

House Foreign Affairs Committee: Investigation of the U.S. Withdrawal from Afghanistan
Summary Prepared by Democratic Committee Staff of Key Transcript Excerpts

Transcribed Interview of Zalmay Khalilzad

Conducted on Wednesday, November 8th, 2023.

In September 2018, after President Trump became “disillusioned” with his South Asia Strategy, he appointed Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad as Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation (SRAR) and tasked him with facilitating negotiations between the Afghan government and Taliban regarding a full U.S. military withdrawal from Afghanistan.

Page 12, line 15

Q: [. . .] And when did you assume the position of SRAR?

A: I think it was at the end of September.

Q: Of 2018?

A: Yes.

Page 15, line 8

Q: Ambassador, were you given any instruction by either Secretary Pompeo or, more broadly, the Trump administration upon assumption of the position?

A: Absolutely. That’s my approach, too, to know what it is. I consider myself a kind of soldier-diplomat, which is, “Okay, what is my mission? Which hell do you want me to diplomatically occupy for you?” as I worked with the military in Afghanistan and Iraq. And it was a clear direction given to me. Yes.

Q: What was that direction?

A: That the President would like to withdraw the forces that we have in Afghanistan. That he did not believe that -- I shouldn’t talk about the -- but I was told by the Secretary. I’m not allowed to quote the President, I understand. But that he had, earlier in his tenure, had authorized a surge and had declared a South Asia strategy, and that subsequently he had gotten disillusioned with that, and that the reason they wanted me to take the job is that he wanted a safe withdrawal of our forces, because Afghanistan withdrawal, historically, has been very difficult.

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A: [. . .] But the President had wanted to withdraw and, at the same time, of course, we wanted to make sure that Afghanistan doesn’t become a terrorist haven that will threaten

the United States again. And we wanted to get assurances from both the government and the Talibs that that would not happen. And, three, that there would be an Afghan-Afghan negotiation, because the judgment was neither side can win the war in Afghanistan. The two Afghan sides, the Talibs and the government, both of them have -- I am adding from subsequent discussions, but those were the three objectives: to give Afghans a chance to come to a settlement internally, but the American objective, narrowly defined for America, was to have a safe withdrawal of our forces from Afghanistan and terrorism commitment.

As SRAR, Ambassador Khalilzad's principal role throughout the noncombatant evacuation operation (NEO) related to spearheading negotiations with the Taliban and informing Washington of the negotiations.

Page 24, line 22

Q: Ambassador, what was your role in the August 2021 evacuation from Afghanistan?

A: Well, I would say, principally, it was to get the Talibs to do what we needed, whether it was on a security issue of our people at the airport, whether it was about Americans or other people of interest that we had to be allowed to come into the airport, the security of the airport, the steps that we required of them, the negotiations or discussions on the Taliban and declaring authoritatively that they would allow Afghans going forward who had passports and a visa from a country that wanted them to go, that they recognized the right of Afghan citizens to leave Afghanistan. And, you know, dealing with a lot of individual requests of Americans. I was very surprised how intertwined our societies had become. That came as a surprise to me, that I would get calls from all kinds of individuals, organizations, groups, saying, we have people in this place, people in that place; you know, engaging with Qataris, who were an important player in terms of the transportation and getting the ambassador in Kabul to arrange to go by checkpoints. So it was a very hectic period and lots of meetings with Washington, although I wasn't there. It was a busy period.

Page 33, line 20

A: Because I was directed as the situation changed on the ground, working on the other elements of the negotiations to get the government together based on an agreement between the Talibs and the government, principally, and then the regional and international engagement that we thought were necessary and helpful to achieving that goal.

Ambassador Khalilzad testified that the military withdrawal from Afghanistan was initiated in August 2018 and that he was tasked with the implementation of the withdrawal.

Page 51, line 11

Q: Okay. So just to be clear for the record --

A: Yes.

Q: -- is it fair to say that the decision to withdraw was firm and made clear to you when you started--

A: Yes.

Q: -- in 2018--

A: Yes, that was clear.

