Afghanistan at the Crossroads

Masuma Hasan: I would like to welcome all those who have joined us today at this webinar on ‘Afghanistan at the Crossroads’ with respect to this never ending war in that country. Very unusual developments have recently taken place in the wake of the United States’ troops withdrawal. We have seen hardly any progress in the peace talks in Qatar but informal talks have moved for peace to other capitals like Moscow and Tehran. It is a strange situation. On the one hand there is this urge seemingly by all parties to end the strife in Afghanistan and on the other hand there is daily escalation in violence. The Taliban claim to hold large parts of the country outside the main cities and the US has recently started making strikes on their positions. The borders of neighbouring countries are being crossed by the Afghan National Army. Its personnel have escaped the fighting and sought refuge in Tajikistan and Pakistan. Above all, there is the genuine fear of what will happen if the Taliban manage to come to power in Kabul: the spill over of the ideology across Afghanistan’s borders and the looming refugee crisis.

Pakistan is considered the most important player in the Afghan situation today, apprehensive of the effects of the Taliban government in Kabul. It has been host to three million Afghan refugees and is bracing itself for another refugee influx. To discuss these and related issues we have three distinguished speakers: Anatol Lieven, Zahid Hussain, and Saba Gul Khattak.

The first speaker is Anatol Lieven. He will soon take up the assignment of Senior Research Fellow on Russia and Europe at the Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft in Washington DC. Formerly, he was professor at Georgetown University and at the War Studies Department of King’s College London. His book, ‘Pakistan: A Hard Country’ has been much acclaimed and is on the official reading lists for the United States and British diplomats serving in that country. As a journalist in South Asia many years ago, he had covered the war in Afghanistan. He will speak on the ‘Rapidly Changing Security Situation in Afghanistan.’

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Anatol Lieven: I am delighted to be here. I wish I was in Pakistan again but anyway if only by Zoom I am delighted to be in contact with Pakistan again. I was a journalist with the mujahedeen in the late 1980s and I have visited Afghanistan intermittently since then, so this might go back 33-34 years. For me both as somebody who’s visited Afghanistan during that time and has spent time with Afghan guerrillas, who were in many ways the forerunners of the Taliban, and also as a student of Afghan history, what is happening seems to be pretty much in accordance with certain basic patterns of modern Afghan history. Above all, the failure to establish a modern state along contemporary international lines whether by the Afghans themselves or by outside forces with some Afghan help. There is not much point in wrapping this up in euphemisms and camouflage, but it is my sense that the current Afghan state is finished.

It may last for longer than some people expect but according to independent analysts 197 district centres have fallen to the Taliban since May. Much will, of course, depend on whether the United States continues airstrikes to defend the main cities, but frankly I do not think that will be enough. If the patterns of Afghan history are anything to go by, the collapse of the state when it comes may come very quickly and unexpectedly. The reason is that, as we saw during the rise of the Taliban in the later 1990s, as indeed we saw with the fall of Amanullah way back in 1929, Afghan society, as I have often been told, is a kind of process of constant conversation and negotiation. When I was travelling Afghanistan in the late 1980s, it was common knowledge and the mujahedeen themselves made no secret of it, that there were endless negotiations at the local level between themselves and local state garrisons. Often to do with sharing the heroin trade but also, basically, very often to just keep things quiet in their own areas. So they would go and fight somewhere else but not where they were. Of course, this was tremendously facilitated by local tribal links, familial links, business links and so forth. That meant when the final collapse came in most of the Pashtun areas, I am talking about the rise of the Taliban, but more widely in 1992, there was actually very little fighting. The garrisons simply went home with their weapons. Of course, some of their commanders had to flee or die. The Taliban, in that rise to power once again in the Pashtun areas, it was rather different elsewhere of course, respected agreements elsewhere by which garrisons surrendered on terms. In other words, they didn’t break the agreement, they didn’t massacre garrisons. If they were going to do that they didn’t have to make the agreement in the first place and they also designated the commanders on the other side with whom they would not deal and who had to leave. This being Afghanistan and Pashtuns, the garrisons went home with their weapons and their personal weapons; a very medieval
approach but actually an effective one when it comes to making sure that transitions, after long years of terrible fighting, can be very peaceful and rapid.

