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WAR COMMISSION



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EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

August 20, 2026

TO: The members of the Senate Armed Services Committee, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, the Senate Appropriations Committee, the House Armed Services Committee, the House Foreign Affairs Committee, the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, and the House Appropriations Committee

Dear Members of Congress,

Below is the Afghanistan War Commission's third interim report. In it, we describe the status of our work per our congressional mandate. This summary touches on the increased flow of released documents allowing us more insights into our analysis of decisions made in the 20-year conduct of the Afghanistan War; our ongoing interviews of individuals providing all viewpoints of the war as it progressed; our progress in drafting our final report; arrangements for an efficient interagency review of the report for declassification and release determinations; and operations and access issues we continue to encounter.

We would like to extend our sincerest thanks for the support your committees have provided us in this mission. Many members and their aides have provided ongoing support and confidence in the Commission, in particular by allowing us to work another year to provide the rigorous, analytical, lessons-learned report you expect. We are particularly grateful to those member champions and organizations who have supported our work this year.

We are cognizant that this interim report arrives on your desks just weeks ahead of the 25th anniversary of the September 11 attacks and the fifth anniversary of the war's end. The twin anniversaries underscore the importance of our resolve to see our mission through.

Congressional commissions are successful only if they remain connected to and integrated with the missions of their committees and members. In the coming year, as we take the final strides toward releasing our report, we invite you to work together with us on ensuring our work reaches the widest possible audience and makes a lasting impact on the people and government of the United States of America.

Sincerely,

Shamila N. Chaudhary, Co-Chair

Dr. Colin F. Jackson, Co-Chair

Afghanistan War Commission Interim Report to the United States Congress, 2026

The Afghanistan War Commission has begun drafting its final report, pursuant to its congressional mandate, as the Commission continues conducting its “thorough study of all matters relating to combat operations, reconstruction and security force assistance activities, intelligence activities, and diplomatic activities of the United States pertaining to the [war in] Afghanistan during the period beginning June 1, 2001, and ending August 30, 2021” (Afghanistan War Commission Act of 2021, section 1094 of the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2022, Pub. L. No. 117-81, 135 Stat. 1935, 1938 (2021)).

The Commission has achieved significant progress toward fulfilling the law’s instructions “to examine the key strategic, diplomatic, and operational decisions that pertain to the war in Afghanistan during the relevant period, including decisions, assessments, and events that preceded the war,” and “to develop a series of lessons learned and recommendations for the way forward that will inform future decisions by Congress and policymakers throughout the United States Government.”

We have surmounted several unexpected obstacles. Since our August 2025 interim report, two government shutdowns lasting a total of 47 days hindered an already painstaking process of obtaining government documents necessary for our research and analysis. The momentum has since shifted as the flow of documents increased substantially over the past five months. The war with Iran has constrained travel to the Persian Gulf region, leading the Commission to defer meetings with Pakistani officials and other key figures of the Afghanistan War. Those visits are being pushed to later this year.

Nevertheless, we began drafting in earnest in 2025 as we scoped the information we were gathering into major themes threading through a chronological framework of the war. That drafting is being enhanced and the research solidified as we analyze newly provided government documents and conduct more interviews. The paths to lessons learned are crystallizing as we proceed, and we are taking diligent steps to guarantee that the Commission’s final report is thoroughly documented.

The Commission, in coordination with relevant departments and agencies, is also establishing a process to conduct a security review of the draft Final Report to meet our deadline for delivering our Final Report next summer. Through the security review, the Commission will seek the release of executive branch information that has not previously been made public but has been provided to the Commission to inform its research, focusing on information critical to our analysis, findings, and recommendations. The robust public report that Congress mandated will require the executive branch to adopt a forward-leaning approach for release and declassification of the material for which the potential harm to national security has abated or the public interest

outweighs the continuing need for classification. Sustained engagement with empowered interagency partners throughout this process to reach sensible accommodations and make timely decisions will be critical to meeting Congress’s expectations.

