

Online Roundtable Discussion
**Reimagining UNAMA:
From Powerbroker to Principle- Centric**

20th February 2023

AISS Report



انستیتوت مطالعات استراتژیک افغانستان
Afghan Institute for Strategic Studies (AISS)

 @AISS_Afg

 /AISSAfghanistan

 @aiss_afg

 contact@aissonline.org

 aisonline.org

AISS-ER-2023-03

Event Report

Online Discussion ‘Reimagining UNAMA: From Powerbroker to Principle-centric’

20th February 2023

The war in Ukraine has left an impact on Afghanistan as the attention of global players such as the US seems to have shifted from Afghanistan. In this scenario, the role of the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) has become more vital than ever as it's probably the most important task force that is mandated to monitor and report the situation in Afghanistan. AISS organised a webinar titled ‘Reimagining UNAMA: From Powerbroker to Principle-centric’ on 20th February 2023 to critically evaluate the mandate and challenges faced by UNAMA. The speakers included Ambassador Mahmoud Saikal, former permanent representative of Afghanistan to the United Nations, Annie Pforzheimer, former deputy chief of mission, US Embassy Kabul & Non-resident Associate, Centre Strategic and International Studies, Naheed Farid, a former member of the Afghan parliament and Professional Specialist at Princeton University, and Shoab Rahim, former senior advisor to State Ministry for Peace Affairs and Visiting Scholar at the New School, New York. The session was chaired by Lynne O'Donnell, an independent journalist and author.

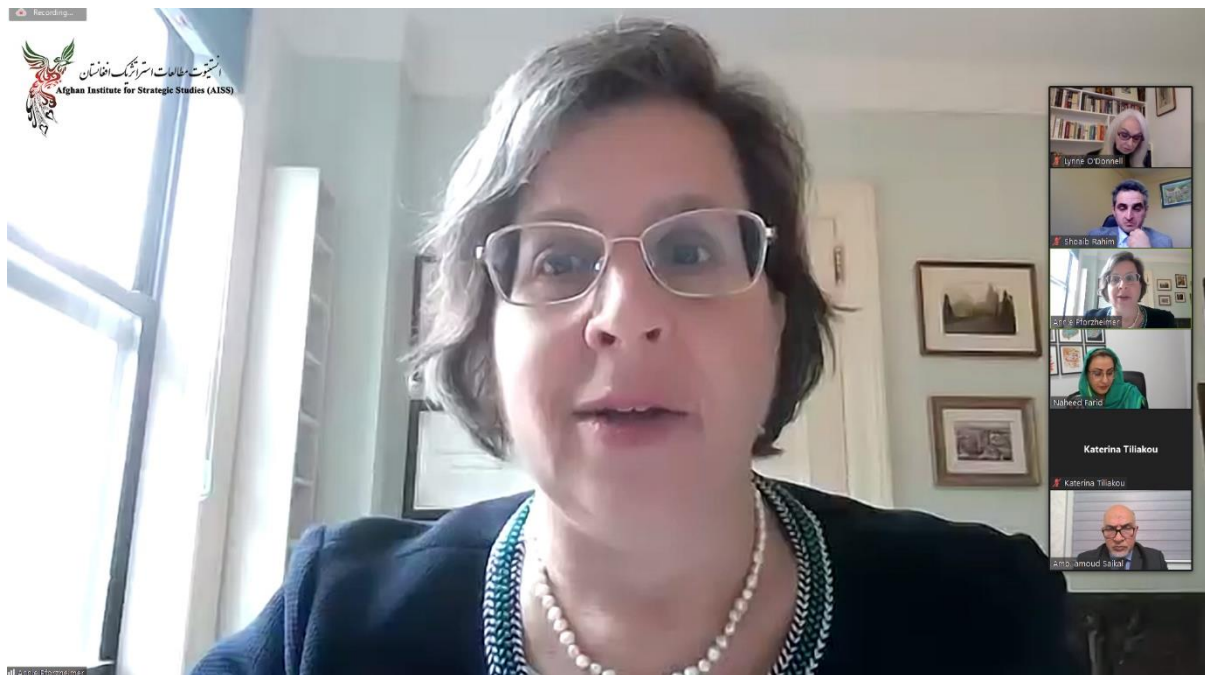
O'Donnell asserted that the UN's role in Afghanistan has been sensitive and contentious for more than two decades, therefore, it's arguably now more important than ever. Particularly, as Annie Pforzheimer highlighted in her presentation that with respect to the United States' role in Afghanistan, there is a special envoy's office, but the level has been downgraded. “It seems policy decision to downgrade the level of its attention to Afghanistan” Pforzheimer added. As a result, UNAMA is probably the only body that is working as a bridge between Afghanistan and the rest of the world on highlighting the issues in Afghanistan.