On the other hand, as we’ve seen before, in certain ethnic and ethno-religious minority groups, notably the Hazara Panjshiris, they of will not surrender to the Taliban. I mean they cannot join the Taliban and they will certainly not simply agree to go home. So the subsequent history of Afghanistan in years to come will be determined by the following questions. The first is will the Taliban as the predominant, if not the sole political and armed force in Afghanistan, be willing to negotiate compromises with key ethnic and ethno-religious minorities, guaranteeing them local autonomy and control over their own affairs? If not, then obviously there is a strong probability of continued and possibly intensified fighting.

The second question is what kind of help and what degree of help will outside powers give to the ethnic and ethno-religious minorities in anti-Taliban forces? This means the United States but in long run it could mean, even more importantly, Iran and India. Iran, because it is emotionally, culturally, religiously committed to the Hazaras, but also to the city of Herat which most Iranians regard as basically an Iranian city which somehow for the wrong historical reasons found itself in Afghanistan and the Iranians, my information is, are committed to go on defending the Hazaras. The Iranians have established good working relations with the Taliban but only up to a point. Secondly, India, which has been the last of all the major powers to come round to the idea that it is necessary to talk to the Taliban. It has very close links to sections of the Afghan state, in particular the Afghan intelligence service, the NDS which is dominated by the Panjshiri Tajiks. This RAW-NDS connection could be of critical importance in determining India’s policy but the other factor will be whether the Taliban will give them assurances, that may also involve Pakistan quietly giving them assurances, of the same kind that the Taliban have now given to America, Russia and China which is: do not worry, we will not allow bases or actions by terrorist groups based in Afghanistan against you and against the international community in general. Of course, the Taliban are entirely credible when they make that assurance to everybody else, but are they credible in giving that promise to the Indians and will the Indians believe them if they do; that is a critical question.

Thirdly, will an Afghan state dominated by the Taliban continue to receive sufficient and substantial international aid from different countries? Because as has often been remarked since the 1880s, the way that British subsidiaries built up Emir Abdul Rahman and his state,
every Afghan state has been to a greater or lesser degree dependent on subsidies, and on aid from outside. Since 2001, the Afghan state has been overwhelmingly dependent on American and European aid. Without that aid it will be very difficult to establish any kind of working state which will remain extremely weak and that will increase both the likelihood of continued civil war or intensified civil war and dependence on the heroin trade which is the single biggest bit of the Afghan economy by far. In all this, Pakistan’s role is crucial in terms of the regional approach, the approach of the regional powers to the Afghan situation and therefore to the future of Afghanistan. Pakistan is in the happy position of having good relations now with four out of the five major regional powers. Not with the fifth which is India, far from it. Pakistan has also had good working relations with the Afghan Taliban, not to say anything more strongly than that.

What, in my view, should be the goals of Pakistani policy on the basis of strengths? One, should be to use whatever influence Pakistan may have with the Taliban to get them to assure rights and autonomy for certain key ethnic and ethno-religious minorities. Without that, there can be no Afghan peace. There could only be a very bloody Taliban victory, probably involving continued conflict going on in certain areas forever, and certainly involving a tremendous amount of bloodshed and loss of civilian life and, in consequence, major floods of refugees out of Afghanistan, principally to Pakistan as we’ve seen again and again in the past, but also towards the West, something which everybody has an interest in preventing. This, by the way, is the biggest single fear of Europe when it comes to Afghanistan. It is Afghan refugees passing across Iran and Turkey, as we saw with the Syrian refugee flow which had a drastically destabilizing effect on European politics, in Germany in particular. This is a great European fear and a reason why, in principle, European powers would be willing to go on subsidizing Afghanistan in certain ways. Secondly, Pakistan has a good deal of ground to make up, at least in the perception of the international community, and must do everything possible to ensure that Afghanistan does not become a base for anti-India extremists and terrorists; some of these groups have extremely close links to the Afghan Taliban. Because, if India is not convinced of this, then India will support the anti-Taliban opposition, though not with Indian troops. Nobody is going to want to send troops in Afghanistan in future. If we unlearn that lesson from the past 180 years we’ve learned nothing at all, and arms and money would help keep a civil war going. So, Pakistan needs to be able to get the Taliban to credibly give that assurance and to give that assurance itself.
Thirdly, Pakistan needs to do everything it can to assure continued international assistance to the Taliban-dominated Afghanistan. That will involve China very heavily which has made by far the biggest palpable commitment to economic investment in Afghanistan, though it hasn’t implemented this and can’t in the middle of civil war. But, in my view, there is also a strong possibility of continued European aid because of the threat of refugees and to suppress the Afghan heroin production and heroin trade.

