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Report – Webinar

“Taliban in Power – A Year On”

August 12, 2022



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The Centre for Afghanistan, Middle East and Africa (CAMEA) at the Institute of Strategic Studies (ISSI) in collaboration with the Institute of War and Peace Studies (IWPS), Kabul hosted a webinar titled “Taliban in Power - A Year On”. The webinar was moderated by Ms. Amina Khan, Director CAMEA. The speakers at the webinar included Ambassador Aizaz Ahmad Chaudhry, Director General ISSI, Ms. Nargis Nehan, Former Afghan Politician, Sardar Ahmad Shakeeb, Charge d’Affairs/ Minister Counselor, Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, Lotfullah Najafizada, Co-Founder and Senior Journalist at Amu TV, Mr Adam Weinstein, Research Fellow at the Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft and Dr. Mandana Tisheyar, Department of Regional Studies, ECO College, Allameh Tabataba’i University, Tehran.

The concluding remarks were given by Mr. Tamim Asey, Founder & Executive Chairman of the Institute of War and Peace Studies (IWPS), Kabul.

During her welcome remarks, Ms Amina Khan stated that August 15, 2022, will mark one year since the Taliban dispensation assumed power. While, initially, there were certain questions as to what the Taliban’s rule will mean for governance, political freedom, human/women's rights, counter-terrorism assurances, or regional peace and stability, the past year has somewhat set the tone and is an indication of how the group intends to govern the country. Even within the confines of the current interim setup, the real test for the Taliban is by no means limited to securing power but revolves around legitimacy, acceptance, performance and of course recognition. She said that this is a unique and unprecedented opportunity for Afghans to come together and focus on a state and government that serves the Afghan people who have suffered immensely. While Afghanistan is a shared responsibility that warrants a collective response, all stakeholders must deliver on their respective parts.

During her remarks, Ms Nargis Nehan, appreciated the dialogue sessions between Pakistan and Afghanistan and she said these dialogues will pave a way for both states. She was of the view that August 15, 2021, was not the only collapse of the country but the collapse of the entire nation, which includes women, media and society. She highlighted that it is very important to remember what Afghanistan was before the transition of power. There was a constitution, government, media and civil society and a number of people who were working for the development of the country. She highlighted that women have always been sufferers in

Afghanistan and they have been led down by all stakeholders, including the international community and Afghan dispensations including the Taliban who have promised that women will be given their rights but so far have not honoured their commitments; Doha Peace Talks were also failed to help the situation of women.

She also pointed out that Afghanistan has also been led down by regional countries and because of the mismanagement and irresponsibility of the international community Afghanistan is suffering. Furthermore, the current economic situation is dire as the country is sinking into poverty and a humanitarian crisis. She was of the view that the time was still ripe for the country to move towards stability provided the Taliban come up with a political and constitutional framework through consensus to govern the country and that they should allow women to be able to exercise their basic rights to education and public life.

Sardar Ahmad Shakeeb highlighted the Taliban's achievements since they assumed office in August 2021. The political transition that took place was peaceful with no civilian or military casualties. He went on to say that in a very short time the new government announced the resumption of all official affairs as well and in this way the group was able to restore the trust vacuum between neighboring and regional countries of Afghanistan. The new government has started to take part in dialogues just like the presence of our leaders in the OIC held in Islamabad and the bilateral talks with China.

The Taliban have also been engaging with the international and regional community in a more robust manner. Furthermore, compared with previous Afghan governments, the number of foreign delegations that have visited Afghanistan in the past, showcase how foreign relations have flourished after the political change in the country. Afghan embassies have remained active in various countries including those in Pakistan, China, Iran, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Turkey, Russia, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Saudi Arabia, India, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates. Furthermore, new diplomats have been delegated to some Embassies as well. He added that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs is working on a written, responsive and comprehensive foreign policy. From past one year our foreign policy works in more realistic and dynamic way and the practical work will also be shown in the near future. Regarding the development of the country, he highlighted several economic, trade and connectivity projects in the works, including

increasing bilateral trade with both Pakistan and China. This is evident from the fact that within a short period of time the Taliban Government has provided ground for the transportation of exports. While speaking about the importance of education, he said that so far more than 500 Afghans have been sent to many countries for higher education through scholarships and that dozens of teachers from Afghanistan's private universities have also been sent to China on scholarships for Master's and PhD degrees.

During his remarks, Ambassador Aizaz Ahmad Chaudhry said that Afghanistan is an important neighbor of Pakistan and hence, whatever happens in Afghanistan affects Pakistan and vice versa. He said our destinies are linked and the Think Tanks, Civil society and people to people dialogues is a sign of better understanding between these two neighbors. Therefore, it is always important for the people of the two countries to remain connected. We are almost one year into the Taliban's takeover of Kabul and this is a reality. However, the international community is engaged with them but not as a de jure government. The on-ground situation is quite grim. Both UN and US sanctions are still in place and the US has also stopped funds which belong to the Afghan people. The topic of recognition is one which the Taliban government needs to ponder over very seriously. There are three major expectations from the Taliban which include counter terrorism, an inclusive set up and women rights. There are also some positive developments such as increased diplomatic engagement and impetus towards economic regional connectivity. Afghanistan can become the transit corridor between South and Central Asia. Regional countries hope to see a peaceful Afghanistan, in which there is no outflow of terrorism and narcotics, he said. The border issues between the two states should be settled on priority, the emergence of TTP is also a major concern on both sides.

