

# Ghani: U.S. Pullout Not to Affect Security in Afghanistan

KABUL (Dispatches) – Afghan President Ashraf Ghani says that withdrawal of 4,000 U.S. troops from his country will leave no impact on the security situation in the country.

Ghani made the remarks in a meeting with the Afghan army commanders on the recent agreement between the Taliban and the U.S.

“The opportunity created for peace is the result of the security forces’ fight and resistance in the past two years and it prevented the Taliban group from attaining its goal,” he added.

“Our position to end the war has created this opportunity that Taliban accepted to decrease violence,” Ghani said.

A senior U.S. official said Friday the United States and the Taliban have reached a truce agreement that will take effect “very soon” and could lead to withdrawals of American troops from Afghanistan.

The official said the agreement for a seven-day truce to be followed by the start of all-Afghan talks within 10 days is “very specific” and covers the entire country including Afghan forces.

The Taliban said Monday that a deal with the United States will be signed by the end of the month, with the top U.S. negotiator describing himself as “cautiously optimistic” about the process.

Abdul Salam Hanafi, a senior Taliban leader



U.S. troops gather at Kandahar Air base in Afghanistan, January 23, 2018.

and member of the political commission in Doha, Qatar, said in a video message shared with journalists that after negotiations, “both sides have initiated the final draft of the peace agreement. Now talks are concluded.”

Meanwhile, Ghani won a second term in office with a slim majority of the votes cast, a

result that comes five months after the election.

The country’s election commission said Tuesday that Ghani won 50.64% of the votes cast in the Sept. 28 poll, confirming preliminary results it released in December. The incumbent president just exceeded the threshold needed to avoid a runoff against his top rivals.

## Zionist Regime Plans 9,000 New Settler Units



A picture taken on January 27, 2020, shows a view of ongoing construction work at Ramat Shlomo, a settlement in the mainly Palestinian eastern sector of al-Quds.

WEST BANK (Dispatches) – The Zionist regime reportedly plans to build 9,000 settler units between two Palestinian neighborhoods in the occupied east al-Quds.

The anti-settlement monitor-

ing group Peace Now said that details of the plan — the first such project in the city in more than 20 years — emerged a day after Zionist transport ministry approved a controversial proposal to extend a train line from

Tel Aviv into the occupied Old City of East al-Quds.

The settlement units, as Peace Now stated, would be built on the site of Atarot airport located in northern al-Quds and between two Palestinian neighborhoods.

The watchdog group warned that the planned construction would drive “a wedge in the heart of the Palestinian urban continuity between Ramallah and East Jerusalem [al-Quds], thus preventing the establishment of a viable Palestinian state with its capital in East Jerusalem [al-Quds].”

Peace now added that the plan “also includes the demolition of dozens of Palestinian residential units” that were built in the area throughout the years.

Under a so-called Middle East peace plan unveiled last month by the U.S., the Zionist regime will have sovereignty over all of

al-Quds as well as settlements in the occupied territories.

Palestinians have rejected the plan as a conspiracy since they demand east al-Quds as the capital of their state.

More than 600,000 Zionists live in over 230 settlements built since the 1967 occupation of the Palestinian territories of the West Bank and East al-Quds by the Zionist regime.

Emboldened by U.S. President Donald Trump’s all-out support, the occupying regime has stepped up its settlement construction activities in defiance of United Nations Security Council Resolution 2334, which pronounced settlements in the West Bank and East al-Quds “a flagrant violation under international law.”

The international community regards the Zionist settler units in the occupied lands as illegal.

## UK’s...

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Favored video clips might be film of militants handing out food, or using sophisticated weaponry to good effect. “Then that would go to Sky News Arabia, BBC Arabic, Al Jazeera, Al Arabiya, those sort of outlets,” said one person involved.

Whenever British government officials wished to discuss the work, meetings would be held away from the newly established offices, to avoid contact with the locally hired Syrians.

British staff running the offices would also be expected to prepare reports on their meetings with Syrians, which would be passed back to the foreign office.

Meanwhile, other leaked documents seen by MEE show that the British government had awarded contracts to communications companies, which selected and trained opposition spokespeople, ran press offices that operated 24 hours a day, and developed opposition social media accounts.

British staff running these offices were told that their Syrian employees were permitted to talk to British journalists — as spokespeople for the Syrian opposition — but only after receiving clearance from officials at the British consulate in Istanbul.

One of the responsibilities of the press offices set up covertly by the British government under the terms of these contracts was to “maintain an effective network of correspondents/stringers inside Syria to report on MAO [moderate armed opposition] activity”.

In this way, the British government was able to exert behind-the-scenes influence over conversations that the UK media was having with individuals who presented themselves as Syrian opposition representatives.

People involved with the operation say that some prominent British journalists visiting Istanbul would be introduced to Syrians acting as opposition spokespeople, who had been prepared for the encounter by British handlers.

They say they would brief the Syrians before the meeting, and avoid any face-to-face contact with the visiting journalists themselves.

