



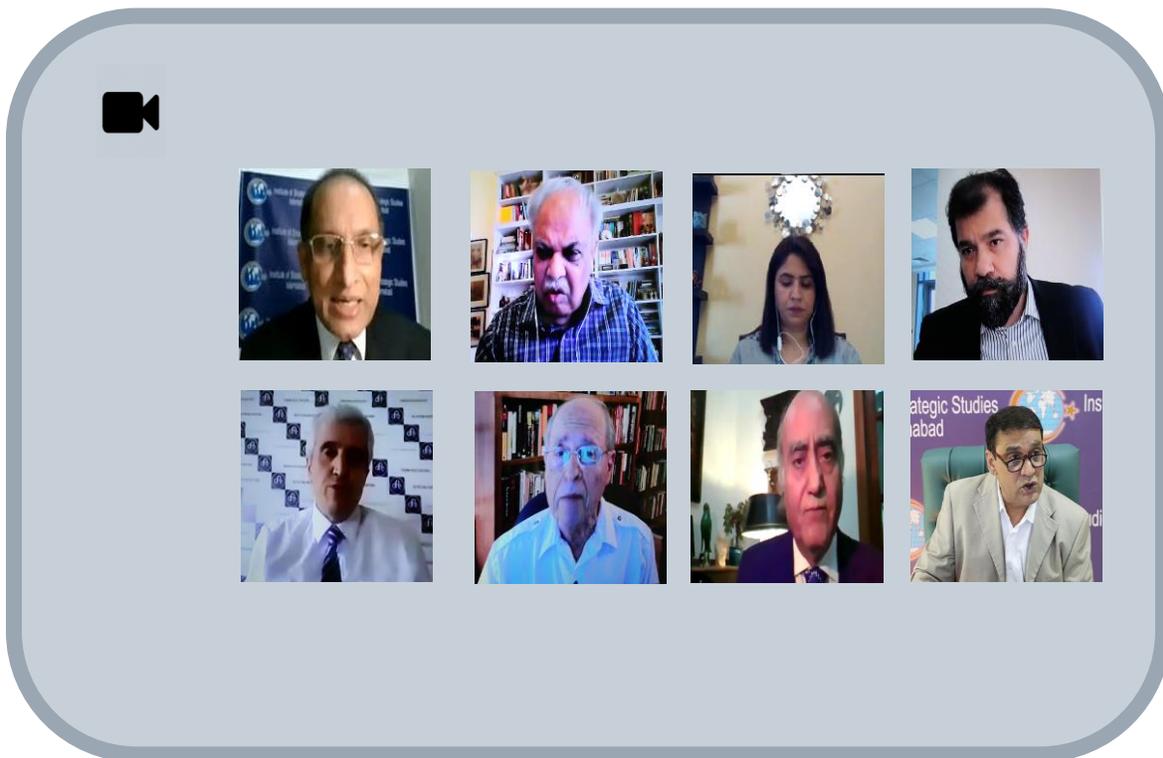
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Report – Webinar

“Doha Agreement and Future of Peace in Afghanistan”

July 1, 2020



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The Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad (ISSI) organized a Webinar on the Doha Agreement & Future of Peace in Afghanistan on July 1, 2020. Speakers at the webinar included: Ambassador Riaz Mohammad Khan, former Foreign Secretary of Pakistan; Ambassador Jawed Ludin, former Deputy Foreign Minister of Afghanistan; Dr. Huseyin Bagci, Professor International Relations, Middle East Technical University, Ankara and Dr. Marvin Weinbaum, Director for Afghanistan and Pakistan Studies at The Middle East Institute, Washington D.C., and Ms. Amina Khan, Director Centre for Middle East & Africa, ISSI.

The webinar was moderated by Mr. Najam Rafique, Director Research, ISSI. Posing a question, “Is there a future for peace in Afghanistan?”, he said that four months after the US and Taliban agreed to a peace deal in Doha, Qatar in February 2020, two of the most critical elements of the deal remain in doldrums – intra-Afghan dialogue and release of prisoners by Kabul and the Taliban. With a mercurial consensus among Afghans, progress on the Doha deal remains pessimistic and it remains to be seen what is in store for peace in Afghanistan and whether the Taliban will resist the temptation to overrun Kabul once again once the international troops have departed?

