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Report – Panel Discussion

“Conversations on the Afghan Peace Process: Qatar’s Role in Afghanistan”

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The Centre for Afghanistan, Middle East & Africa (CAMEA) at the Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad (ISSI) had a Panel Discussion on ‘Conversations on the Afghan Peace Process: Qatar’s Role in Afghanistan’ which is the second in a series of conversations, CAMEA had on Afghanistan – under its Conversations on the Afghan Peace Process series.

The distinguished speakers included: Dr. Majed al-Ansari, President of Qatar International Academy for Security Studies (QIASS); Dr. Marwan Qabalan, Director of Policy Analysis at the Arab Centre for Research and Policy Studies, Qatar; Dr. Omar Sadr, Assistant Professor of Political Science at the American University of Afghanistan (AUAF); and Ambassador Sarfraz Khanzada, former Ambassador of Pakistan to Qatar. Ambassador Aizaz Ahmad Chaudhry, Director General ISSI, and Ambassador Khalid Mahmood, Chairman BOG, ISSI, also took part in the discussion.

During her opening remarks, Ms. Amina Khan, Director CAMEA, said that the war in Afghanistan, which has spanned for nearly two decades, appears to be coming to a rather inconclusive end, with the political, security, and economic transition processes still in limbo. With limited gains, Afghanistan is far from being stable, as it continues to be challenged by a plethora of problems, thus presenting challenges to the international community and the region at large.

She further mentioned, perplexed by instability in Afghanistan, regional actors have come to the forefront to play a more proactive role, and one such country is Qatar, which has played a substantive role in Afghanistan. Qatar has risen to the role of a mediator between the Taliban and Kabul as well as the US and Taliban as early as 2011. In 2013, Qatar's efforts resulted in the opening up of a political office for the Taliban in Doha to pursue peace talks with the Afghan government. However, hopes for a negotiated settlement were short-lived due to reservations from the Karzai government, as a result, the talks were called off. Even though the US and Qatar made several subsequent attempts to salvage peace talks, efforts failed to deliver until more recently, with the initiation of the Doha talks in July 2018. After 18 months of extensive and rather exhausting negotiations, including a brief collapse of the process in September 2019, a breakthrough was finally achieved with the signing of the US-Taliban peace agreement in Doha on February 29, 2020.

Although the deal was signed over a year ago, still several challenges stand in the way of intra-Afghan negotiations. The recent Taliban military advance, deadlock in intra-Afghan dialogue, and deteriorating overall security situation in the country have worsened an already difficult situation, making the prospects of an inclusive political structure even more implausible.

She concluded by saying that while Qatar, like Pakistan, is committed to the ongoing process, at the end of the day peace can only be achieved through a workable compromise between the Afghan government and the Taliban - which at this stage appears to be a tall order.

Ambassador Aizaz Ahmad Chaudhry said that Qatar played a pivotal role in mediation between the Afghan Government and the Taliban. He hoped that all parties would recognize the significance of a negotiated settlement sooner or later because, at the end of the day, peace can only be achieved through a workable settlement between the principal parties, he said.

Dr. Majed al-Ansari gave his overall analysis of Qatar's role in the Afghan peace process. He emphasized that the Americans, the Afghan Government, and the Taliban found Qatar as a trustworthy partner. Qatar neither sent its military force along with the US and NATO alliance in Afghanistan nor does Qatar have military interests in the country. So, being a small, non-controversial, and non-interventionist state for Afghanistan, Qatar was acceptable to the Afghan Government, the Taliban, and the US. He further mentioned that Qatar's mediation efforts can be viewed as building a national ground for the country since 1995 as well as a survival strategy that would showcase it as an important partner worthy of support.

Dr. Marwan Qabalan mentioned that Qatar's involvement in the Afghan peace process is not something new. One of the motives behind the mediation includes establishing itself as a facilitator and mediator in different regional conflicts, such as; Sudan, Lebanon, Palestine (mediation between Hamas and Al-Fatah), Afghanistan, etc., and thus branding itself as a peacemaker in a very unstable part of the world. Moreover, Qatar would like to distinguish itself as a country that has its independent foreign policy-something which it has been trying for the past 25 years. He highlighted that Qatar's position strengthened in the negotiation process when the Obama Administration and Taliban reached a point of a prisoner swap in 2014.

Dr. Marwan Qabalan thought that challenges which Qatar faces in its mediation efforts include the very complicated situation concerning the different factions in Afghanistan, and the unrestricted involvement of so many regional players all trying to fill the security vacuum and the desire of some countries for Qatar's mediation efforts to fail.

Dr. Omar Sadr viewed Qatar's role as a pragmatic element in the mediation process and an interlocutor between the West and the Islamic world. He said that Qatar is experienced in both facilitation and mediation mostly between a short number of parties of negotiations, but Afghanistan's conflict is quite complicated. It will also require efforts from regional countries to take ownership of peace and stability in Afghanistan.