During his remarks, Mr. Lotfullah Najafizada said that the Taliban have not yet managed to transition from a military group to a government. He went on to say that they have also not managed to provide a vision on how to link the country. He said that the ruling party in Afghanistan has to come up with a model to accommodate all groups of Afghans and provide a vision for taking the country forward. The profound humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan and the grim economic situation have affected all sectors of society. In humanitarian crisis media becoming target again and again like over the past one year over half a million journalists lost their jobs, more than two hundreds had been arrested and tortured. Furthermore, on the topic of

counterterrorism, he said that the fact that Ayman al-Zawahiri was found and killed in Kabul begs questions regarding the presence of terrorist organisations in Kabul as well as the Taliban's relations with other terrorist groups. He summarized by stating that all in all, it was a year of suffering and grief. Nevertheless, it is up to all Afghans to stay engaged, work with each other and find solutions that will work for everyone and not for only some specific class of people.

Mr Adam Weinstein began by saying that the Taliban are the de facto government but should not assume that they are not ordained to rule. Highlighting some of the positive developments that came with the Taliban takeover, which was relatively peaceful where Kabul was not destroyed nor was a mass revenge witnessed, he said there has been free movement for most people, men and families, however women's movement remains restricted. The Taliban have invited diplomatic missions to the country which is a positive development and a reflection of the group's willingness to engage with the international community. Domestically, governance remains an issue but there is less corruption as has been observed by independent sources. Regarding the economic development, he said the Taliban need to focus on developing an organic economy, by focusing on exports to the region. The silver lining, he said, was that the Taliban are willing to talk and Sardar Shakib's participation in panels like this was a reflection of this policy. However, he said the Taliban need to focus on attaining legitimacy from the Afghan people by engaging with them. He also highlighted the negatives, by saying that the Taliban need to improve in many respects, and they are now in government to represent all Afghans. Speaking about the US, he said Washington has continued to give humanitarian aid to Afghanistan amounting to \$775 million - making it the single largest international donor.

While he said that the US was engaging with the group, it was important for US diplomats to engage with the group in Kabul directly. Moreover, while the US was close to furthering its engagement with the group via aid, allowing for a brief window of opportunity to improve relations, the ban on girls' education was the single most destructive measure that the Taliban undertook, which has been extremely damaging for the group. He said, while Afghanistan cannot develop without the active participation of all stakeholders, the group must realize that if they do not deal with terrorist group like al -Qaeda, ISKP or the TTP, which continue to be the biggest barriers. He particularly raised the issue of the TTP and how it has resurfaced in Swat where it has been causing incredible hardship and harming Pakistan. He said that it was not only

the responsibility of Pakistani security forces but also its neighbors including the Taliban to ensure the region remains secure.

Dr. Mandana Tisheyar, said that the neighbors of Afghanistan, especially the Iran and Pakistan have been greatly affected by the situation in Afghanistan especially with regards to the refugee inflow. While some Iranians considered the US withdrawal from Afghanistan as a good omen and tried to leave doors open for dialogue with the Taliban, however, border tensions have continued despite this. Factional and political divisions within the Taliban have caused upheavals as well. Due to the prominence of ethnicity in Afghanistan, if the ground is provided for dialogue and inclusive participation by the government, it will undoubtedly result in peace and stability in the country. Talking about the refugee crisis she said that thousands of academics and intellectuals and other groups related to the Afghan middle class have started new lives in other countries. These are socio-economic assets in the host country and can become the basis for dialogue of cooperation with the Taliban. The start of such a dialogue between thinkers and experts from the region could play a key role in bringing Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iran closer. There are social, cultural, economic, and linguistic communalities between the people of these three nations who can contribute in flourishing the future of these states, they can interact and move toward the common solutions. She hoped that if dialogues continues the intellectuals from the regional states will also participate in dialogue to contribute in the increased provision of culture based security in the region.

Dr Zakir Ershad remarked that at this stage governance and political stability are critical questions. The Taliban should come up with proper policies and mechanisms to run the country. He went on to say that they should work for an inclusive political setup in which all Afghan factions should be included and should work towards alleviating the current humanitarian crisis in the country.

In his concluding remarks, Mr. Tamim Asey said that it is very important for the Taliban to engage with regional countries. He said that Pakistan is going to be a major partner as well as a major corridor which will help ease the humanitarian crisis in the country. Everyone is concerned about the security, human rights and lack of inclusive setup and at this point, all sides are engaging with the Taliban with the sole aim of bringing peace and stability to the country..

Hence, it is the right time for the Taliban to engage in constructive dialogue with the international community and it is equally important for the international community to remain engaged independently as well as through initiatives.