Ms. Amina Khan, Director Centre of Middle East & Africa (CMEA), ISSI gave a presentation on the on-going developments on the historic peace agreement, the hurdles in its way, constructive developments such as appointment of Abdullah Abdullah as Chairman of the High Council for National Reconciliation (HCNR), a 3-day ceasefire by the Taliban, and the release of 2,000 Taliban prisoners as a gesture of goodwill. Since the signing of the deal, the group appears to have come out as the most responsible actor, be it towards addressing the corona virus or their commitment to the peace agreement and future of Afghanistan.

Recognizing the Taliban’s apparent commitment, in March 2020, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said that in contrast to the Afghan government, the Taliban were keeping their end of the peace deal by delivering their team to the ultimate negotiations.

She further said that following the clauses of the US-Taliban deal, the Taliban have halted attacks against international forces, yet they continue to target Afghan forces - their reluctance to abandon or reduce violence against Afghan forces is highly problematic and a stumbling block in the way of peace. The Taliban must put a halt to their hostilities towards the state, because at the

end of the day its ordinary Afghans that are losing their lives. If the Taliban can accept the US – the same country that invaded Afghanistan, they should also be ready to accept the Afghan government as an equal stakeholder. Moreover, for a group that is going through war fatigue, the Taliban should do this not as a sign of weakness but a chance to further their cause through a non-violent platform and secure for themselves a legitimate place in the Afghan polity.

Discussing Kabul's position on the matter, Ms. Amina said that now that the political feud has been settled between Dr. Abdullah and President Ghani, it appears that all the ingredients necessary for a peace deal are in place; hence it is now up to the stakeholders to show themselves as both ready and willing for it to succeed. Moreover, while external challenges to the peace process are often spoken about, little or no attention is given to the internal /national challenges which by far, are the greatest hurdles in the way of peace. Hence, Kabul should focus on political and national reconciliation as well as national and social healing - critical factors that have been missing from the Afghan equation. External actors she said can only do so much. It is important for Kabul to take ownership and realize that talking to the Taliban and reaching a compromise is solely in the hands of the Afghans themselves.

She emphasized that critical aspects essential for peace that were overlooked in the US-Taliban deal would need to be addressed in the upcoming intra-Afghan talks, such as; agreeing on a timeline for a responsible and measured withdrawal, securing a credible and sustained ceasefire, focusing on national and social healing as well as pushing for a future political set up that is acceptable to all. While discussing the way forward she said all the ingredients necessary for a peace deal are in place and thus present an opportunity to Kabul as well as the Taliban to accommodate each other and take a chance on peace.

Ms. Amina opined that while many have criticized the US-Taliban deal, for being, “both truly momentous for happening at all and severely modest for what it contains”, this is the best option that the Afghan people have for peace. The US has a responsibility to push all sides to fulfill their side of the agreement and ensure a credible and workable agreement. As has been witnessed in the past, haphazard and hasty compromises that are prone to collapse need to be avoided at all costs. Instead, Washington will need to play a proactive role, ensuring it allows the Afghans to come up with their own plans, and know when to intervene and put pressure on all sides. Now

that intra Afghan talks are finally on the verge of occurrence, critical aspects essential for peace that were overlooked in the US-Taliban deal need to be addressed and focused on in the upcoming intra-Afghan talks such as troop withdrawal, ceasefire and a future political set up.

She rounded up her presentation on an optimistic note. Afghanistan has suffered for decades from war, political instability, corruption, and now faces a new threat in the form of Covid-19 which is a huge test as well as an opportunity for the Afghan government and the Taliban to come together, accommodate each other and take a chance on peace. The aim now more than ever, should be to focus on achieving peace in Afghanistan. As a starter and positive gesture, the Taliban must demonstrate a visible reduction in violence, not as a means of weakness or surrender, but rather as an opportunity to further their cause through political engagement. This should be accompanied by the upcoming intra-Afghan talks which should lead to a timeframe for a gradual and responsible troop withdrawal, leading to a sustained and credible ceasefire that is not prone to collapse. The process is long and extremely fragile, which requires the utmost care and commitment but surely peace will come.