Furthermore, UK audiences could on occasion be “a specified target” of some media being produced as part of the initiative, with the permission of British officials in Istanbul.

The different strands of the propaganda program were evaluated by a scientist from the UK’s Ministry of Defense, looking for evidence of “behavioral and attitudinal change”.

During 2015, Free Syria, Syrian Identity and Undermine were funded in both British pounds and Canadian dollars, with the equivalent of around £410,000 (\$540,000) being spent each month.

The British government appears to have regarded its propaganda initiative as being in part a way to maintain a presence in Syria until it was able to become militarily engaged, with the blueprint saying that it should have “the capability to expand back into the strategic as and when the opportunity arises, to help build an effective opposition political-military interface”.

Around the same time that the initiative was being developed, the British government “loaned” a number of its pilots to the U.S., French and Canadian air forces, enabling them to take part in combat missions against Syrian targets, despite the country’s parliament having voted against such action.

British government enthusiasm for much of the work appears to have begun to wane as it became increasingly clear that the Assad government and its Russian and Iranian allies were winning the war, and funding for contracts began to dry up.

Early in 2019, the Free Syrian Police, a British-backed organization, finally ceased operations following a militant takeover of Idlib province.

## Russia...

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Syrian troops have reconquered swathes of Idlib and retaken the key M5 highway connecting the country’s four largest cities as well as the entire surroundings of Aleppo city for the first time since 2012.

A Syrian passenger jet landed in Aleppo on Wednesday from Damascus, marking the resumption of domestic flights between Syria’s two largest cities for the first time since 2012, while the government’s onslaught continued nearby with airstrikes reported in several terrorist-held towns and villages.

The flight carrying Syrian officials and journalists was an important symbol that President Bashar Assad’s government has consolidated control over the northwestern province of Aleppo and seized the last segments of the strategic M5 highway linking Aleppo to Damascus. The motorway is being repaired and is scheduled to reopen in coming days for the first time in eight years.

Government forces have for weeks been conducting a crushing military campaign to recapture the Aleppo countryside and parts of neighboring Idlib province in northwestern Syria, the last terrorist-held areas in the country.

The commercial Syrian Air flight landed in Aleppo after a 40-minute flight from Damascus and was welcomed by a military band on the tarmac. Syrian warplanes flew low overhead in a show of force and celebration. Syrian Tourism Minister Rami Radwan Martini and Transport Minister Ali Hammoud had earlier opened the airport for business.

Hammoud called the opening of the airport is a “great joy” for Syrians and a “dream” for the ministry. It has been closed since 2012 due to fighting after Aleppo fell into rebel hands.

The Syrian army drove the terrorists out of Aleppo

in December 2016. The airport opened briefly in 2017 but closed again due to security concerns.

Airstrikes and shelling were reported Wednesday on several terrorist-held areas, mostly near the towns of Daret Azzeh and Atareb.

Turkey arms and trains militants opposed to the Syrian government and has sent thousands of troops and military reinforcements into Idlib in recent weeks to try to stem the government advance. That has led to rare clashes between Turkish and Syrian troops with deaths on both sides.

Russian officials on Wednesday held Turkey responsible for the collapse of the cease-fire deal that was reached during talks in Sochi, Russia, saying Ankara had not held up its end of the deal to rein in militants, who continued attacking Syrian and Russian targets.

“We were satisfied with the agreements reached a year ago in Sochi,” Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said.

“We absolutely stopped being satisfied when militias and terrorists in Idlib started their attacks on the Syrian military and Russian military objects. That’s where our satisfaction ended.”

## China...

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public fury over Hubei authorities’ handling of the outbreak when it began in December. The risk of human-to-human transmission was downplayed, and doctors who tried to warn the public were reprimanded by police. Wuhan residents reported overcrowding in hospitals and futile attempts to seek treatment.

Many countries have also set up border screenings and airlines have canceled flights to and from China to prevent further spread of the disease, which has been detected in around two dozen countries and caused about 1,000 confirmed cases outside mainland China. Five deaths have been reported outside the mainland — in Hong Kong, Taiwan, Japan, the Philippines and France.

China’s top diplomat arrived in Laos on Wednesday for an emergency meeting with counterparts from Southeast Asian countries, which have expressed alarm over the viral outbreak.

Foreign Minister Wang Yi was expected to discuss the crisis with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations over dinner Wednesday in the Laotian capital of Vientiane, then hold broader formal talks the following day. Six countries in the 10-nation bloc have confirmed cases of the new virus.

In Hong Kong, a spokesman for Princess Margaret Hospital reported the city’s second death out of 62 cases. Media reported the victim was a 70-year-old man with underlying illnesses.

“Prevention and control work is at a critical time,” Chinese President Xi Jinping said during a phone call Tuesday evening with British Prime Minister Boris Johnson, according to Chinese state media.

