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**Conference Report**

# **In-House Meeting with Dr. Mohammad N. Azizi**

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The Institute of Strategic Studies, Islamabad (ISSI) organised an in-house meeting with Afghanistan Information Management Services (AIMS) Executive Director Dr Mohammad N. Azizi on September 5, 2014. The focus of Dr Azizi's talk was the ongoing security and political transition in Afghanistan.

Dr Azizi gave an overview of the current state of affairs in Afghanistan vis-à-vis the US/NATO intervention, the successes the country has achieved, and the challenges it continues to be confronted with. He said that Afghanistan has been in turmoil for the last three decades due to many reasons, mostly because of its geopolitical location, relations with its neighbours, coupled with the interests of the Western powers as well as regional states.

Speaking about violent extremism within the region, he recalled a recent workshop he conducted in which he divided participants into three groups. The first group had to deny that the 9/11 attacks had taken place, the second group had to accept that the attacks had happened but were sorry for them, and the third group had to appreciate the attacks as the greatest thing that had happened. All three groups responded with interesting comments, using verses and quotes from the Holy Quran as well as *hadith* to justify, condemn, deny and accept the attacks, in accordance with their hypothetical stances. The view of one participant stood out with which Dr Azizi agreed, that the 9/11 attacks were very tragic for the US, but a blessing for the Afghans. Dr Azizi said that 9/11 gave a new hope to the people of Afghanistan regarding their future, including himself.

Due to the continuing unrest, many Afghan intellectuals had to leave Afghanistan and settle in different countries; as a result they were unable to contribute to scholarly discussions on Afghanistan. However, after 9/11, Afghans started coming back to their home country, especially those in the ranks of scholars, and started getting opportunities to research on different issues pertaining to Afghanistan. If one casts a look at the modern history and anthropological literature of Afghanistan, 99.9 per cent of this canon comes from the outside - with 95 per cent coming from the West, and 2.3 per cent from regional countries such as Pakistan, India and Iran. Therefore, 9/11 provided hope not only for the educated elite but also for the ordinary Afghans.

Dr Azizi said that he is often asked about what will happen once foreign aid to Afghanistan ceases, to which he responds that he belongs to a nation that knows how to survive. During the Communist era in the 1980's, poverty was at its peak and many Afghans lived on rations. But then, during the civil war in the 1990's, circumstances changed significantly. During the 90's, those who became refugees and settled in Peshawar had no means to support themselves or their families. During these trying times, Afghans had very limited livelihood opportunities, and they carried all these memories back with them. Hence, after 9/11, people within Afghanistan as well as those returning from different parts of the world had very high expectations, and this can be linked to an earlier 2002 speech given by former US president George Bush in 2002, where he gave everyone hope that a Marshall plan will be implemented. It raised the hopes of Afghans as well as the neighbours of Afghanistan in a sense that Afghanistan will be demilitarised completely and that there would be security. Afghans also expected that the Marshall plan would bring industrial development, however, that evidently did not happen.

Dr Azizi, while speaking about the current state of affairs in Afghanistan said that there is a massive change and marked improvement in Afghan social indicators, particularly in the health and education sectors. He said that during the Taliban era, girls were only allowed to study till grade three,

and that too in madrassas. Subsequently, the number of boys enrolled during that time was 0.5 million, ranging between 65, 000 and 68, 000, who went to school. However, at present, 11 million children go to school. There is still room for much improvement in the current educational system; especially, in order to ensure that quality education is imparted, teachers need to be trained. However, the important lesson is that children are learning basic concepts of knowledge, through which they will be able to finish primary and secondary school, and pursue higher education.

Dr Azizi also spoke about the current constitution of Afghanistan, which he said had a number of issues of concern. He said that the constitution was not like the Holy Bible which could not be talked about or amended; instead, the constitution has provided Afghans with new instructions on how to live as a society, and how to look into different issues Afghans tend to ignore. He cited an example of the national anthem of Afghanistan. During Daud Khan's era, the anthem was in Pashto; it was changed to Dari during Rabbani's era. However, when it came to the jirga of 2004 of which Dr Azizi was a part, extensive discussions were held over what language the anthem should be in. While division is a reality in Afghanistan, Dr Azizi said that it is not something that could be talked about in the open, as people do not have the courage to address such a controversial subject. But within the loyal jirga and the context of the constitution, different ethnicities raised their voices, which resulted in the unanimous decision to formalise the anthem in Pashto, with mention of all the names of the various ethnic groups inhabiting the land. Hence, the constitution is a relatively new development and a way forward for a large number of Afghans, particularly those born in the 1970's, who did not know what a constitution was, let alone a national anthem.

