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Remarks Following a Meeting With President Ashraf Ghani Ahmadzai of Afghanistan and an Exchange With Reporters at Bagram Airfield, Afghanistan

November 28, 2019

President Trump. Well, thank you very much. It's great to be in Afghanistan with our troops. And we had a wonderful Thanksgiving lunch. It was abbreviated a little bit, but we served lunch and had lunch. And these are great people, and it's also wonderful to be with the President of Afghanistan. And, President Ghani, thank you very much. It's an honor.

We have a lot of things to talk about, many, many things. We've had tremendous success in the last few months with our military, as you know. ISIS has been very, very badly hit, very severely hit. We had al-Baghdadi down in a different part to the world, and we took him out. That was the father of ISIS, the founder. And he was trying to rebuild it, and that didn't work out too well for him.

But we had tremendous success with ISIS over the last 3 to 4 months, and we're down to a very small number. And likewise, with Al Qaida, we're down to a very small number. And the Taliban wants to make a deal. We'll see if they make a deal. If they do, they do. And if they don't, they don't. That's fine. But we've had tremendous success.

And I think what I'd like to do—and perhaps, General, if you could say just a couple of words before President Ghani. Tell them about how we've literally decimated ISIS in Afghanistan, also Al Qaida in Afghanistan, if you would.

Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Mark A. Milley, USA. Sure, absolutely, Mr. President. And, President Ghani, good to see you again. And we had a great meeting earlier today.

And as you know, Scott Miller and the troops here, and Afghan troops and international troops, have all put a significant amount of pressure on ISIS, particularly in Nangarhar. And they've been hurt bad. Their numbers have been treaded and dwindled significantly. Organizationally, they have not been destroyed, but they have been severely hurt. And that pressure will continue.

And as the President mentioned, there's ongoing talks with the Taliban, and hopefully, those will be successful. And hopefully we'll then lead to Afghan-to-Afghan dialogue in the not-too-distant future.

So I think there's been some significant progress, Mr. President. And I thank Scott Miller and the Ambassador. And the entire team of U.S. forces here, in combination with the Afghan National Security Forces, has done a great job.

So thanks for your support.

President Trump. Good. Thank you very much, General.

And, Scotty, do you want to just mention how much—what we're left with? You're down to very small numbers with ISIS, and also you're down to very, very small with Al Qaida. Do you want to mention that?

North Atlantic Treaty Organization Resolute Support Mission Commander Gen. A. Scott Miller, USA. Mr. President, with the Afghan forces, particularly over the last 30 days of this—although it's been a long fight—we've seen a—quite a few surrenders by Daesh/ISIS fighters, as well as their families, coming out of southern Nangarhar, which, as everybody knows, that's a—been a tough set of terrain for the United States of America and Afghanistan.

Since 2001, it was a safe haven for bin Laden in the early days, and it's been a pretty remarkable military operation, as well as the following operations with the Afghans.

President Ghani. Equally with Al Qaida South Asia.

President Trump. Yes. We've made that tremendous progress though over the last, I would say, 6 months. And we've really, with respect to ISIS and Al Qaida. And we've hit them very, very hard. And they're down to literally hundreds as opposed to thousands. They had many thousands a short while ago, and now they're down to hundreds. Probably 200 left. And we're scouting them out. So we'll be down to very little, if anything, in a very short period of time.

Great job, by the way. Great job.

Gen. Miller. Thank you, sir.

President Trump. Appreciate it, Scotty.

Mr. President, please.

President Ghani. Well, Mr. President, it's a great honor and pleasure to welcome you. Let me first pay tribute to the Americans who paid the ultimate sacrifice. From 2001, 2,298 Americans—might be one or two difference—paid the ultimate sacrifice. We salute their courage and their determination for your security and our freedom.

Since you've been President, the number has been 52. So it's been a tremendous change. Afghan security forces are taking the lead now in most of operations. I would like to pay tribute to General Miller and to Ambassador Bass for their remarkable partnership with their problem solving and our security forces. Our team is here; has gone from strength to strength.

I'd like to thank you for your leadership and for your determination both on the South Asia strategy that made this possible and on your very principled decisions regarding putting limits on the type of peace that would ensure the gains of the past years and ensure your security and our freedom.

President Trump. Right. Well, as you know, for a period of time, we've been wanting to make a deal, and so have the Taliban. Then, we pulled back. We were getting close, and we pulled back. We didn't want to do it because of what they did. It was not a good—it was not a good thing they did with the killing a soldier. They knew he was a soldier, but he was a soldier, an American soldier from Puerto Rico. And they killed him. They killed a United Nations soldier. And they also killed—they killed a total of 12 people. They thought that was good negotiating power. I said, "No, that's bad negotiating power." That was not good what they did.

And since then, we've hit them so hard, they've never been hit this hard. In the history of the war, they have not—never been hit this hard.

And they want to make a deal. So we'll see what happens. If they make it, fine. If they don't make it, that's fine.