Q: -- and you were brought on to implement--

A: Exactly.

Q: -- that plan?

A: Exactly.

Q: Okay.

A: It was clear, not only in private settings, in the public statements that probably -- are quite a lot of them available outside by management of -- not say the President, but by management as you say, yes.

Q: And which month was this in 2018? Do you recall?

A: When I was engaged?

Q: Uh-huh.

A: In the summer, August, I think, is where it became serious, and I started at the end of September.

Ambassador Khalilzad explained that Afghan Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) policy was not included in his SRAR mandate under the Trump Administration.

Page 53, line 2

Q: Great. So I think it's been made clear that the directive was to withdraw.

A: Right.

Q: Is that correct?

A: That's correct.

Q: Did that directive include any engagement on Afghan SIV policy?

A: No, no. We did not -- at the beginning, this issue was not either part of my mandate or raised with me.

As SRAR, Ambassador Khalilzad's mandate was narrowly focused on obtaining an agreement for a safe withdrawal of U.S. forces and facilitating discussions between the Taliban and the Afghan government to ultimately achieve a ceasefire.

Page 53, line 24

Q: Would you agree with a statement that your role was narrowly focused on securing an Afghan peace deal, not the day to day of U.S. policy towards Afghanistan?

A: And that's correct, if I understand that. My role was, to repeat, to negotiate an agreement for safe withdrawal of U.S. Forces as well as commitment by the Afghan Government, the Talibs on terrorism, and facilitate Afghans negotiating about the future of their country, and to get ultimately a ceasefire.

Under the Trump Administration, Ambassador Khalilzad was under extreme pressure to complete the military withdrawal before the end of Trump's presidential term, regardless of a negotiated settlement among Afghans.

Page 56, line 10

A: -- very clearly that this withdrawal should take place. Sometimes it was the -- I had the impression that it should take place within a year almost or even sooner than that. There was episodic sense of crisis that why this hasn't happened, why the withdrawal is not being completed, why 14 months, why -- why not sooner, that sort of -- but there was no discussion of the tenure. But I knew that, you know, the President was going to be President until the end of his term, which was -- I knew that, that we had that timeframe to -- for a decision to be made. But I'm sure you'll ask about the withdrawal issues because there was a --

Q: So, just to clarify your testimony, even though you weren't given a clear end date of your tenure when you began in 2018 --

A: Right.

Q: -- is it fair to say you were under time pressure

A: Yeah --

Q: -- as you --

A: -- for delivering an agreement and a withdrawal.

Q: And you understood that a withdrawal would essentially need to or was intended to occur during President Trump's term?

A: That would've been preferred from the management point of view [. . .]

Page 57, line 9

Q: And, at that time, the President that you're referencing or the White House that you're referencing to is President Trump?

A: Right.

Q: Okay. And what informed your opinion that there was moments of crisis where you only had a year to get this done?

A: Well, I mean, this would come out of -- in meetings. We had NSCs. We had senior level meetings, and the President was very -- the management was very determined on withdrawal, whether it happened as part of an agreement or it happened without an agreement, that withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan was clear, loud and clear. And the pessimism about the prospect for success and negative assessment of how we're going there militarily, an appreciation or a belief that the costs were too high, that the opportunity cost of what we were doing was too high, that those resources could be used to deal with other challenges that were now more important and more urgent. So those impressions, those attitudes, those preferences was very clearly and, as I said before, loudly expressed. Yes.

Ambassador Khalilzad asserted that the Biden Administration sought to engage with the Afghan government to support them, but ultimately, no one anticipated the Ghani government would fall as quickly as it did.

Page 151, line 4

Q: In full transparency, did the State Department or more broadly the administration care about what the Afghan Government thought when making its decisions?