Likewise, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres told The Associated Press in an interview in Lahore, Pakistan, that the viral outbreak “is not out of control, but it is a very dangerous situation.” He said that “the risks are enormous and we need to be prepared worldwide for that.”

Outside Hubei, other localities have imposed quarantine measures to varying degrees. Residential neighborhoods in Beijing have placed limits on the number of people per household who can go out, and those who do must carry exit-entry cards. In Shanghai, police detained a man for 10 days for repeatedly leaving his house and taking public transportation when he was supposed to be under quarantine at home.

Despite such warnings, Beijing was showing signs of coming back to life this week, with road traffic at around a quarter of usual, up from virtually nothing a week ago. While most restaurants, stores and office buildings remained closed, others had reopened.

China may postpone its biggest political meeting of the year, the annual congress due to start in March, to avoid having people travel to Beijing while the virus is still spreading. One of the automotive industry’s biggest events, China’s biannual auto show, was postponed, and many sports and entertainment events have been delayed or canceled.

## Officials...

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He said others suspected of having the disease had been identified to have the influenza type B.

The announcement of coronavirus cases came nearly a month after authorities evacuated dozens of Iranian students from the central Chinese city of Wuhan where the virus began reportedly in an illegal wildlife market.

The 57 students were released from 14 days of quarantine inside a hotel in southwest Tehran on Tuesday.

The new virus emerged in China in December. Since then, more than 70,000 people have been infected globally, with more than 2,000 deaths being reported, mostly in China.

## Suspect...

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private accounts and stole the interest. Fourteen people have been charged in the case.

Fourteen people were indicted, and a long trial ensued, but Sharifi Niknafs’ name was not on the list of suspects. An outspoken political activist and former legislator, Alireza Zakani, has said that multiple crimes were committed in the IPCC under Mehdi Sharifi Niknafs’ directorship.

## Saudi Transfers Hundreds of al-Qaeda Terrorists to Ma’arib

SANAA (Dispatches) – The Saudi-led coalition has transferred hundreds of al-Qaeda terrorists to Ma’arib province in northern Yemen after recent defeats.

The Saudi-led coalition resorted to al-Qaeda terrorists after heavy defeats in the 9th Front which cleansed their forces and liberated a large number of points in Ma’arib and al-Jawf provinces by the Yemeni army, the Arabic-language al-Masirah news channel quoted an informed source as saying on Wednesday.

The source added that over 250 al-Qaeda terrorists, commanded by Abu Hajar al-Hazrami, were transferred to Ma’arib from Hadhramaut province in eastern Yemen.

“100 al-Qaeda terrorists are from al-Bayda province (in southern Yemen) commanded by Ahmed Ibad al-Khabzi and 70 others are from Abyan province (in southern Yemen) commanded by al-Marfadi and they

were relocated to Ma’arib,” he noted.

A Yemeni news website had disclosed earlier this month that Saudi Arabia and the UAE were using al-Qaeda in Yemen again despite claims that the terrorist group has ended its presence in the Arab country.

The Arabic-language al-Khabar al-Yamani news website reported that the UAE is making use of al-Qaeda again in al-Shabwah province in southern Yemen to restore its influence which was almost gone last year.

Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia is correcting the structure of the former regime forces which allows al-Qaeda leaders to remain at the top of the rank.

According to the report, the Saudi-led coalition is attempting to deploy new troops, commanded by Zaki al-Haji who is linked with al-Qaeda in Lahij, to act as a wall stretching from Lahij to the west, from Yafe and Zale’ to the central parts of the country and from Baiza and Ma’arib to the east to prevent advance of the Yemeni army and Ansarullah fighters.

## IMF Confirms Staff Visit to Lebanon This Week

WASHINGTON (Dispatches) – A team of IMF experts will visit Lebanon from Feb. 20-23 to meet with authorities on economic challenges facing the country, and provide broad technical advice, International Monetary Fund spokesman Gerry Rice has said.

IMF staff will listen to Lebanese authorities about “how they plan to face Lebanon’s economic difficulties, ... take stock of recent macroeconomic developments, and provide broad technical advice on policies to deal with the macroeconomic challenges facing the economy, he said.

Rice said Lebanon had not requested fi-

nancial assistance from the IMF. He gave no further details about the trip.

The government of heavily indebted Lebanon is grappling with an economic crisis that has fueled protests, and must urgently decide on how to deal with fast-approaching debt payments, including a \$1.2 billion Eurobond due on March 9.

The financial crisis, worse than any Lebanon endured in its 1975-90 civil war, came to a head last year as slowing capital inflows led to a liquidity crunch and demonstrations erupted against the ruling elite.

Banks are imposing controls on access to cash and blocking transfers abroad, the Lebanese pound has slumped, prices are rising, and firms are shedding jobs or slashing wages.

Rice last week said the IMF was ready to help Lebanese authorities as they worked on a needed package of economic and structural reforms, but any decision on debt restructuring would be up to Lebanese authorities and their creditors.

Lebanon’s public debt is equivalent to around 150% of its gross domestic product.