

International Conference

Reimagining Afghanistan: Ways Forward

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In the run up to the second anniversary since the Taliban takeover of Kabul in August 2021 the Afghan Institute for Strategic Studies held its first international conference in London since the institute's relocation to the UK in 2022 titled 'Reimagining Afghanistan: Ways Forward'. This was a timely conference given the continued human rights violations by the Taliban, particularly against women, and discussions within the international community about Taliban recognition. Speakers constituted academics, civil society activists, military personnel, journalists and diplomats, among others, with a diverse cross-section of both Afghan and non-Afghan speakers. Barring the conference's keynote speech by John Sopko, the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR), and Ben Acheson's book launch, the working panels of the conference followed Chatham House rules. Hence the names of various speakers are not attributed to the comments referenced in this report.

Keynote Speech - John Sopko:

From the outset of the keynote speech John Sopko emphasised that the United States' expectations for and from Afghanistan were unrealistic. Afghanistan constantly had complex social and economic issues but the US was over-confident when it came to its approach and engagement with the country. The US did not fully understand local dynamics and values. Mr Sopko stated that the US, and the international community as a whole, does not 'learn lessons well'. There was a constant repetition of past mistakes between 2001 and 2021, meaning that development aid strategies did not improve over the course of two decades. Fundamentally, the US did not understand Afghanistan, especially the country's politics and culture. Afghanistan was viewed as homogenous by the US. Mr Sopko noted that that mindset was as follows: 'What was good for Kabul is good for Kandahar'. The same is happening now and the US is treating the Taliban as a homogenous group. However, he emphasised that the SIGAR does its best to listen before it talks. Furthermore, there is still a lot of interest in Afghanistan, but those in Washington DC will not openly admit this. It is now more important than ever to seriously reflect on Afghanistan and the past twenty years. Otherwise, the US will repeat the same mistakes it made in Afghanistan elsewhere in the world.

Currently, the SIGAR committee is looking at how humanitarian aid is operating in Afghanistan. One primary concern here is whether the Taliban is diverting aid. There are also concerns about the United Nations (UN) recent conduct in Afghanistan. A key issue for the US at present is balancing the issue of humanitarian assistance for those in need versus aid being usurped by a violent regime that the US is deeply against. The SIGAR has come to learn that there are serious operational problems in relation to the UN in Afghanistan, but this is confidential for now. Funds to Afghanistan may be banned by the US government if it is used by the Taliban in any capacity beyond its intended use. This is a potential policy decision that is under consideration in Washington DC at present. Thus, given the events of the last two years, since the Taliban return, it appears that lessons have not been learnt, and the US is doing the same post-2021 in Afghanistan as it did in the past.

Panel I: Emerging Black Hole: Convergence of ‘Acute’ and ‘Chronic’ Ills:

One idea that was emphasised in panel one was that a regional perspective needed to overcome domestic obstacles in Afghanistan. Regional countries need to be involved as part of a solution for the current problems and crises in the country. There is no multilateral approach towards Afghanistan at present. Furthermore, it is important to note that the ideology of the Taliban has not changed since the 1990s, there is no Taliban 2.0. They are not a legitimate government. In the beginning, initial cabinet members numbered thirty-one once, but now it numbers fifty-two. Surprisingly, the Taliban as an entity is not sanctioned by the UN but the Haqqani Network is a sanctioned entity. The Taliban claims that it is combatting ISIS-K but at the same time Al Qaeda members hold Afghan passports and national ID cards, so here a tension emerges with regard to claims to not harbouring terrorist groups. Furthermore, a recent development is that of new NGOs being established in Afghanistan, but they are Taliban-affiliated NGOs. Worryingly, these NGOs allow for a diversion of humanitarian aid, some of which goes to terrorist fighters. This means that the flow of aid is not transparent.

In terms of the Taliban itself, there are now internal divisions within the Taliban. Furthermore, given the previous harbouring of terrorists by the Taliban in Afghanistan, Al Qaeda is currently very safe in the country. This allows the terrorist group to resume its operational capacities. However, providing this sanctuary has not alleviated all of Al Qaeda’s problems. The group currently has a succession dilemma, starting in 2022. This is due to the killing of Ayman al-Zawahiri in Kabul in the same year. Although Al Qaeda has found a new

safe haven in Afghanistan, it will not be allowed to resume its global agenda against the West again. Thus, post-2021, Al Qaeda has a great chance to re-establish its capacity in Afghanistan.

Another key takeaway from this panel was the need to consider present and future dynamics, moving away from the past. This means acknowledging that the situation in Afghanistan will most likely deteriorate. However, current issues are not now and are remnants of past issues and events. It is vital that the focus is now on protective measures for when the country's next political shift materialises. Here it is vital to ensure that there is not another state collapse or that of Afghanistan's institutions. Therefore, it is essential to support civil society, Afghan NGOs, and human rights defenders among others. What is also needed here is a UK presence in the country, in order to support such institutions, but this does not mean recognising the Taliban. There is also a need to assist political opposition to the Taliban but this requires unity within the movement. Furthermore, the international community needs to ensure there is accountability for the Taliban's crimes, both now and in the future once the group is removed from power. Here the International Criminal Court must investigate Crimes Against Humanity in relation to the Taliban's gender apartheid.