Ambassador Sarfraz Khanzada believed that Qatar is unique amongst the Middle Eastern states. Therefore, the role of facilitation and mediation suits the country. He elaborated that Qatar has relatively tangible foreign policy tools, which include the element of vast LNG resources that make it an energy giant; its stable economy and foreign reserves, which increase its financial capabilities at home and abroad; its media network Aljazeera, which gives it popularity in the Arab and non-Arab world; its Qatar Airways, which have made it a global hub; and its geographical position in the Gulf, which makes it seem like a viable neutral partner. Mr. Ambassador further said that Qatar mediated in bringing the US and Taliban to a peace deal. Now, it is struggling hard for a negotiated settlement between the Afghan Government and the Taliban. Therefore, it has a very moderate and important role to play in Afghanistan even after the withdrawal of foreign forces.

While responding to the question about how hopeful Qatar is for a possible breakthrough in intra-Afghan negotiations for peace in Afghanistan, Dr. Majed al-Ansari said he was hopeful of a settlement soon as given the Taliban are now open to talking, something which they had not been previously. However, at the moment there is a conflict within both the Taliban and the Afghan Government. Among these two principle parties of negotiations, the Afghan Government is in bigger trouble, which not only has to engage multiple stakeholders outside but also has to tackle the challenge of the divide between coalition parties in the government. Contrary to this situation, the Taliban side is more structured and confident upon its stance of negotiations. He mentioned that this element further causes frustration to the Afghan Government.

The main challenge Qatar will face is to make the peace process successful by an Afghan-led and Afghan-owned process. Moreover, The Taliban's military advance is another challenge for all stakeholders. Dr. Majed al-Ansari highlighted that academia, civil society and, other Afghans need to come up with solution to the Afghan conflict. There needs to be a consensus of the outcome of mediation within Afghans.

Dr. Qabalan said that since Qatar has been hosting the Taliban at Doha, but it does not have leverage on the group. He noted that the balance of power on ground might the have the actual say in Afghanistan and at the table of negotiations. He opined that being a mediator, Qatar could not have leverage over the Taliban or the Afghan Government to reach a power-sharing agreement. So, uncertainty is the name of the game in the coming weeks in Afghanistan. After fighting for many years, still today the intentions of principle parties of the intra-Afghan dialogue are not clear, he noted. Taliban can takeover Kabul overnight, but their strategies are different as compared they applied in 1996. This time, they are on a regional tour and focussing on giving assurances to the regional countries for peace at the border. They are politically smart and acting proactively at the diplomatic front, even sometimes more accurately than the legitimate government in Afghanistan, he said.

Dr. Qabalan highlighted the recessive role of US, where it seems that it has abandoned the Afghan Government even before the complete withdrawal from Afghanistan. This behaviour of the US is leaving a power vacuum, which could be definitely filled by its rivals i.e. China, Russia and Iran. He viewed that US might be the loser in this scheme, if it continues separating itself from the core issues of Afghanistan, chiefly the negotiated settlement. He further commented that the threat of resurgence of Al Qaeda and Islamic State (IS) can be the next security threat to the region from Afghanistan, because neither the Afghan Government has the capability to counter the danger nor Taliban are prepared to tackle the threat.

Dr. Omar Sadr was of the opinion that democratic values and the democratic government in Afghanistan are weak enough, which can deliver very less than the expectations of the people of Afghanistan. He also mentioned that there are divisions in the existing political structure of the Afghan government and its allies. He highlighted how the Taliban want to establish a 'Sharia' driven government in Afghanistan, but many stakeholders in Afghanistan are confused about the

system and say that Taliban neither have any framework nor have capacity to establish such a model, which could be acceptable for the rest of the world for coexistence in the international system.

Ambassador Sarfraz Khanzada expressed the political mind-set of Taliban, he said that Taliban do not trust the electoral process in Afghanistan nor do they have the same trust in Qatar relative to the level of trust they had prior to the Gulf Cooperation Council's (GCC) blockade of Qatar. He said that at the moment, the balance of power in Afghanistan has shifted towards the Taliban. He was optimistic that the Taliban have evolved and are serious towards negotiations.

Dr. Omar Sadr was of the belief that the Taliban have not changed themselves nor are they pragmatic, but remain violent as they were in the past. He highlighted that Afghanistan is a diverse country and there is a significant part of the population in Afghanistan which is in favour of elections. With regards to the question of establishment of a sustainable political state, he said that the rule of a single ethnic group is unacceptable in the country. There needs to be an accountable and inclusive government in Afghanistan. He emphasized that Americans are leaving Afghanistan with some expectations from the future Afghan government, which must be responsible towards human rights, accountable in terms of finance, sovereign in terms constitutionally and geographically, and independent in terms of its foreign policy. Only a democratic government can deliver these futuristic elements. All depends on how scenarios will evolve, he said.

While responding to the question about how does Qatar view the role of India in Afghanistan and the meetings between Taliban and Indian representatives, Dr. Majed al-Ansari said that Qatar acting as a mediator, is in contact with almost all regional countries including India, but it refrains to be engaged in any protracted rivalry between regional states. He further mentioned that certain Afghan factions are interested to engage multiple actors in the process, so that they could maximize their stakes.

Dr. Qabalan addressed the question about the role of Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) in the Afghan peace settlement. He said that OIC deals with only legitimate governments, but the Afghan government faces an indigenous parallel militant movement. Therefore, OIC refrains from getting involved in a very controversial aspect of the war in Afghanistan. In spite of keeping distance, the official

statements of OIC show grave concerns over the situation and issues pertaining to Afghanistan very frequently.