Heroin is an issue on which, once again, the entire region and Europe, not so much the United States because it doesn’t suffer from it in the same way, can agree. In that context, it is vital to remember that the Taliban are the only force in Afghanistan over the past 45 years which has actually managed to suppress the heroin trade in 1999 to 2001, simply because of their authority and prestige in the Pashtun countryside. However, for the Europeans to contribute significant aid to Afghanistan, they would also need certain assurances of minimum human rights, respect for human rights at least in Kabul, because nobody will notice frankly what goes on outside Kabul. And, of course, women’s rights in particular. Pragmatic Taliban people have always recognized this. Unfortunately, America assassinated the most pragmatic and intelligent of them, Mullah Mansour.

The Taliban will need modern technocrats, experts in certain fields, if they are to make any kind of Afghan state work. The Taliban are, in their own particular way, heirs of the tradition of Pashtun state building in Afghanistan. They are very conscious of that. But they will need modern experts and part of the challenge is to bring them to a recognize this, which Mullah Mansour did. If they do need these experts, they are going to have to give them certain room for cultural and intellectual freedom, at least in Kabul. Pakistan can play a very important role in helping to bring that message home to them, and therefore in continuing western aid to Afghanistan without which the future of Afghanistan will look even darker than it already does. That is my somewhat gloomy view of the situation.

**Masuma Hasan:** Thank you very much Anatol. Our next speaker is Zahid Hussain whom we all know from his columns in *Dawn*. He is a journalist of great eminence and the author of books which focus on Afghanistan such as *No Win War: The Paradox of US-Pakistan Relations in Afghanistan’s Shadow*. His other books are *The Scorpion’s Tale: The Relentless Rise of Islamic Militants in Pakistan* and *Frontline Pakistan: The Struggle with Militant Islam*. 
Zahid has written as a correspondent for many important newspapers and journals across the world like The Times of London, The Wall Street Journal, and The Economist. He will speak on ‘The Concerns of Regional Powers in the Evolving Situation in Afghanistan’.

Zahid Hussain: Rapid developments in Afghanistan after the drawing down of American forces has been quite spectacular but not unexpected. In Afghanistan at the moment, with the Taliban gaining ground in large swathes of Afghanistan, may have come as a surprise to many, but it was building up and the withdrawal of foreign forces had almost led to the collapse of whatever administration there was in Kabul. They may have control of certain areas, they may have this army - a professional army - but over the years the authority of the state has weakened, and a large part of the country is under control of the Taliban. After the Americans started negotiating with the Taliban in Doha way back in 2019, there was a clear indication that they finally recognized the Taliban as the main insurgent force in Afghanistan and that gave the Taliban the kind of legitimacy which they needed. After the start of the Doha talks, the Taliban had already opened an office in the Qatari capital, which gave them a kind of forum from where they could interact with other capitals of the world. And they did that quite intelligently.

In 18 months of negotiations with the United States, the Taliban showed some shrewdness. They made sure that some of their major demands were accepted. It was very clear that the Americans were in a hurry to leave Afghanistan and I do not blame them. Eighteen to 20 years of war had made it very clear that there was no military solution and they could not have won this war anyway. But the way they left Afghanistan is quite astonishing. When the Doha agreement was signed, it was not a declaration of defeat, but obviously it was not actually the victory of US forces either. It may not be surrender but certainly it was some kind of finally recognizing that they cannot actually win this war. That gave the Taliban a huge boost; in fact, it also affected their situation in Afghanistan.

