. If the President repeats his mistakes from Iraq, we can expect a similar disaster in Afghanistan: growing instability, terrorist safe havens, horrific human rights abuses, the rapid dissolution of the hard-won gains that our men and women in uniform purchased at such high cost, and ultimately, direct threats to the United States.

I want to thank the witnesses again for testifying today. I look forward to hearing the views they have developed based on their years of experience in the region.