Ambassador Riaz Mohammad Khan approached the discussion from a Pakistani perspective. He said that the agreement of February 29 is the most important decision in Afghan history after the Bonn Agreement of December 2001 and the adoption of the constitution in January 2004. Ambassador Khan admired the Afghan courage and tenacity in resisting foreign presence but also lamented the failure of Afghan leadership in resolution of their differences and bringing about peace. He said that the Taliban are part of the Afghan political landscape and of the peace process while the biggest challenge faced by Afghans is the failure to work out peace among themselves. Much depends on the Afghan leadership while the outsiders could play a positive role, in the end it would fall to upon Afghans themselves to take control of their own peace process. US have a role due to their military presence. Pakistan needs to ensure that Kabul's territory is not used against us in any way which has been a constant complaint from our side. We should proceed with our relationship confidently as we have a geographic and demographic overlap as an advantage which can only be offset by the continuation of this conflict.

Ambassador Jawed Ludin presented the Afghan perspective about the impending peace process. He said that despite claims that 'Afghanistan has never been closer to peace', the violence taking

place inside Afghanistan on a daily basis raises several questions. The discourse internationally and regionally has shifted toward peace which is extremely important as it could lead to peace eventually. But internally, Afghanistan does not seem that close to peace. About the peace process he said that it has come 19 years too late but recognized the efforts that many countries like the United States and Pakistan have made over the years for this purpose.

He emphasized upon the many complications, risks, derailments and spoilers that stand in the way of peace. Technically, the most crucial complication to be resolved is the issue of prisoners which needs to be handled tactfully. He said that there is an agreement in place which favors the release of these prisoners but there are several possible outcomes of this release which raise questions about the settlement of these prisoners after their release. Then there is also the important question about the general public sentiment toward these prisoners which include individuals that have killed family members from numerous Afghan families. This is not an easy task at all even for responsible governments all over the world.

Ambassador Ludin questioned whether it was fair to focus on Taliban prisoners' release when the Taliban have not agreed to reduce violence at the same scale. He told how the Taliban have agreed to not attack the US soldiers in the country and to not attack cities but they have only refrained from the former point of the agreement. He said that cities with civilian populations are still being targeted. He acknowledged and appreciated the role that Pakistan has played in this peace process. There has always been unity over bringing about peace in the country. Peace would also require a unity of action not only within Kabul but also on the regional as well as the global level.

The issue of religious radicalization is immensely dangerous especially in the current era of post-information and it is crucial to deny such groups even an inch of geographical space. There would also be more space to discover and work on other problems facing the region if this chronic conflict is resolved. Regional countries will have to work together to bring about a change in the status quo. It would be up to Afghans to decide what the future Afghan state would look like such as whether an Islamic Emirate or an Islamic Republic would be a suitable type of state structure. This will also impact the regional countries, not only the Afghans themselves. He said it is clear that the US is disengaging itself from Afghanistan at least in the conventional

military sense. How would the region prepare for their withdrawal? But this withdrawal would also pose serious future challenges as the US would leave with major considerations about protecting its own interests over the religious situation.

Dr. Huseyin Bagci began his comments by asking would there ever be peace in Afghanistan and if yes, then what type of peace would that be? Will this peace also bring technological advances and development in the field of education? Would this result in two Afghan societies wide apart in terms of keeping up with the times or a unified society? He made an analysis from the Turkish viewpoint and conveyed how the general public sentiment in Turkey is in favor of peace in Afghanistan as this violence has been going on since three generations. Talking about the resolution of the Afghan conflict as one of the pre-requisites for regional stability, Dr. Bagci stressed how Pakistan has played a huge role particularly by accommodating refugees. US also considers it an 'endless' war thus it is high time to end this conflict.