Perception about UNAMA

The speakers started by discussing how is UNAMA mandate perceived. Ambassador Saikal added that politics and diplomacy have a huge trust deficit among the people of Afghanistan. “Unless and until we bring trust in politics and diplomacy, UNAMA mandate would be looked at with suspicion, regardless of its substance especially if UNAMA in its policy of engagement or appeasement for the Taliban, in the hope of seeing a change in their practices, ignores atrocities committed by Taliban”.

Ambassador also suggested that UNAMA has to make it clear to Taliban that since they are collecting national revenues, they are the primary responsible party for food and health care for Afghans, not the international community. Pforzheimer also raised a similar concern and added that the budget transparency of the de facto authorities is essential. “There is no good reason that Taliban is allowed to keep its revenues, spend them on their own fighters and security system”, she added.



Challenges to UNAMA

The speakers raised the challenges faced by UNAMA. Ambassador Saikal added that the implementation of the UN resolutions and the sanctions regime have been politicised. He highlighted the political tension among the Security Council members impacts the implementation of resolutions. "If only they were generally implemented 60 to 70 per cent, Taliban wouldn't have been or shouldn't have been where they are at the moment". Naheed Farid also echoed Ambassador Saikal's viewpoint and added that ‘they don't have consensus in New York. All countries do not support UNAMA. We have countries who are against it. We have Russia who didn't even want this mandate”.

Farid also referred to the lack of resources on the ground for the humanitarian work as well as the monitoring and reporting, and even authenticating the violations of women's rights. Pforzheimer argued that UNAMA is held hostage on security and political levels. She urged

that the UNAMA’s political role ‘does need to be de-linked from the humanitarian coordination role’.

Responsibility on UNAMA

Lynne O'Donnell reminded that the humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan is profound and again calls upon UNAMA to play a central role in alleviating, suffering, and coordinating the distribution of relief. Pforzheimer added that UNAMA should be filling a vacuum that exists, particularly as the US leadership recedes. The UN should be working with all international stakeholders, especially in the region to design a framework to promote inclusive governance in Afghanistan, and to contain the negative impact of the Taliban’s support of narcotics, trafficking, and terrorism in the region. She stressed that "the lack of coordination gives Taliban an opening to search for recognition. The UN Security Council has to assert its role through UNAMA”.

Pforzheimer provided a roadmap for UNAMA to enhance its operations in Afghanistan. At the provincial level, she added, UNAMA should be creating space for dialogue between Taliban and non-Taliban leaders over the humanitarian aid distribution issue to ensure that aid is reaching those with the greatest need. At the national level, UNAMA should be holding talks with Afghan opposition in exile such as members of civil society, particularly women. She also strongly urged UNAMA to downgrade its interaction with the Taliban authorities.

Ambassador Saikal asserted that every day we allow the Taliban to breathe, we allow Taliban to extend its life. It means that they are making advances in all of this. “The way we see it is that if we let the Taliban stay one more day. They keep brainwashing the people, the younger population of Afghanistan. They're changing the curriculum of the schools and universities” he added.



UNAMA's shortcomings

UNAMA has played a key role in the coordination and facilitation of humanitarian assistance, and much-needed financial resources as well as coordination. However, when it comes to the facilitation of dialogue, as Ambassador Saikal claims, UNAMA's absence on different platforms has been noticeable. "When it comes to the gross violations of human rights by Taliban, we are still waiting for UNAMA to explain why Taliban didn't allow UNAMA and a special rapporteur to visit in May last year to assist claims of war, crimes, and crimes against humanity".

Shoaib Rahim questioned why UNAMA is sitting on the mandate and not moving forward with it. "Finding missions and reports, unfortunately, are missing, and when access is demanded it is not provided, and the conversation essentially stops there".