A: No, no. Actually, I would say the administration did pay attention to the Afghans, to President Ghani. They tried to address a perception that maybe the previous administration had been too tough. Again, it's an impression I'm giving you and not that they said that. But my impression is they tried to engage more. I remember they invited President Ghani to Washington with Dr. Abdullah and gave him a lot of -- you know, embracing him, reassuring him that we would support him. So I think that, yeah, they took his views seriously, but it wasn't going to change fundamental American policy based on American interests and American goals to adjust that because of President Ghani's concerns or desires or, you know, sort of -- at the end of the day, what mattered was -- and, again, the other context you should remember, nobody thought this thing was

going to collapse that quickly.

Ambassador Khalilzad believed that Trump Administration rhetoric led the Taliban to conclude that the U.S. military would withdraw from Afghanistan regardless of the outcome of U.S.-Taliban negotiations.

Page 172, line 12

Q: So you're negotiating with the Taliban.

A: Right.

Q: There are messages coming from the Trump administration, from the President himself --

A: Right.

Q: -- saying we're getting out.

A: Right.

Q: So you believe, during your negotiations, the Taliban had already come to the determination that the United States is leaving?

A: Right. That's what they --

Q: Is that correct?

A: That's a judgment that -- and they took the statement very positively. But also, I have to say --

Q: And can I stop you? So the answer to that is yes?

A: Yes --

Page 173, line 13

Q: So -- so you're negotiating with the Taliban.

A: Yeah.

Q: You believe that the messages coming out of the White House led the Taliban to the conclusion that the United States was getting out regardless

A: Right.

Q: -- correct, during the negotiations?

A: Uh-huh.

Ambassador Khalilzad explained that if the Biden Administration had invalidated the Doha Deal and allowed the U.S. military to remain in Afghanistan, then “we’d be back at war.” He did not see anyone in the U.S. government disputing this assumption at the time.

Page 179, line 1

Q: If the Biden administration had said the Doha agreement is no longer valid --

A: We’d be back at war.

Q: Okay. And that was the consensus view?

A: Oh, yeah. I mean, I didn’t see anybody from intel to others saying no. They would say, Welcome. Why don’t you stay? No.

Page 240, line 7

Q: Ambassador, do you believe that President Biden prematurely decided to withdraw before ensuring an issue as important as this one was already resolved?

A: Well, the alternative was -- and he decided that to delay the withdrawal would go back take us back to combat potentially, and the combat would mean send more forces.

Ambassador Khalilzad reaffirmed his April 27th, 2021 testimony to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee that intel he received as SRAR time led him to believe that the Afghan government was not going to collapse.

Page 222, line 1

Q: This is a transcript of your testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on April 27, 2021.

A: Yeah.

Q: If you could please direct your attention to page 18. It’s marked at the top.

A: Okay. 18.

Q: Here, you testify, “I do not believe that the Government is going to collapse, that the Taliban is going to take over.”

A: Yes.

Q: By “Government,” just for the record, you’re referencing the Afghan Government, correct?

A: Absolutely, yes. Yeah. Yeah.

Q: Ambassador, before we get to the part of either overestimating the Afghan Government’s capabilities or the Afghan Government’s failures, which I anticipate we will get to, the

Taliban did take over, correct?

A: Right. They did.

Q: And you stated here, “I do not believe that the Government is going collapse,” comma, “that the Taliban is going to take over.”

A: Yeah. The two are related to each other. And I believed that -- and I say it was my personal judgment.

Q: Uh-huh.

A: And it was informed by the intel -- which I didn't want to say, “Our intelligence people say that to me.” I was reflecting what was a common assumption, that the -- and, besides, I wanted to send a message, since it was a public testimony, to the Afghan Government and the military not to say, “Yes, they will collapse, Talib will take over,” to not have a negative psychological effect on their morale. I was trying to build them up by saying, I don't believe they'll collapse and the Talibs will take over.

Q: This testimony was under oath, though, correct, right, so you testified to the truth of what you believed?

A: Yes. That's what I believed.

Page 223, line 11

Q: Of course -- did you misjudge the strength and intentions of the Taliban?

A: I misjudged it based on intelligence, the resolve of the government and the capabilities of the armed forces, in which we had invested billions of dollars and we thought it was an effective fighting force.

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