Panel II: Unlocking the Taliban Conundrum: Engagement, Accountability, Resistance:

In panel two, one point that was emphasised was that the Taliban has not changed. Ideologically it is the same movement from the 1990s. One of the group's first statements upon returning to power was to underscore that there had not been any ideological shift. Of note is the fact that there are no new terrorist camps in the country, the old ones are still in use. On an ideological front, it is ISIS-K that poses a threat to the Taliban in Afghanistan. It was mentioned that the establishment of an Islamic Emirate is central to the Taliban but that the forms of punishment used are not as severe as they were in the past. Furthermore, Al Qaeda and ISIS-K have also not changed ideologically. These groups now threaten Europe, while the Taliban threatens Afghanistan. Domestically, the Taliban has stated that it is engaged in a counter-narcotics initiative, but history shows that the drug trade was extremely financially beneficial for the movement before. Thus, we have to be wary of media claims of opium eradication. What is certain is that the Taliban is moving away from opium for meth production. This is because it is less labour intensive and yields higher profits. This has transborder consequences. Meth from Afghanistan is reaching Europe and this in turn means

that the Taliban overseas financial gains are increasing. This means the Taliban is involved in a worldwide money laundering scheme. However, there is hope. Western governments can act to counter this illegal drug trade through a joint counter-terrorism initiative.

Having touched upon ideology in the previous paragraph, it is important to further unpack the Taliban ideology, given the religious and political philosophy that underpins the movement. Here it is vital to remember that both the Taliban's religious and political ideology has maintained since its creation. The movement takes its inspiration from Sunni Islamic ideology and is driven by an agenda which seeks to institute Sharia in Afghanistan. This means that both the Qur'an and Sunnah are central to the Taliban and its ideology. The idea of a Caliphate (a government under a Islamic spiritual leader) is also very important to the Taliban. This means to which this Caliphate is established or chosen can be through constitution with a Shura (council) or force. Both are seen as legitimate means to establish the Caliphate. This is complemented by regional and local councils. The Caliph, regional leaders and allegiance to Muslims is of utmost significance to the Taliban. This coincides with the denunciation non-Muslims which is also significant. Thus, Afghanistan is seen as a Muslim land and the Taliban seeks to create an Islamic Emirate within the territory. This is perceived as a divine obligation for the Taliban. Although the Taliban's aims are mostly domestic, the group still does support global Sunni jihadi groups. This means that ISIS-K, Al Qaeda and Taliban are actually quite similar ideologically. The Taliban utilises the very binary idea of 'friends' and 'enemies'. Thus, non-Muslims are all considered enemies. They also accept the Taliban ideology or they will be destroyed. This means the international community is also an enemy of the Taliban. Furthermore, no Muslim-majority country is understood as being truly 'Islamic' by the Taliban. Lastly, it is also worth noting that the Taliban is a traditional movement, which is anti-modern and tyrannical.

Alongside ideology, this panel highlighted academia and policy. It was mentioned that academia has always ignored Afghans when it comes to their perspectives of their country. From the policy angle it was emphasised that NATO will not militarily engage in the country again. This is partly due to the fact that there is no public support anywhere in Europe for this. It was stated that Afghanistan is not currently seen as a counter-terrorism threat, so there is no appetite to intervene in the country. Furthermore, the Taliban are not representative of Afghans. If Afghans were actually given a choice in the future of their country they would never support such an extremist group. The Taliban cannot currently be undermined either as there is no armed resistance group with widespread support. Here it is also necessary to consider Pakistan's role in the strengthening of the Taliban and the issues of Taliban support

among the diaspora. The Taliban is not only supported overseas, but the group now also inspires other terrorist groups in other countries, such as the Philippines and Yemen. Moreover, it is of paramount importance that the Taliban is not given legitimacy by the international community. It is the voice of Afghans that needs to be front and centre when proposing solutions for the existing crisis.

Book launch: ‘The Pashtun Tribes in Afghanistan’ by Ben Acheson:

Mr Acheson emphasised that his book is primarily for non-Afghans who are unfamiliar with Afghanistan. So much of the existing literature on the country focuses on the Soviets and Taliban, but there is considerably less that is written about the people of Afghanistan. The international community did not appreciate or utilise the local and indigenous knowledge it could gain from Afghan colleagues. Western nations always thought they knew what was best for Afghanistan. However, their understanding of the country was shallow. In thinking about Afghanistan now, it is important to remember that the Doha Agreement ‘was not a peace agreement but a withdrawal agreement’. The people of Afghanistan are not homogenous but many people are ignorant and unaware of this. Thus, this book unpacks dominant narratives and labels about Afghanistan and its people in order to present a holistic understanding about a country the West still does not fully understand.

