

United States Senate  
WASHINGTON, DC 20510

July 30, 2021

The Honorable Joseph R. Biden, Jr.  
President of the United States  
The White House  
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW  
Washington, D.C. 20500

Dear President Biden:

As the Co-chair of the Senate Caucus on International Narcotics Control, I write to express my concerns on the withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan without a comprehensive counternarcotics strategy in place. With poppy cultivation levels in Afghanistan among the highest on record, and Afghanistan producing over 80 percent of the world's illicit opium, a comprehensive counternarcotics strategy is necessary to protect the safety and welfare of the United States and its allies.<sup>1</sup>

Terrorist activity and the drug trade in Afghanistan are inextricably intertwined. The Taliban controls the movement of illicit drugs in Afghanistan and uses the proceeds to finance its war against the Afghan government, the United States, and our partner nations. The Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) issued its 52nd quarterly report on July 29, noting that there are now “fewer than a thousand U.S. military personnel [in Afghanistan], compared to 110,000 a decade ago.”<sup>2</sup> Also, you have indicated that you intend to remove all troops from Afghanistan by August 31, 2021.<sup>3</sup> With fewer U.S. military personnel in Afghanistan, the Taliban's strength has grown and it now controls about half of Afghanistan's 419 districts, more than double what it controlled in May of 2021.<sup>4</sup>

The troubling trend of increased Taliban control coincides with record highs in Afghan poppy cultivation. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) 2020 *Afghanistan Opium Survey: Cultivation and Production* report notes that there has been a “major increase in 2020 opium-poppy cultivation.”<sup>5</sup> This report shows that all the main opium poppy-growing provinces saw a significant increase in cultivation.<sup>6</sup> For example, the Badghis region saw opium

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<sup>1</sup> U.S. Department of State, Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs: Afghanistan Summary (accessed July 29, 2021), available at : <https://www.state.gov/bureau-of-international-narcotics-and-law-enforcement-affairs-work-by-country/afghanistan-summary/>.

<sup>2</sup> Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, 52<sup>nd</sup> quarterly Report to the U.S. Congress, p.ii, July 2021.

<sup>3</sup> NBC News, *Biden says U.S. troop withdrawal from Afghanistan will end Aug. 31*, (July 8, 2021, 10:49 AM EDT / Updated July 8, 2021, 3:49 PM EDT), <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/white-house/biden-address-afghanistan-troop-withdrawal-taliban-gains-ground-n1273338>.

<sup>4</sup> Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, 52<sup>nd</sup> quarterly Report to the U.S. Congress, July 2021.

<sup>5</sup> *Id.*

<sup>6</sup> *Afghanistan Poium Survey 2020: Cultivation and Production – Executive Summary*, UNODC, p. 5, May 2021.

poppy cultivation increase a staggering 194%.<sup>7</sup> This is the same region that the Taliban has significant control of and recently sieged the capital of Qala-e Nau.<sup>8</sup>

It is important to consider the impact that American troop removal will have on the cultivation and insurgence of the global heroin market. This is particularly pressing in light of the staggering number of overdose deaths in the United States. The CDC recently released numbers that over 93,000 Americans lost their lives to drug overdoses in 2020.<sup>9</sup> Opioids, like heroin and fentanyl, accounted for 69,710 of these deaths.<sup>10</sup>

The need for a comprehensive counternarcotics drug control strategy for Afghanistan is imperative. A stable and peaceful Afghanistan requires a dedicated counternarcotics strategy, which should take into account issues of illicit drug supply and demand, law enforcement involvement, and constricting terrorist financing. In concert with this, we must ensure that American military personnel and international partners are effective allies to meet these goals. Accordingly, I have called on previous Administrations to reassess and consider building and implementing an effective counternarcotics strategy in Afghanistan.<sup>11</sup> And, as I stated nearly a decade ago when President Obama decided to withdraw significant numbers of American troops from Afghanistan, “[i]t is critical that plans are in place to deal with how counternarcotics efforts will continue absent the security provided by the U.S. military.”<sup>12</sup> Unfortunately, I have yet to receive any indication that you have substantial plans on this point.

Since the drug trade is deeply connected to the resurgence of the Taliban and its control over the Afghanistan people, we must be prudent, cautious, and intentional in understanding the severe impacts that American military withdrawal will have on Afghan civilians and beyond. I look forward to hearing what plans your Administration has to ensure continued counternarcotics efforts absent American military presence.

Sincerely,



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Senator Charles E. Grassley  
Co-Chair, U.S. Senate Caucus on International Narcotics Control

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<sup>7</sup> *Id.*

<sup>8</sup> Susannah George, *Taliban's rapid advance across Afghanistan puts key cities at risk of being overtaken*, The Washington Post, July 7, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2021/07/07/afghanistan-taliban-surge/>.

<sup>9</sup> Bill Chappell, *Drug Overdoses Killed a Record Number of Americans In 2020, Jumping by Nearly 30%*, NPR, July 14, 2021, <https://www.npr.org/2021/07/14/1016029270/drug-overdoses-killed-a-record-number-of-americans-in-2020-jumping-by-nearly-30>.

<sup>10</sup> *Id.*

<sup>11</sup> See Sen. Grassley and Sen. Feinstein Letter to John F. Spoko, SIGAR, Sept. 17, 2018, available at: <https://www.grassley.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/09-17-2018%20Joint%20Letter%20to%20SIGAR%20Senate%20Drug%20Caucus.pdf>.

<sup>12</sup> Sen. Grassley Opening Statement, Senate Caucus on International Narcotics Control Hearing, “Future U.S. Counternarcotics Efforts in Afghanistan,” Jan. 15, 2014, available at: <https://www.grassley.senate.gov/news/news-releases/grassley-statement-future-us-counternarcotics-efforts-afghanistan>.