

Testimony of Jarrett Blanc
Principal Deputy Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan
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Government Oversight and Reform
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Chairman Chaffetz, Ranking Member Cummings, Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss the future of Mission Afghanistan with my colleagues Lydia Muniz of Overseas Buildings Operations and Greg Starr of Diplomatic Security.

Please allow me to begin once again by thanking the members of the Committee for your continued support for our mission. The American people have been generous, steadfast, and brave in supporting Afghanistan. I would particularly like to honor again the dedication of thousands of American military personnel, diplomats, and assistance professionals who have served – and continue to serve – in Afghanistan.

We began our mission in Afghanistan in late 2001 to ensure that that country would never again be used by al Qaida and other extremists as a haven from which to launch attacks against U.S. territory, citizens, or interests overseas. History has taught us the terrible consequences of inattention and disregard, and we must not repeat our past mistakes. Since 2001, our goal has been to foster the development of an Afghanistan that is sovereign, unified, democratic and increasingly self-sufficient, both economically and militarily – in short, the development of Afghanistan as a capable partner in our efforts to combat al Qaida and other extremists who threaten the United States and our allies. We cannot achieve this without smart diplomacy and, by necessity, the presence in Afghanistan of U.S. diplomats and development professionals.

Afghanistan is undeniably a dangerous place for U.S. diplomats, and we understand the risks associated with our working there. When we ask our people – our friends and colleagues – to go into harm's way, we do so because their work is vital to our national security, and we are all of us obligated to provide them with the resources they need to do their jobs safely and well. Understanding this, the

Department of State, with support from the Congress, has made significant investments to make Embassy Kabul the safest, most effective platform possible to carry out our goals, and we will continue to make improvements to adapt to a variable political, security, and planning environment. Ongoing construction and security upgrades – based on our best estimate of longer-term political and security challenges – will create an embassy compound that is designed to minimize threats and sustain U.S. diplomacy. Before the end of 2017, we expect to complete construction on several projects that will provide new, hardened office space and living quarters to accommodate permanent staff. In keeping with President Obama’s plan for a phased drawdown of U.S. military forces and a normalization of the diplomatic footprint to an Embassy-based presence, we are executing an options-based contract for life-support services that will reduce our dependence on Department of Defense support and increase our flexibility and self-sufficiency. We are bringing satellite locations that house and support the Kabul Embassy Security Force (KESF) closer to the main compound, installing advanced early-warning technologies, and enlarging facilities for our threat prevention and response teams. We continue to work with our Afghan partners to assess emerging threats and develop effective prevention strategies.

Of course, none of these measures is perfect. While we constantly examine our security methods to adapt to an evolving threat environment, I want to be clear that no amount of setback or security programming will ever entirely eliminate the risk our personnel face while serving in Afghanistan. We will continue to scrutinize the environment in Afghanistan and our security footing to seize opportunities to improve security when possible. We have demonstrated an ability to be flexible as diplomats – surging our civilian staff to support the military footprint, and now drawing down to a smaller and more sustainable level, including by closing our presences outside of Kabul. To be effective, the business of diplomacy must be conducted in person. The men and women of Mission Afghanistan engage closely and continuously with Afghan institutions and actors at all levels. The reporting they provide is vital to informing an extensive interagency process that determines long-term U.S. strategy. They build relationships with Afghanistan’s current and future leaders, making certain that U.S. policymakers remain well-informed and that our positions are heard. They oversee one of the United States’ largest assistance relationships, safeguarding

billions of taxpayer dollars. This work is critical to our efforts to fight al-Qaida, assist the Afghan Government against the Afghan insurgency, and bolster the legitimacy and durability of the Afghan state.

Since the attacks on September 11, 2001, we have made significant progress in degrading al Qaida's operational capacity in Afghanistan and Pakistan. U.S. diplomacy has helped the Afghan government build a national army, a police force, and professional institutions to provide improved security, education, and opportunity for millions of Afghans. We have seen the country make great strides in expanding its democratic institutions, culminating recently in the first democratic transition of power in Afghanistan's history. But many challenges remain. Democratic institutions must be further strengthened so that the fledgling government can continue to gain legitimacy. A once booming economy has slowed and must be reinvigorated through domestic innovation and international investment. And Afghanistan's ability to provide a self-sufficient security apparatus must be bolstered in order to face persistent threats and remain a capable partner in counterterrorism operations and a responsible regional actor. Fostering Afghanistan's development is the only sustainable way to address U.S. security concerns in the region, and addressing these remaining challenges will require continuing assistance and intensive day-to-day diplomatic engagement. We will continue to find ways to address the real risks our team in Afghanistan faces while still performing this critical engagement.

Jarrett Blanc is Deputy Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan. He has served in this role and as Senior Advisor to the Special Representative since 2009.

Prior to joining the State Department, Blanc was the Senior Policy Analyst for Multilateral Affairs at the Open Society Institute. He has worked for the U.N. and others advising senior decision-makers on conflict termination and political transitions. He managed the first elections in Iraq and other complex infrastructure and governance operations in conflict and post-conflict areas such as Afghanistan, Kosovo, the Palestinian Authority, Lebanon, and Nepal.

Blanc has been a Council on Foreign Relations International Affairs Fellow, a Visiting Scholar at the U.S. Institute of Peace, and an adjunct professor at George Washington University. He has published a number of articles and book chapters and has lectured at West Point, Harvard, Princeton, and the Scuola Superiore Sant'Anna. Blanc holds an A.B. from Harvard University and an M.S. in Environmental Science and Policy from Johns Hopkins University.