As further detailed below, we have obtained more than 380 interviews with subjects who include cabinet-level officials in all four U.S. presidential administrations involved; a wide range of officials in agencies that had stakes in the war and reconstruction efforts; NATO leaders; U.S. troops, aid workers, intelligence officers, and diplomats who served in the war; members of the Afghanistan National Army; and Afghan civilians. More than two dozen interviews are currently scheduled into the fall, and we are continuing efforts to interview as many key participants in policy decisions, military operations, and diplomacy as our remaining time allows.

Our mandate is specifically to learn and present lessons that future policymakers, military leaders, and diplomatic officials can apply in future contingencies. The Commission’s examination is therefore focused on systemic faults—how consequential decisions were made, how responsibility was shared across leaders and institutions—and what lessons can be offered for future leaders. Those future leaders’ predecessors managing the war in Afghanistan had to make difficult decisions as they steered U.S. warfighting, diplomacy, and intelligence gathering through the war’s many turns and singular landscapes over its course. If we can identify the things we did well and the things we did poorly and preserve and transmit those lessons to succeeding generations of Americans, we may help those generations become better prepared to confront similar but not identical problems. This act lends new meaning to the service and sacrifice of countless Americans. It is a gift that one generation of public servants can make to their descendants in the military, the diplomatic service, the intelligence services, and development organizations.

Since its previous interim report, the Commission has had several changes to the professional staff, including the promotion of Neilesh Shelat to Executive Director, succeeding Jaime Cheshire. The overall size of the Commission’s staff did not increase during the reporting period.

Following is a full accounting of where the Afghanistan War Commission stands three years into its mandated mission and a year out from delivering its final report to the U.S. Congress, the military veterans and civilians who served in Afghanistan, the American public, and our allies and partners around the world.

Timeline

The Afghanistan War Commission is working with its appointing committees and appropriators to seek an extension of our mandate to release our final report to Congress in August 2027. We are seeking this additional time to fully integrate into our final report the research material gleaned from our ongoing interviews and our access to new and probative proprietary executive

branch records. An extension would also ensure that we can carefully craft findings and recommendations to inform future decision-makers faced with hard national security choices.

We thank the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, House Committee on Foreign Affairs, Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, Senate Committee on Armed Services, and the House Committee on Armed Services Minority for already providing written approval for the extension.

A provision on extension is also pending in the Fiscal Year 2027 National Defense Authorization Act. The commission thanks the House Committee on Armed Services and the Senate Committee on Armed Services for supporting that request.

Executive Branch Engagement

Executive branch prioritization of the Commission's requests for briefings, access to documents, and interviews has been instrumental to the Commission's progress to date. Through meetings between senior officials and Commission co-chairs and regular, sustained coordination between department and agency liaisons and the Commission's senior staff, our priorities are being addressed. We wish to thank the White House, the Department of Defense,¹ the Department of State, and the Intelligence Community for working diligently to satisfy the Commission's remaining requirements.

With critical information requests ongoing, the Commission's research and analysis are continuing even as we draft the final report.

The Numbers

Since the Commission's second interim report delivered in August 2025, Co-Chairs Colin F. Jackson and Shamila N. Chaudhary have issued five formal letter requests for information (RFIs) to executive branch entities, bringing the number of RFIs active or issued during this administration to 24 and the overall total to 39.

One RFI was fully satisfied this year and another closed with the termination of the Office of the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction. The remaining RFIs have been left open to facilitate production of prioritized material necessary for the Commission to complete its research.

¹ The Commission refers to the Department of Defense, Secretary of Defense, and their constituent offices and officers as defined in Title 10 of the National Security Act of 1947 (as amended). Consistent with Executive Order 14347, *Restoring the Department of War* (Sept. 5, 2025), all references after its date of issuance are also references to the Department of War, Secretary of War, and their constituent offices and officers.