We're going to be able to do everything we're doing and actually more. And, at the same time, we're bringing down the number of troops substantially. But we're able to, because of the weaponry and all of the things that we have in place. We can do, actually, more damage with even fewer troops.

So we're going to—we're bringing it down very substantially. And we'll be down at a number that's very—it's a good number. And we're going to stay until such time as we have a deal or we have total victory. And they want to make a deal very badly.

So we're dealing with—this is really for the media, I guess, more than anybody, because the President knows what I'm saying. Again, the Taliban wants to make a deal. And we're meeting

with them, and we're saying it has to be a cease-fire. They didn't want to do a cease-fire, but now they do want to do a cease-fire, I believe. And it will probably work out that way. And we'll see what happens. But we've made tremendous progress.

But the thing I'm most proud of—because you could look at Taliban and say they're fighting for their land; you could look at, you know, others and say they're fighting for other things. But we know what ISIS is fighting for, and we know what Al Qaida is fighting for. And we have them down to a very small number of people. So—and that won't be—that will not be a long-lasting fight. That will be over with very soon.

So we've made a lot of progress, and, at the same time, we're drawing down our troops. And by the way, the same thing in Syria. I have to tell you, there was false reporting in the New York Times and some of the others yesterday.

We—as you know, we did withdraw from Syria; except, we kept the oil. And we're doing a little scattered fighting, because we had some areas where ISIS was a little prevalent and gaining some traction. And we sent some troops in and pretty much wiped it out. But we have left—for the most part, we've left, but we've kept the oil. And by keeping the oil, we don't have the enemy getting the oil. And the oil is what fueled the enemy. In this case, it was ISIS.

And so in addition to—in addition to what we did 2 weeks ago, which was pretty remarkable, the—what that group of young people was able to do very rapidly and very surgically, we are only in an area where we're keeping the oil and knocking out certain small groups of ISIS as it reforms. We don't want to—as it—as it reforms, it gets back, it tries to get back.

But we also knocked out—Mr. President, as you know, we knocked out the number-two person who became the number-one person. And now we have our sights on the number-three person, who's going to be the number-one person, if he wants it. You know, it's not a good job. [*Laughter*] I don't think he wants it. Maybe he doesn't want it so badly. He's not acting too quickly.

So we've had tremendous success. And we've had tremendous success here, especially over the last period of 6 months to a year. So it's very nice to be with be with you.

President Ghani. It's a pleasure.

President Trump. Very, very nice. Thank you very much.

President Ghani. Thank you, Mr. President.

President Trump. Okay, thank you very much, everybody.

Q. Mr. President, will you withdraw without a deal? Will you withdraw if there is no deal?

Taliban-U.S. Peace Negotiations

Q. Has the U.S. restarted peace talks with the Talban?

President Trump. Say it?

Q. Has the U.S. restarted peace talks with the Taliban?

President Trump. No, we're talking to the Taliban. Yes.

Taliban-U.S. Peace Negotiations

Q. Are you prepared to withdraw even without a deal?

Q. And will you include the Afghan——

President Trump. I would never say a thing like that. You wouldn't want me to say a thing like that. But I could just say this: We haven't had so much success in this—in this country, in this area. We haven't had success like this probably from the beginning, certainly as it relates to ISIS and Al Qaida, which is a very primary aim. But we've had very good success in talks with the Taliban.

Drawdown of U.S. Troops From Afghanistan

Q. You said that you're, at this point, pulling out troops. How many troops are currently in Afghanistan? And what is the plan for——

President Trump. Well, we'll give you those numbers later, but we'll get down to a certain number. I'm not sure I want to give you that number, to be honest. But it's a very big difference. But because of new weaponry and technology, we're able to do actually more with fewer troops.

Q. You had mentioned 8,600. Is that not the number anymore, sir?

President Trump. It's a number that people are talking about, yes.

Q. And is that the number you're talking about?

President Trump. Yes, it is, for now. And then, we can do much better than that.

Drawdown of U.S. Troops From Afghanistan

Q. Would you like to get it lower, sir?

President Trump. We can go much further than that. But we'll have it all covered.

You know, this is a country where, for whatever reason, they reform, they regenerate. And we don't want that to happen. And we also have the support of a lot of other countries, by the way. We have a lot of help from a lot of other countries. But don't let anybody tell you that's it's anybody else, because we're leading it all the way.

Q. What is the greatest challenge——

President Trump. And frankly—and frankly, that's one of the things. We—look, we're in an area of the world—we're 8,000 miles away. Some of us—I guess, most of us came here together. We want other players in this area to help. They don't like ISIS either. They don't like Al Qaida either. And they have to help also. You have countries that are right nearby that are very big, that have power, and they should be doing some of the work too, not just the United States.

Thank you very much, everybody.

NOTE: The President spoke at 10:02 p.m. In his remarks, he referred to the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) terrorist organization, also known as Daesh.

Categories: Interviews With the News Media : Exchanges with reporters :: Bagram Airfield, Afghanistan; Meetings With Foreign Leaders and International Officials : Afghanistan, President Ghani.

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