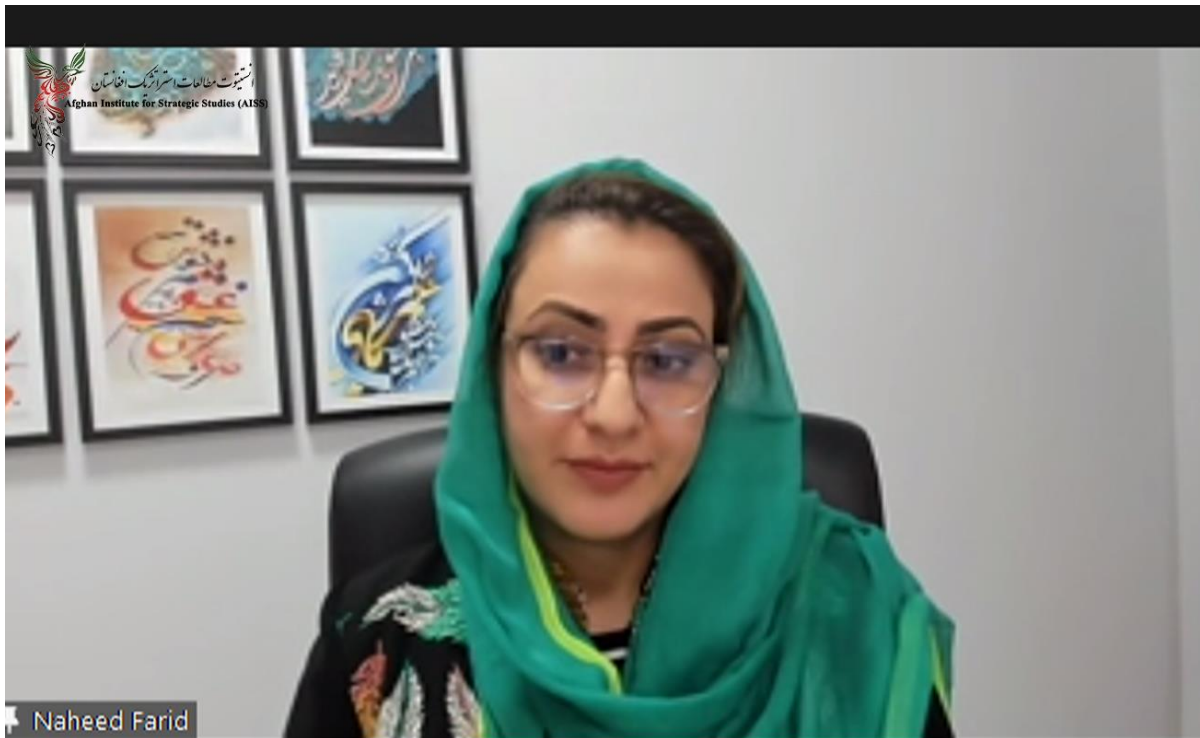


Way forward

The speakers agreed that UNAMA needs a new mandate. Naheed Farid argued that the new mandate should stay focused on outlining the UN's priorities that include facilitating inclusive dialogue and reporting human rights situations. Ambassador Saikal also added that "we do need the UN in Afghanistan, but we need to refine it. We need to really be critical of the failures, and we need to look at them". He further stressed that Taliban cannot bring security and stability to Afghanistan. "Taliban cannot bring development in Afghanistan, so we need to get our acts together. This is why we need better coordination of interest, and this is why we need to refine the mandate of the UN in Afghanistan".

Shoaib Rahim was of the view of not renewing UNAMA's mandate and urged that UNAMA's resources should solely be diverted to humanitarian aid. He said that for political engagement, the UN or other bodies could be used as an alternative to UNAMA just like in the 1990s.

However, other speakers were of the view that UNAMA’s mandate should be extended. “I think there is something to be said in favour of that rather than potentially losing them. And the focus should then be on implementation of what's already in the mandate” Pforzheimer added.



Ambassador Saikal asserted that UNAMA has to be more proactive than reactive and urged that preventive and proactivity should be introduced in the UNAMA’s mandate while it’s being reviewed. “The UN was not born to react. It was supposed to prevent the crisis from happening”, he added. Naheed Farid also reminded that along with amendments in the UNAMA mandate, “we have to think of how effectively we can facilitate the implementation of UNAMA mandate on the ground”

Some of the speakers also urged regional and global stakeholders to prioritise the interest of the Afghan people. Ambassador Saikal explained that in the past 7 or 8 years, many players got involved in Afghanistan and they each came with their own agenda, from Norway to Indonesia, from Qatar to UAE. “I think what is needed is to make sure that we do have a healthy multilateral interaction, but with the aim of reducing the number of players, and really focusing on the main place [Afghanistan] and see how can we establish a healthy dialogue”.

The End