By the end of 2025, departments and agencies had produced roughly 126,750 pages of documents in response to RFIs and facilitated in camera review of tens of thousands more. By March of this year, the Commission received an additional 8,677 pages of responsive documents from the Department of State, 2,812 from the Department of Defense, and 862 from the Central Intelligence Agency. By July, those numbers had risen to 24,540 from State, 38,275 from DoD, and 1,246 from the CIA. Roughly one-third of total document production has occurred in this calendar year, the vast majority within the past several months. Production to close remaining gaps is continuing, and Commission staff are using this material—some 64,061 pages and counting—to develop important details in the factual record and refine working analytic findings and conclusions.

The Research Impact

Documents received in 2026 are some of the most impactful and probative records. This is due in part to accommodations made by the White House and National Archives, State Department, DoD Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy, and U.S. Central Command for Commission staff to conduct in camera review of mountains of records in order to hand select only the most critical ones for production. As a result, the overall utility of materials produced that enable core aspects of our mandate continues to rise.

In response to the Commission's April 2025 request for presidential records, **the White House** in May and August 2026 provided insightful documents pertaining to all four presidential administrations during the war. These documents contribute significantly to the Commission's understanding of major aspects of the war:

- The Bush administration's plans for development and aid programs in Afghanistan
- The Obama administration's surge deliberations
- Negotiations with the Taliban spanning the Obama administration's second term and initial six months of the first Trump administration
- The Trump administration's South Asia Strategy
- The Biden administration's deliberations during the withdrawal.

Most of the documents sought under this request have been produced or are in process. Work to locate remaining items is ongoing. The Commission submitted a second RFI on August 12 for a small number of additional records critical to a thorough and complete analysis.

The State Department recently produced regular reports of the Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan and Secretary of State to President Obama in 2009 and 2011–2015. The department also provided access to messages among U.S. negotiators and between U.S. negotiators and other parties during negotiations with the Taliban in 2018–2021. The Bureau of Intelligence and Research's intelligence assessments spanning the war offer further valuable context and insight into critical issues. Meanwhile, the department, through U.S. Mission NATO,

is facilitating the Commission's request that NATO declassify and release records hand selected by Commission staff.

In our 2025 interim report, the Commission identified read-ins to closely held counterterrorism information as an outstanding requirement. **The Department of Defense** has since satisfied that need. DoD has facilitated access to briefings and documentation on operations to counter the Taliban insurgency and to deny, disable, and defeat al-Qaeda. U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) supported two trips by Commission staff to identify priority documents, and the Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy (OUSD-P) similarly has provided consistent in camera access to allow Commission staff to identify essential documents from its records. Through these visits, CENTCOM and OUSD-P have produced a significant number of documents providing insights into key decisions, including department input on the decision to withdraw from Afghanistan as well as planning related to a post-withdrawal Afghanistan.

The Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI) National Counterterrorism Center provided Commission staff with a detailed briefing of the threat posed by al-Qaeda, the Islamic State, and other foreign terrorist organizations with an emphasis on threats to the homeland.

The CIA produced the vast majority of requested finished intelligence assessments early in the Commission's tenure. This effort is now focused on completing production covering 2002–2008, a process that requires retrieval of paper records from archival storage. These early assessments aid the Commission's understanding of the counterterrorism picture and regional dynamics.

Our 2025 interim report also discussed the Commission's outstanding requests for documents other than finished intelligence reports, including studies by the CIA's Center for the Study of Intelligence. Commissioners and senior staff engaged extensively with the National Security Council, CIA, and congressional intelligence committees to reach an accommodation that would enable access to a small number of documents the Commission identified as high value to its work. Most of these categories of documents have been shared with, or briefed to, the intelligence committees or congressional leadership.

These efforts were not successful. To further its work, the Commission accepted an accommodation to receive detailed briefings in lieu of access to primary written sources. A May briefing under this arrangement sufficiently answered the Commission's questions on the topic. It is scheduling two additional briefings with potential additional briefings as needed.