When the Taliban were negotiating with the US and they reached that agreement in February 2020, they did not attack US forces but continued attacking Afghan forces because that gave them a certain kind of space. The escalation of the Taliban offensive had started way back in February 2020 and it gave the impression to the population that the Taliban will win. Finally, when the Americans decided to leave or withdraw all their forces by September 2021, the Taliban consolidated their hold in their control areas. They had strong support within the Pashtun districts, particularly in eastern and southern Afghanistan. Their most surprising and spectacular victory was in northern
Afghanistan and in some areas they never had controlled before, like Badakshan. Even during their regime in 1996 they could never occupy Badakshan or all those provinces which are situated along the borders with Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and the small border with China. Importantly, they now control all borders with regional countries and even the border area with Iran. That had not happened before and has put the Taliban in a very commanding position.

But there is a limit to where the Taliban can go from here. It was much easier for them to take control of large swaths of land in Afghanistan, but the major question is, can they hold it? That is the major challenge. The Taliban controlling more than 50 per cent of Afghan land does not mean that they have been able to set up their own administration. They have control because in most of these areas the Kabul government has almost collapsed. The real challenge for them is that they have not taken any major town and city. This may be part of their strategy but also shows the limit of their power. I think they will face huge resistance and, as Anatol earlier said, the Panjshiris and Hazaras will not surrender. It means that fighting will continue and also actually taking over Kabul, as some American intelligence agencies had predicted, that it may fall in six months’ time. I doubt it very much. Afghan forces in many areas may have surrendered or fled, but they still have the strength to defend Kabul and the war will continue.

There are other factors too. For example, I do not know how far the Americans could go but they have already warned that they will continue bombing the Taliban strongholds. So in a way what I see more likely is continuing civil war. One other factor which makes the situation more dangerous in Afghanistan is the rise of regional militias. Some militias have existed forever, for example Dostam’s militia, Ismail Khan in Herat, and Atta Noor in Mazar-i-Sharif. They have all had their own personal armies for a long time but now we have seen the emergence of local regional militias. It means that they may have shown some kind of affiliation with the Kabul government, but they are just fighting to protect their own fiefdom. A full-fledge civil war is very likely if no political settlement is reached. It will result in some kind of fragmentation of power and no particular group will be able to control the entire country.

What does this mean actually? It means that it will affect not only Afghanistan, but the surrounding countries and regional countries. Because Afghanistan's problem or conflict during the last four decades has never been only an internal matter. Two superpowers were involved in the war in this country over the last four decades and all other regional countries were deeply involved in Afghanistan's conflict throughout. If we
go back to the 1980s and later, the role of the regional countries was very significant. Pakistan, as we know, was always deeply involved in this conflict from the 1980s to 2020 in different ways. Whatever happened in Afghanistan during this period had a direct bearing on Pakistan which was a frontline state way back in the 1980s in the war against the Soviet Union. Pakistan became a frontline state yet again after the 2001 invasion of Afghanistan.

The 2001 war was very peculiar. Pakistan became an ally of the United States in what they described as the War on Terror but there was no convergence of interest between the United States and Pakistan when they entered into a new alignment after 9/11. In the earlier alignment even during the Cold War, Pakistan and the United States had some convergence of interest and during the 1980s there was a strong convergence of interest and that is why that alignment worked smoothly. But later in 2001 that has been described as shotgun marriage Pakistan did not have any option but to join. Pakistan’s support was necessary for the United States to fight against al-Qaeda and remove the Taliban government. It was an alignment of convenience and was probably wrongly described as a strategic relationship between the two countries. From the very outset it was a transactional relationship. During the 1990s, Pakistan was the most sanctioned country by the United States. Several kinds of US sanctions were imposed on Pakistan.

