



**INSTITUTE OF
STRATEGIC STUDIES**

web: www.issi.org.pk
phone: +92-920-4423, 24
fax: +92-920-4658

Report – Webinar

“Evolving Situation in Afghanistan”

August 26, 2021



Rapporteur: Areeba Arif Khan

Edited by: Amina Khan

The Centre for Afghanistan, Middle East & Africa (CAMEA) at the Institute of Strategic Studies (ISSI) in collaboration with the Middle East Monitor (MEMO), UK held a webinar on “Evolving Situation in Afghanistan” on August 26, 2021. The distinguished speakers included: Dr. Abdullah Anas , author of ‘To the Mountains: My Life in Jihad, from Algeria to Afghanistan’, Dr. Tamim Asey, Founder & Executive Chairman of the Institute of War and Peace Studies (IWPS), Kabul, Mr. Adam N Weinstein, Research Fellow at the Quincy Institute, Ms. Amina Khan, Director CAMEA, ISSI. Ambassador Aizaz Ahmad Chaudhry, Director General ISSI, Dr. Daud Abdullah, Director Middle East Monitor (MEMO), and Ambassador Khalid Mahmood, Chairman BOG, ISSI also spoke on the occasion.

During his introductory remarks, Dr. Daud Abdullah stated that the presence of foreign troops in Afghanistan was always seen as an affront to what it means to be an Afghan. He also believed that foreign powers have overlooked that the people of Afghanistan had their values, systems and beliefs which they adhered to and sought to preserve. The reaction which we saw as a result of the invasion was predictable for a country that was never colonised. There had long been a recognition that the war in Afghanistan was unwinnable. Even after the Afghan army mobilized a force, they were unable to reverse the trend of defeat and the invading forces could not motivate young Afghans to fight against their fellow Afghans. He also added that after, what he called a ‘misadventure’, the inquisition, export and imposition of western values remains a fantasy. Afghanistan represents a classic case in this regard. He concluded by saying that throughout this 20-year misadventure the invading forces could not motivate young Afghans to fight against their fellow Afghans and that was one of the reasons for the collapse and disintegration of those forces.

During his welcome remarks, Ambassador Aizaz Ahmad Chaudhry said that no nation would like to be occupied by any other nation and the Afghans were no exception to this. The end of any occupation is an inevitable reality and should be endorsed. He was of the opinion that there will be peace in Afghanistan when there is no foreign occupation and he pointed out that in the 11days during which the Taliban have taken control of the capital Kabul, no province or city rebelled against them because they thought that they were being liberated from foreign occupation. He stressed that the decision taken by the Taliban was right because America was

never there for building the nation of Afghanistan, Afghans's will have to build their nation in their way.

He believed that the Taliban could achieve political stability in Afghanistan, provided they form an inclusive setup and honor their commitments and adopt a more moderate outlook. Moreover, the Taliban should honor their promise that Afghan soil will not be used against any other country- something which all of Afghanistan's neighbors are very sensitive about. He said that the Ashraf Ghani government was dependent on economic assistance from the West, but now the Taliban should not expect any economic assistance from the West. Hence, the Taliban should instead count on trade and transit trade for economic development, especially through Pakistan and Iran.

Dr Abdullah Anas said that though I am Algerian and I live in the UK, my heart remains in Afghanistan. Happiness through military victory is not permanent; the real victory will be a political victory. He said that permanent stability in Afghanistan is crucial. He said that before we go to the topic of international recognition of the Taliban, we have to solve the financial situation inside Afghanistan. We should not repeat the mistakes which we have done in past. There is unrest and instability in Afghanistan for the past 30, 40 years. At this stage, the Taliban should indulge themselves in talks with Afghan factions and negotiations on how to shape the future political system of Afghanistan.

He added that there needs to be reconciliation between all Afghan factions for enduring peace and stability. Pakistan is like a 'big brother' of Afghanistan, which means they should facilitate the establishment of an inclusive political system instead of just recognizing an exclusive political system and asking people to work with that political system because one opinion, one system, one idea and one faction cannot rule Afghanistan anymore.

Dr. Tamim Assey believed that no single group can rule Afghanistan by themselves. The failure of the Taliban regime in the 1990s has proved that any monopoly of resources and power will not last in Afghanistan. However, inclusivity and a broad-based approach are keys to lasting peace. He was of the view that the people of Afghanistan have strong values and they want education, health services and freedom. They are not fighters and warriors - which was an old narrative- and it is high time to change this narrative. He expressed that Afghanistan has been a

cradle of many civilizations and the cold war and successive proxy wars have turned Afghanistan into the battleground and labelled it as a country that is always fighting.

He stressed that wars are costly businesses and Afghanistan is a poor country and the important question here is that who is providing money and resources. At this stage, the Taliban must fulfil the demands of the people of Afghanistan and deliver services because if this did not happen people will start rebelling against them within six months. He said that it is too soon to call the Taliban takeover a military victory. Taliban should accept the diversity of Afghanistan, start working on governance and start being inclusive if they want to run the country for a long period.

He stressed that the Taliban should spell out their visions within six months. In this period they should do four things which are; first, announce the form of government, second, they should start delivering services, third they should seek some financial means because there will be a financial crunch and economic downturn in the country and fourth is that if they fail to form an inclusive political setup fighting will remerge and Afghanistan will plunge into another civil war.