While we are making progress within the confines of a briefing-only accommodation, the Commission finds the denial of access to these documents regrettable, unnecessarily defensive, and contrary to the ideal outcome of a report that has been informed by direct access to all probative primary source material. We are grateful to the CIA briefing team for the considerable time, preparation, and professionalism required to support this approach and for their thoughtful efforts to address the Commission's questions within these constraints.

The Remaining Gaps

Even with meaningful in camera review and executive branch prioritization of efforts to clear documents for release, several months often pass between selection and production. Commission staff are attempting to mitigate the impact of this lag by taking detailed notes as research and drafting aids when possible; but with limited time and many documents to review, this is an imperfect stopgap for the most critical items.

Outstanding records prioritized for production are relevant to all periods of the war. Some of the most important are the following:

- Key documents related to the Obama administration’s military surge and governance surge and priority documents from CENTCOM, including General Tommy Franks’s contemporaneous notebooks and other early war planning documents, best military advice memoranda from General Austin Miller and General Kenneth McKenzie, and other records from General McKenzie regarding the planning and execution of the withdrawal;
- State Department cables on various topics including NATO ministerials, high-level engagements with Afghan and Pakistani officials, and documents on war termination and engagements with the Taliban between 2016–2021;
- Additional presidential records including those pertaining to 2006 and 2009 strategic reviews of the war and records on withdrawal planning; and
- Remaining CIA intelligence assessment and briefings.

Our work depends on expedited access to remaining priority records. Co-Chairs Jackson and Chaudhary are requesting that Secretary of State Marco Rubio, Secretary of War Pete Hegseth, and CIA Director John Ratcliffe redouble their organizations’ efforts to satisfy all remaining priority requests as soon as possible.

Interviews

The Commission has built a robust interview regimen to bolster its research. These engagements have given the Commission a wealth of individuals’ hands-on experiences, perspectives, and insights into combat operations, reconstruction and security force assistance activities, intelligence activities, diplomatic engagements, and key strategic, diplomatic, and operational decisions that pertain to the war. As of July 31, the Commission had conducted 381 formal interviews of 307 people.

These interviews cover the breadth of our research mandate and encompass individuals at all levels of policymaking and operations, from cabinet-level members of all four presidential administrations involved in the war through senior military officers, ambassadors and diplomats, and intelligence community officials to junior officers serving in Afghanistan, on-the-ground aid workers, and embassy and consulate staff. The Commission has also interviewed NATO

officials, senior members of coalition armed forces, U.N. envoys, and other nations' diplomats who served in Afghanistan during the war.

The Commission has made a concerted effort to collect Afghan perspectives, as well. The tally of formal interviews conducted by Commission staff includes members of the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (GIROA), fighters in the Northern Alliance, commanders in the Afghanistan National Army, Afghan scholars, and civil society members. In the past year the Commission has contracted with a third-party organization to conduct remote interviews with Afghan civilians living in Afghanistan in a manner appropriate to ongoing security and safety concerns. These interviews, with questions developed by Commission researchers, solicit views from Afghans ranging from teachers, engineers, and village elders to former employees of nongovernmental organizations and veterans of the Afghanistan National Army. So far, 43 interviews have been gathered representing every region in the country.

After more than a year of coordination and delays, the Commission is finalizing plans for a trip to Pakistan in the fall to interview more than a dozen individuals from that nation's government agencies, military, and intelligence services.

In addition to one-on-one interviews, the Commission has conducted roundtable discussions involving individuals identified with specific sectors of the war, including military veterans, aid workers, provincial reconstruction team members, scholars, and U.S. ambassadors to Pakistan.

The Commission is working hard to continue securing interviews with senior members of all governments involved in the war over its 20-year span.

Interagency Security Review

The Commission's research is informed by a rich variety of sources. Executive branch documentation and briefings range from unclassified but nonpublic records to highly classified material requiring special access permissions. The draft final report is being written at the current level of classification of these sources.

To deliver the unclassified public report that Congress requires, the Commission will submit the draft report for an interagency security review. Through this review process, the Commission will seek declassification of information central to the report's analysis, findings, and recommendations. It expects to engage in regular discussions with department and agency subject-matter experts and classification authorities throughout the review to satisfactorily address public release concerns.