Panel III: External Orchestra: Tuning the Choir:

The third panel allowed for regional dynamics to be explored in greater depth. In terms of Central Asia, it was noted that the region’s policy toward Afghanistan did not alter significantly after the events of August 2021. Afghanistan was, and is still, viewed as an important neighbour. The Taliban takeover underscores the importance of stability and peace for the region, as well as greater regional collaboration. Ultimately, Central Asia has always been rational with regard to its engagement with Afghanistan. The Taliban is a current reality that the region has to deal with, in turn it is a negotiation partner but a difficult partner. However, although the region has to engage with the Taliban in some capacity, regional countries will not allow the Taliban to carry on without any restrictions and consequences for problematic actions.

In terms of relations with Pakistan, it was stated that although Western countries are not engaging with the Taliban, Pakistan has continuously supported the Taliban. However, this is not an easy relationship given the Tehreek-e-Taliban-e-Pakistan (TTP), the Pakistan Taliban.

The group has attempted to wield influence in the Pashtuns regions of Pakistan, leading the growth of a religiously-oriented ideological movement in that area. Beyond Pakistan, China is also keen to engage with Afghanistan, due to economic interests, in the form of investments. This means that many competing interests are at play when it comes to Afghanistan. At present, given that there is no strong opposition to the Taliban, they will continue to rule the country. Hence the urgent need for a constructive counter initiative to eradicate the Taliban.

In this panel, it was also mentioned that there was an alternative path for Afghanistan, and that was the previous twenty years of the democratic system within the country, from 2001 to 2021. However, this was constantly undermined by Pakistan. Given the human rights violations of the Taliban at present, the West cannot recognise the group. We have to acknowledge the need for dialogue, but this does not mean that the Taliban should be accepted as the legitimate representatives of the Afghan people. Here it is critical to note that the US was also at fault for its negotiations with the Taliban, while ignoring the previous Afghan government and not involving them. It is therefore the Afghan youth who show how their country changed after 2001 who must be at the centre of the new vision for post-Taliban Afghanistan.

Panel IV: Summing the parts: Transitioning to an Afghanistan-Centric Approach:

The conference ended with an Afghanistan focused and diaspora led panel. Here it was highlighted that there has not been a national consensus when it comes to the idea of Afghanistan. The country was forced to be a multi-ethnic unit within defined borders. Since the 20th Century, the country we know of as Afghanistan does not represent the society its territory covers. This has meant that the resources and diversity of the country have not been adequately managed. This has meant that previous governments have ignored difficult issues and only short-term issues were given precedence by politicians. Thus, there was no sincere belief in the country's institutions, nor agreement between different political factions throughout the country. Hence what ensued was superficial individualism within politics, but covertly there was strong collectivism rooted in the idea of *andiwali* (network of friends).

On a more micro-level, it was stated that the people of Afghanistan do not agree on the issues the country and its people face. In turn this creates further problems, divisions and tensions. The generational trauma of war affects all Afghans. However, in working towards a future

peaceful Afghanistan the problems its people face must be understood. One pertinent example highlighted here was the suffering of Hazaras as a result of targeted attacks. This is not just denied in Afghanistan but also among the diaspora. It is paramount that the vulnerable communities of Afghanistan are listened to, and their lived experiences respected. Furthermore, spaces such as this, international conferences need to reflect the diversity of Afghanistan. Only then can conversation about Afghanistan be truly representative. Divisions which stem from ideology are why there is fragmentation in both Afghanistan and the diaspora. Without tackling these issues a national dialogue cannot be established.

Lastly, civil society has played a valuable role in Afghanistan in the last twenty years. Kabul's civil society genuinely represented the views and feelings of many people across Afghanistan. That was a time when there was unity on fundamental issues and values. However, the negotiations between the US and the Taliban were very slow. Furthermore, they did not align with the views of the people and were not supported by them. Currently, insecurity is the driving force behind the severe repression of the Taliban. It is important to note that there are also divisions within the group which present opportunities for political opposition to effectively mobilise against the Taliban. For example, not all of those within the Taliban agree with or believe that the new decrees are workable in the long term. This is an issue where political opposition can work to leverage and undermine the Taliban. Moreover, what is strongly evident is that there is unity in the area of women's rights and the denial of these rights across different political groups. In sum, this shows how outdated the ideology of the Taliban is and the fact that the group cannot handle the younger generation of Afghans nor a transformed society.

To conclude, the conference emphasised that many players and parties were at fault for the current crises in Afghanistan. Regional countries prioritised their own interests over the needs and wishes of Afghanistan. While, economic interests motivated others. However, Afghanistan did witness a political shift post-2001 which transformed the country. Thus, there is hope for the future, but this future must centre the voices and views of the people of Afghanistan, particularly its youth.