While talking about the foreign policy of the Taliban, there is a need for a reset in relations vis a vis Pakistan. During the last 20 years, a lot of transformation has happened and a lot of mistakes have been made by both sides. It is the right time to convert the Pakistan-Afghan relationship into a meaningful strategic partnership. In terms of relations with Iran, a reset in relationship is the need of the hour.

Dr. Adam Weinstein said that Afghanistan has always been beholden to what outside powers want for it. The ideal situation would have been the formation of an inclusive set-up in Afghanistan and there was some form of transition instead of the present uncertainty. The previous government in Kabul was mired in strategic incompetence and pursued their short-sighted political gains; as a result, Afghans suffered. He also said if something is not done soon, there will be casualties in Afghanistan due to starvation. It also needs to be ensured that there needs to be the creation of a system where a political equilibrium emerges.

Afghanistan is not a country that can be sustained through cross border trade since it is a country that has been heavily dependent on aid. At this stage, it is worth considering what are the real

priorities for the United States, for Pakistan, for Iran, for Russia and the international community in Afghanistan. He also added that the recent 'Sanction Pakistan' movement is a laughable proposition because it does not solve any US problem related to Afghanistan. Here he added that though Pakistan does not have complete leverage over the Taliban, it is in Islamabad's interest to work with the Taliban government and form an inclusive government. He stressed that the United States and Pakistan must continue to work together on counterterrorism and it is crucial that the US not simply view or withdraw from Afghanistan as a way to wipe its hands clean of Afghanistan and Pakistan because that will come back to haunt the US later on.

Ms. Amina Khan stated that there is no doubt that with the announcement of the US withdrawal, in the absence of a negotiated settlement, a military takeover by the Taliban was expected, the manner, and the speed at which the group has taken over, along with the tactics employed was certainly not anticipated. While many were foreseeing bloodshed, unlike the past, the Taliban have so far adopted non-offensive tactics, and thus by far, the transition process has been relatively smooth. The Taliban have assured that they will not resort to any sort of violence in fear that they will lose the support and recognition the group so badly needs from the international community to legitimize their rule even if it is within the context of an inclusive set-up. The Taliban have been holding meetings with major Afghan stakeholders and while there are some signs of resistance, it appears that key Afghan stakeholders/factions are willing to work with the Taliban in this inclusive political set-up we keep on hearing about.

She stated that Afghanistan must be viewed as a collective and shared responsibility – which entailed ensuring the formation of an inclusive political setup that is acceptable to all. While talking about the role of Pakistan she said that Pak has a relationship with the Taliban as do a number of countries within and outside the region have. The Taliban have developed relations within the region and have other sources of support which includes entails logistics, financial and open flow of arms. So, instead of shifting the onus or responsibility of Afghanistan on Pakistan, it is time for the US to fulfil its responsibility - that is ensure the formation of an inclusive political set-up instead of pushing for sanctions that will not harm the Taliban but ordinary Afghans.

In his concluding remarks, Ambassador Khalid Mahmood stated that the Afghan war ended with a great human and economic loss and one thing which is certain is that Afghanistan is a graveyard of empires. He did not think the US has completely withdrawn from the region and remains a pre-eminent power. Sensitivity needs to be shown to the local culture and multilateralism needs to be reinforced. To have credibility, there need to be no double standards, he said. The Taliban should be aware that international legitimacy needs to be earned.

The discussion was followed by a brief question-answer session:

Responding to the question regarding the inclusive political setup and role of the region Dr. Tamim stated that the tone of the Taliban which we are witnessing now is a conciliatory tone and the Taliban are not pursuing their extremist policies which they have pursued in past especially during the 1990s and this is a positive sign. The new generation should help the Taliban in formation of an inclusive political setup and the Taliban should not be exclusionary. They should make Afghanistan a home of all Afghans but it is still too early to apprehend that.

We have to wait and see what kind of political setup they will form. This movement is a double edged sword and it is both a threat and an opportunity. It is an opportunity for the Taliban to form an inclusive based government that represents and reflects the diversity of new Afghanistan. This will be a successful way to win peace in Afghanistan. At the same time, it can be a threat if extremist elements between Taliban hijack the Taliban mandate and turn it into a jihad or khilafat ideology then it will eventually trigger the resistance and will lead towards an unending war. In terms of the regional role, Afghanistan has to reset its relations with Pakistan and other important countries of the region like Iran. Moreover, Pakistan can play the role of interlocutor because of its historical relations with the Taliban. The entire region wants stability and peace in Afghanistan at this stage.

In response to another question regarding, whether the evacuations taking place in Afghanistan encompass all educated masses within Afghanistan, Dr. Tamim agreed that the best and brightest are leaving Afghanistan. But at the same time he was optimistic that would eventually come back as soon as the Taliban make an inclusive and open political setup.

Replying to a question about the time frame of how to deal with the Taliban, Dr. Weinstein stated that the Taliban are in a critical time frame. They are holding meetings with various Afghan factions such as meetings with Karzai, Abdullah Abdullah and others. It is important to understand that what these meetings mean and assess whether these are the beginning of any process or just formal meetings. It is high time that all the regional states along with the US should adopt a regional approach to deal with the evolving situation in Afghanistan and it is important to learn from the mistakes of the past. An inclusive government in Afghanistan is very important at this stage not only for democracy or rights but to avoid an unending war in Afghanistan.

While addressing the concerns regarding the future of Afghanistan Dr. Abdullah Anas said that there is a complete change in attitude and behavior of the Taliban. They are sending some positive signs that they are more open and sort of liberal but how long this will persist remains a key question.