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Statement before the
House Committee on Foreign Affairs
Subcommittee on Terrorism, Nonproliferation, and Trade
Women's Role in Countering Terrorism

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Chairman Poe, Representative Keating, and distinguished members of the subcommittee, it is an honor to appear here today.

My name is Farhat Popal. I work on the Women's Initiative at the nonprofit, nonpartisan George W. Bush Institute in Dallas, Texas. I am also Afghan-American, born in Kabul, so this issue is near to my heart.

At the Bush Institute, we believe women are essential to the development of open, peaceful, and prosperous societies. Our initiative, the Afghan Women's Project, has worked to ensure the expansion and protection of women's rights in Afghanistan. We engage with remarkable Afghan women—educators, businesswomen, researchers, politicians, peacebuilders, and more—and support Mrs. Laura Bush in her role as Honorary Co-Chair of the U.S.-Afghan Women's Council.

My comments today will focus on women's role in countering violent extremism (CVE). I will also discuss how women's meaningful inclusion and leadership can build resilient communities.

Here are the three points I'd like to leave you with:

- Afghan women drive education, growth, and self-reliance. They are essential to Afghanistan's stability, and we must continue to invest in them.
- Afghan women help build resilient communities, and participate in peacebuilding at all levels of society. We must ensure their voices are represented in the peace process.
- What happens elsewhere in the world matters here at home. It is in our national security and moral interest to support peaceful, sustainable development in Afghanistan.

Afghan women and girls have made enormous strides in areas such as education and employment, but continue to be impacted by gender-based violence, limited access to justice, and violent extremism. Afghan girls risk acid attacks, poisoning, and kidnapping to go to school. Afghan women brave sexual harassment and violence to go to work. All Afghans endure indiscriminate bombings in their daily lives.

In the 2017 annual *Survey of the Afghan People* by The Asia Foundation, 92 percent of Afghans say they fear encountering the Taliban, and 94 percent fear encountering ISIS. I share this to show both the magnitude of the problem and the Afghan people's general lack of support for extremist groups. All Afghans benefit from effective CVE efforts and peacebuilding, but Afghan women gain the most. They also have the most to lose if their hard-won rights are negotiated away.

At the family and village level, Afghan women play a key role in mediating conflict, building trust and dialogue, educating children, and counseling family members not to engage in violence. Youth represent one of the most vulnerable groups for recruitment and radicalization. With over 63 percent of the population under the age of 25, mothers can have a profound influence on their children through education.¹ Today, thanks to the U.S. government, international community,

¹ "Young People," United Nations Population Fund - Afghanistan, accessed February 22, 2018, <http://afghanistan.unfpa.org/node/15227>.

and Afghan government efforts, more than 9.2 million children are enrolled in school, of which almost 40 percent are girls. We have seen a rise in the percentage of college-age students enrolled in higher education, from one percent in 2001 to almost 10 percent today.²

At the national level, 12 out of 63 members of the High Peace Council are women.³ The visible presence of women in these bodies is important, and the Afghan government must ensure this is more than symbolic representation. Women must have actual influence and authority. In the 2017 initiation of the Afghan-led Kabul Process, only two of 47 representatives were women.⁴ This marginalizes women and their voices.

At the provincial level, women have been instrumental members of provincial peace councils—encouraging local insurgents to participate in talks and facilitating the release of hostages.⁵ Women’s inclusion is essential to peace. Research shows women’s meaningful participation in a peace negotiation makes the resulting agreement 35 percent more likely to last at least fifteen years.⁶

CVE is also about more than security. It’s about creating resilient communities that are built upon strong social connections, trust, and inclusion. Afghan women are a key part of these efforts, and advancing their socioeconomic conditions, political empowerment, and voice, can foster community resilience. Many women civil society advocates are fighting for just that.

Last October, the Bush Institute hosted 14 women leaders from the Middle East, North Africa, and Afghanistan who are working to advance economic opportunity—and ultimately peace and prosperity—in their countries.

We met Nadia Behboodi, Executive Director of the International Center for Afghan Women’s Economic Development at the American University of Afghanistan, where she is working to support women-owned businesses through training, capital, and access to business and information technology support.

We reconnected with Manizha Wafeq, featured in our book, *We are Afghan Women: Voices of Hope*, who advocates for women’s economic rights through the Afghanistan Women Chamber of Commerce and Industry. According to the Chamber, women entrepreneurs have invested more than \$66 million in the Afghan economy, and created more than 47,000 jobs.⁷ When you

² “Education,” USAID - Afghanistan, last updated February 21, 2018, <https://www.usaid.gov/afghanistan/education>.

³ Ahmadi, Belquis. “Afghan Women Step Up in Local, National Taliban Talks,” U.S. Institute of Peace, October 25, 2017, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2017/10/afghan-women-step-local-national-taliban-talks>.

⁴ Barr, Heather. “Women Excluded Again from Afghanistan’s Peace Talks,” Human Rights Watch, June 6, 2017, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/06/06/women-excluded-again-afghanistans-peace-talks>.

⁵ “Women’s Participation in Peace Processes,” Council on Foreign Relations, last updated January 5, 2018, <https://www.cfr.org/interactive/womens-participation-in-peace-processes/afghanistan>.

⁶ O’Reilly, Marie. “Why Women? Inclusive Security and Peaceful Societies,” Inclusive Security, October 2015, <https://www.inclusivesecurity.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/Why-Women-Report-2017.pdf>.

⁷ Afghanistan Women Chamber of Commerce and Industry, accessed February 22, 2018, <http://awcci.af/en/reports/>.

economically empower women, you accelerate economic recovery and advance post-conflict economies.⁸

This fall, we will launch a leadership development program focused on women who are advancing economic opportunity for all in their countries. Afghan women will be a key part of that effort.

Afghan women have a staunch advocate in First Lady Rula Ghani. Last fall, Mrs. Ghani joined Mrs. Bush on Capitol Hill in their roles as Honorary Co-Chairs of the U.S.-Afghan Women's Council. They discussed the importance of advanced training and mentoring for Afghan women, and urged us to see women as the leaders and partners they are, not as victims.

If I can leave you with one key point it is this: women's meaningful inclusion in all aspects of society—social, political, and economic—is essential for Afghanistan's stability and prosperity.

And in the words of Mrs. Bush, "As the people of Afghanistan continue on their own hard path to freedom, they must know that we are with them." Here's how we can help.

First, we must consider local contexts and causes of violent extremism to inform effective CVE strategies and women's role in them. Building local capacity enables communities to sustainably lead their own efforts.

Second, we must continue to support and fund sustainable development in Afghanistan that is aligned with national-level policies and priorities. Stability requires equal access to justice, respect for human rights, effective rule of law and good governance, and transparent, effective, and accountable institutions. It also necessitates access to quality education, particularly as insecurity and poverty threaten to undercut substantial gains in this area. These efforts will help to undermine extremist narratives, and will take both public and private sector engagement.

Perhaps most importantly, we must continue to invest in women and ensure their rights are not negotiated away in an ultimate peace agreement. We must guarantee their meaningful inclusion in peacebuilding, so they can speak for themselves. The bipartisan Women, Peace, and Security Act of 2017 is an important step in this direction, but it must be implemented and funded to make a difference.

Within their families, in their communities, and as public figures, Afghan women exhibit great leadership. They are making a profound impact on a daily basis, and it is in our interest to support them.

Thank you.

⁸ "Preventing Conflict, Transforming Justice, Securing the Peace: A Global Study on the Implementation of the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325," UN Women, 2015.