He further asked if the change in government in the US after the elections would change their policy or stance toward the Afghan peace process. He also posed questions about the aftermath of the peace process regarding co-habitation of different Afghan factions and style of government. Dr. Bagci wondered how the Central Asian neighbours of Afghanistan and other regional countries like Iran would react to an Islamic Emirate in the country. While negotiations with the Taliban and the progression of the peace process are first and foremost an Afghan initiative, it will be important to see what shape the future Afghan government take. Even a badly negotiated peace treaty would be better than constant war. Dr. Bagci said that the Turkish public is very much interested in peace in Afghanistan since it is essential for regional stability. The question is how far the United States is willing to pursue the peace process. Moreover, what will a change in US administration mean for the peace process? He pointed out that Chinese and Russian interest in Afghanistan will mean a continued US attention towards Afghanistan. He noted that if the Taliban and Afghan regime can contribute towards economic development of Afghanistan, then the country has a bright future.

Dr. Marvin Weinbaum characterized his assessment of the situation as that of sceptic. He was of the opinion that the February 29 agreement signed by the US was not of peace but an exit agreement so that it can depart gradually and responsibly. Thus, this agreement itself may be the

precursor to a proper peace agreement in the near future but is an exit mechanism for the United States. Dr. Weinbaum stressed that the Taliban have never abandoned or agreed to abandon their ultimate goal of establishing an Islamic emirate in Afghanistan. He said that it comes down to an impossible situation in the bargaining process because as previously seen, parties have struggled on the simplest matters of the process, which were very negotiable.

Negotiations could become excruciatingly difficult and there are signs of this process becoming quite stymied in the end. The only reason that the Taliban decided to negotiate, he said, was due to the recent realization that the military route to an Islamic Emirate would be very difficult. He pointed to the declining American leverage, particularly referring to US air power and how its absence in the future could adversely impact the security situation on ground in Afghanistan. Cohesion among the Afghan security forces could be weakened and defections could come into being disintegrating the Afghan societal structure even further. Dr. Weinbaum expressed concerns that peace in the region could be subject to the whims and preferences of the Taliban instead of a reasonable political settlement among all parties.

He also pointed out that instead of a grand plan for peace, smaller strategic and timely agreements could actually be more potent in achieving a peaceful political settlement. Reintegration could be the way to strengthen our position.

Q & A Session

Q.1. Violence by the Taliban has gone up ever since the peace process has begun as Kabul reported its deadliest week in 19 years on June 22, 2020. Under these circumstances, is there still hope for the peace process?

Ambassador Jawed Ludin wondered about the political motives of all stakeholders involved in the peace process while answering the question. He said the real question that the government needs to ask is whether we are really committed to the idea of achieving peace and if yes, then it needs to be defined properly. If the violence is not ceased immediately then what kind of peace are we talking about? People have to be convinced through solid confidence building measures. Dr. Weinbaum said that the wealth of the human capital developed over the years in Afghanistan has been incredible and these people will have no place in an Emirate. Ambassador Riaz

Muhammad Khan opined that the Taliban being a central part of the political landscape in Kabul cannot be wished away.

Q.2. How do you see the influence of India in the peace deal?

India has invested quite a lot in terms of development in Afghanistan and would definitely like to play a bigger role in the peace process. But that role should not be at the cost of Pakistan's security interests as well as that of the entire region.

Q.3. Can the Taliban doctrine and mentality be trusted to keep a country like Afghanistan safe?

The real danger is the absence of unity among the Taliban factions as well as the Afghan government. A civil war would be a nightmare that the Afghans are quite afraid of and which is the most destructive kind of conflict that the region would try to avoid at all costs.

Chairman BOG, ISSI, Ambassador Khalid Mahmood in his concluding remarks said that he was hopeful that prospects for peace in Afghanistan are very near. However, one has to be cognizant of the challenges and obstacles at hand. For instance, there is still a fear of civil war breaking out again. On one hand, peace seems nearer than it has ever been before due to the US wish to withdraw and the dialogue between the Taliban and the Afghan government. The primary responsibility for peace rests on Afghan shoulders and it is important that they arrive at some modus operandi which will involve power sharing to ensure a peaceful and stable Afghanistan.

PICTURES OF THE EVENT