On June 8, the Commission requested the National Security Advisor to direct the establishment, composition, and functions of the interagency security review. We have requested that the review be forward-leaning on release to inform the U.S. public and all those who served and sacrificed during America's longest war. It must be staffed by senior officials empowered with decision-

making authority and sufficient resources to accelerate a robust review process. As of publication of this interim report, a draft directive is under way.

Commission staff are working with senior officials at State, DoD, ODNI, and CIA as core participants in the review to ensure its timely stand-up. The Commission intends to submit sections of the draft report for security review on a rolling basis, commencing in September. This start date allows sufficient time to resolve sensitive priority issues, allow Commissioners to fully consult among themselves, and incorporate feedback into the final draft.

An effective, forward-leaning, timely security review is critical to achieving the Commission's goal of a robust public report that answers Americans' fundamental questions about the war and issues recommendations that equip policymakers to make hard national security decisions.

Operational Support

The Commission's essential operational needs continue to be its sensitive compartmented information facility (SCIF) workspace, classified information technology support, and continued appropriations sufficient to execute the Commission's work plan.

In its second interim report, the Commission noted its extensive efforts beginning in February 2024 to secure classified computers. SECRET and TOP SECRET//SCI closed-network computer systems came online on September 15, 2025, enabling Commission staff to begin drafting classified interview transcripts and other documents in its main office and SCIF.

The Commission's SCIF is slated to be decommissioned in April 2027 because the General Services Administration (GSA) is terminating the umbrella building lease. Commission staff are working closely with the DoD Washington Headquarters Service (WHS) to pursue a lease extension that would avoid any disruption to the Commission's work in the critical last months of finalizing its report. WHS has informed the Commission that it will also work with GSA, the Architect of the Capitol, and the Senate and House Sergeant-at-Arms to identify a back-up alternate solution. Should the Commission have to relocate its SCIF and secure computers, the interruption in operations could impact delivery of its final report. The Commission is grateful to WHS leadership for prioritizing a solution that keeps the report's publication on schedule.

In February 2026, the commission was allocated \$12 million following the passage of the Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2026 (Public Law 119-75). For fiscal year 2027, the Commission requested \$11.4 million to maintain its operations. The Senate Armed Services Committee—passed National Defense Authorization Act authorized \$11.4 million for the Commission for the upcoming fiscal year. The Commission thanks the Senate Armed Services Committee for this support, as well as individual members in both chambers who championed our Fiscal Years 2026 and 2027 funding requests.

Public Outreach

Since its stand-up, the Afghanistan War Commission has been conducting public outreach to gain a fuller understanding of the Afghanistan War’s human context as well as to inform public entities of the Commission’s mission and Congress’s purpose for establishing it. That outreach has included attending international forums, giving presentations at universities and other academic centers, participating in podcasts, and hosting roundtables.

The Commission has engaged in the following outreach since our 2025 Interim Report:

- Meeting with members of the Afghan diaspora facilitated by Afghans for a Better Tomorrow in New York, New York, September 2025
- Meeting at the Veterans Leaders Forum in Houston, Texas, December 2025
- Panel at the Modern War Institute’s “Remembering the Lessons of Afghanistan” conference in Arlington, Virginia, May 2026
- Roundtable with American University Terrorism and Security program graduate students in Washington, D.C., May 2026
- Podcast interview with the Irregular Warfare Institute on Security Force Assistance, July 2026
- Commission forum titled “Afghanistan at 25 and 5: Veterans’ Views on the War, from 9/11 to the Withdrawal,” at the Veterans of Foreign Wars national convention in Reno, Nevada, July 2026

The Commission now has three portals on its website, <https://www.afghanistanwarcommission.senate.gov>, for public inputs: one for veterans, one for foreign policy and national security professionals, and one for Afghanistan professionals. These portals are providing the Commission information on a wide range of personal experiences with the Afghanistan War and suggesting potential follow-up interviews.

The Commission

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