Dr Azizi also spoke about the issue of human rights' violations, which has gained considerable attention in Afghanistan. However, Azizi pointed out that during the Taliban era, the rights of men as well as those of women were equally violated, and that a holistic view of human rights violations should not ignore atrocities meted out against men. Deference for human rights has improved significantly since 9/11; this is reflective on many levels, such as the fact that at present, 29 per cent of Afghanistan's parliamentarians are women who were elected and not selected. Likewise, violence against women has decreased significantly, and women are generally free to go out and work. He cited figures from the finance ministry saying that out of its 240 employees, 90 were women. Similarly in the education sector, the role of women is becoming more prominent. He was of the view that the Afghan society needs to realise the significance of the role of women.

The role of the civil society has also transformed and expanded in Afghanistan, becoming very prominent. Today the civil society in Afghanistan has an altogether different meaning; it is no longer only limited to just NGO's. Presently, the civil society in Afghanistan comprises numerous think tanks, research and policy institutes, as well as Afghanistan's vibrant media, which has expanded massively. Currently, there are more than 80 private channels and more than 160 radio stations which are not just limited to Kabul, he added, contending the popular notion of merely Kabul-based activities, peace and development. In fact, speaking about Kabul, Azizi was of the view that peace, development and infrastructure could be seen throughout Afghanistan and was not limited to the capital only.

Economic prosperity was another important issue addressed by Azizi. He was of the view that the economic situation of Afghanistan has improved tremendously, which is visible in the purchasing power and standards of living of the people. He said that people in Afghanistan have money, regardless of the means of that income. However, having said that, post-Taliban Afghanistan has many drawbacks, such as corruption, which is at its peak. Elaborating further, he added that corruption- whether economic or political- is centralised in the Western world, but in Afghanistan it trickles down from top to

bottom. Hence, such wide-scale corruption could be taken as an indicator that the society is not progressing in the right direction towards stability. Also, since there is no control on corruption, inequality becomes manifest, with the poorest of the poor pitted against the richest of the rich.

Dr Azizi also spoke about the two major issues currently confronting Afghanistan, which are the security and the political transition. Speaking about the security transition, he outlined that it began in 2010, when the international community under the aegis of USA declared that it would be withdrawing from Afghanistan. This gave the Afghans an opportunity to take responsibility of the security of their country. However, he was of the view that the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) faces many challenges, as they are not only undertrained but also underequipped. He also highlighted that high-ranking officers within the army, which include many former mujahideen commanders, might be very good fighters but are not good strategists. Therefore much focus needs to be laid on the restructuring of the army.

Speaking about the political transition, Azizi said that there are a number of issues which are of concern for Afghans, one of them being the question of Mr. Karzai's willingness to leave office, another being whether Dr Asharf Ghani and Dr Abdullah Abdullah will be able to resolve their differences and form a consolidated, central government. The future stability of Afghanistan is dependent on a successful security and political transition. If any one of these components fails, Afghanistan as a state will also fail, stressed Azizi.

According to Dr Azizi, the discourse surrounding Afghanistan mostly consists of three predominant perspectives: the Western, regional and Pakistani perspective. The 'Western' perspective which is often expressed or found in leading western newspapers such as the Washington Post, New York Times and the Guardian- sometimes comes up with far-fetched conclusions. These may portray the Afghans as unwilling to hear or acknowledge reason, even though there might be little truth behind these claims. To cite an example, Azizi said that two weeks earlier, an article was published in the New York Times, which stated the plausibility of a coup following the first round of elections. This half-cooked hypothesis probably came about as an inference from the fact that the interior minister, defence minister and many high-ranking officials of NDS were all supporting Dr Abdullah Abdullah. However, one major flaw in this hypothesis was: discounting the fact that the head of NDS was not backing Dr Abdullah Abdullah.

The regional perspective depicts Afghanistan as a failed state which lacks political leadership and is widely divided on an ethnic basis. While some countries believe that the Pashtuns are misrepresented, others feel that the Shias are mistreated. Even those countries that do not share a border with Afghanistan, such as India and Turkey, also have a Turkish and Indian perspective on Afghanistan. He then went on to speak about the Pakistani perspective, which is of much significance to the Afghan people. Afghans have always tried to put themselves in the shoes of Pakistanis, to understand the concerns of Pakistan. It is important for the upcoming new government in Afghanistan to establish a workable relationship with Pakistan based on trust, unlike the current state of relations, which are based on mistrust.

He concluded by saying that there are many reservations within Afghanistan as well as the region regarding post-2014 developments, which include the possibility of a civil war in the country. However, Azizi was of the view that after 2014, provided the opportunity to progress and prosper, Afghanistan will still remain an important country for the West and NATO at large. He expressed hope that the new government will sign the Strategic Partnership Agreement with the US, which will be a further step in establishing a stable Afghanistan.