

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Lloyd J. Austin, III
Secretary of Defense
Department of Defense
1000 Defense Pentagon
Washington, DC 20301

May 8, 2024

Dear Secretary Austin,

I am deeply concerned about the apparent discrepancy between newly-reported video footage of the Abbey Gate attack in Afghanistan on August 26, 2021 and the conclusions of two U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) investigations into the bombing.

According to a CNN article on April 24, 2024, the helmet camera of a Marine on the ground in Kabul during that period reportedly recorded multiple bursts of gunfire immediately after the suicide bomber attack on Abbey Gate, with further gunfire in the minutes following the attack as well. This appears to directly contradict CENTCOM's official results.

There has always been a great deal of confusion over the amount of small arms fire heard at Abbey Gate during the attack. Some servicemembers reported "a mass volume" of gunfire, while others asserted that they were under fire from various locations, including a rooftop and a water tower.

In the last CENTCOM investigation, which was concluded on April 15, 2024, investigators examined three questions: "1) whether an Improvised Explosive Device (IED) test run occurred near Abbey Gate on August 21, 2021; 2) whether, before the attack occurred, service members identified in the crowd the suicide bomber who committed the attack; and 3) whether service members posted at or around Abbey Gate had an opportunity to engage the bomber prior to the attack." The review also focused on the Taliban's use of excessive force and the decision to consolidate the defensive perimeter around Abbey Gate before the attack. It also evaluated new information obtained since the original 15-6 investigation, concluded in November 2021.

The April 15 report concluded: "The suicide bomber was not previously identified in the crowd, nor was there an opportunity for service members to engage him prior to the attack on August 26, 2021. The new information obtained during the review did not materially impact the findings in the November 2021 Abbey Gate 15-6 investigation and the supplemental review team did not recommend any modifications to those findings."

In February 2022, Colonel C.J. Douglas, a member of CENTCOM's Abbey Gate Investigation team, said during a press briefing that there was "nearly simultaneous gunfire from three separate points, traveling across the frontage of servicemembers operating within a confined space. That confined space caused an echo, which created the illusion of a firefight."ⁱ

It is unclear what generated this CENTCOM data point of near-simultaneous gunfire, which appears to be directly contradicted by the video footage obtained by CNN, which shows 11 episodes of gunfire over nearly four minutes.ⁱⁱ However, after the release of the video, CENTCOM informed the House Foreign Affairs Committee that “neither the Investigation Team nor the Supplemental Review Team had seen the complete video prior to its publication by CNN on 24 April.”ⁱⁱⁱ Nevertheless, CENTCOM stated that the video did not contradict the findings of the Abbey Gate investigation.^{iv}

While we appreciate CENTCOM’s investigation into the Abbey Gate attack, nearly three years later we still have the same questions that the very U.S. servicemembers captured in the CNN video had, including who was firing the rounds and whether it was the Taliban or another hostile force. We therefore ask you to clarify the volume, incidence, and sources of gunfire at the scene. Why, also, was the Afghan doctor referenced in the CNN article not interviewed, nor any other Afghan? Lastly, why do journalists have this video footage and the Department does not? Is there any more footage in the Department’s possession that has not yet been made public? If so, please release such footage immediately and confirm that no more video recordings exist of which the Department is aware.

The Abbey Gate attack was a horrifying conclusion to the Afghanistan war which in the end cost the lives of more than 2,400 American servicemembers and wounded more than 20,000. As Memorial Day approaches, we owe it to our fallen servicemembers that their last sacrifices are not swept under the rug or celebrated as a success. The truth must come out. We urge you in the strongest possible terms to account for the discrepancy between the results of the CENTCOM investigation and this new reporting. We also request a follow-up unclassified briefing about this issue and other remaining questions related to the circumstances surrounding the Abbey Gate attack.

Sincerely,



Mike Waltz
Member of Congress



Michael T. McCaul
Chairman
House Foreign Affairs Committee



Tim Burchett
Member of Congress



Darrell Issa
Member of Congress



Brian Mast
Member of Congress



Rich McCormick
Member of Congress



Cory Mills
Member of Congress



Keith Self
Member of Congress



Chris Smith
Member of Congress

ⁱ <https://www.defense.gov/News/Transcripts/Transcript/Article/2924617/general-kenneth-f-mckenzie-jr-commander-us-central-command-holds-a-press-briefi/>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.cnn.com/2024/04/24/world/new-evidence-challenges-pentagon-account-kabul-airport-attack-intl/index.html>

ⁱⁱⁱ Email from U.S. Central Command's Legislative Affairs and Washington Liaison Office to House Foreign Affairs Committee staff on April 26, 2024

^{iv} Email from U.S. Central Command's Legislative Affairs and Washington Liaison Office to House Foreign Affairs Committee staff on April 26, 2024