2001 actually allowed Pakistan to come back on the old stream and obviously, it got US aid, but from the very beginning there was huge discrepancy in the policy of the two countries. Pakistan supported the US in fighting al-Qaeda but when it came to fighting the Taliban, Pakistan’s position from the very beginning was one of reservation. Pakistan had insisted from the very outset that only direct negotiations with the Taliban could end this war. When it came to fighting America’s battle against the Taliban, Pakistan found itself on the other side. Most of the Taliban had taken refuge in Pakistan and it became the base of their resistance. So in a way Pakistan had become a part of the war and all the leaders like Mullah Baradar who was arrested later on, they lived in Pakistan. The Quetta Shura, Peshawar Shura, and the Miranshah Shura were real. Pakistan was a part of the war but not exactly on the side of its ally. This kind of relationship which we hardly see in history is described as a frenemy, that we are friend as well as enemy.

The war was already inside Pakistan, it was there for the last 20 years. The situation is much more dangerous now because it is not the 1990s situation when Pakistan fully supported the Taliban regime in Afghanistan. At that point the civil war in Afghanistan, because of other factors, did not affect Pakistan that much. Now in 2021, during the last
20 years we have seen Pakistan fighting its own war against militancy with Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) with the specific Pakistani agenda. In fact, that is the biggest dilemma for Pakistan because the TTP may have a very different objective from that of the Afghan Taliban; the Afghan Taliban were focused on fighting American forces while the TTP wanted to impose its own brand of Islam through force. So basically while their worldview is the same, Pakistan faced this dilemma from the very outset, that it was supporting the Taliban tacitly if not directly for different reasons and as Anatol has earlier mentioned, there was the India the factor.

Afghanistan has also been the centre of a proxy war. Over the last 20 years, Pakistan’s policy was driven by how to contain Indian influence in Afghanistan which led to Pakistan’s support for the Taliban, apart from other reasons. There was some kind of apprehension also that in the long term Taliban control over Afghanistan will not be favourable to Pakistan. Even Taliban control in a part of Afghanistan will give a huge boost to the Pakistani Taliban and Pakistani militants. On one side, Pakistan's support has been very critical in bringing the Taliban back on the table but, on the other side, this has led to a policy predicament.

Among other regional powers, Iran has an interest, as described by Anatol earlier, as a security issue and they have carried out a very careful policy. They never had good relations with the Taliban. In 1990 they came close to war with Afghanistan but lately they have developed a relationship with the Taliban. Many Taliban leaders are living in Iran with their families. Iran has been supporting or giving tactical support to the Taliban because of certain reasons. Number one, they want the Taliban to fight Daesh. Number two, they also accept the Taliban reality and want to be part of whatever power structure comes in after the withdrawal of American forces. Number three, recently Iran held several meetings with Taliban leaders in Tehran and the purpose was to get an understanding with them that they will not attack the Hazaras or other minority groups and safeguard Iranian interests. They are very clear about their position and will not like an Islamic emirate to take over.

The same thing about other regional countries. There is almost a conversion of interest, like for example China, Pakistan, Iran and Russia. Generally, they accept or recognize the Taliban as a force but none of these countries would like the restoration of an Islamic emirate. That will limit the Taliban's offensive or their efforts to take over control of entire Afghanistan. I see the role of regional countries becoming very important. The Americans may still have some role there but regional countries will have a much larger stake in peace in Afghanistan.
Masuma Hasan: Thank you Zahid for this really excellent analysis of Pakistan's relationship with the Taliban.

It is my pleasure to invite Saba Gul Khatak to take the floor. Saba is a former member of the Planning Commission of Pakistan and was executive director of the Sustainable Development Policy Institute for many years, in fact she built it from its very foundation. She specializes in comparative politics and her research interests revolve around political economy and development, feminist and political theory, gender issues, public policy, governance, militarization, refugee women, and refugee politics. Saba will speak on ‘Apprehensions about the Taliban government in Afghanistan’ probably with special reference to the fate of Afghan women under a Taliban government.

Saba Gul Khatak: Thank you for giving me this opportunity. Just this morning there was a press conference in Kabul by Afghan women leaders, political and civil society activists where they have actually outlined their fears about the current situation about what needs to happen and I am happy to share that with you but it should be out there on twitter and everywhere as well.

I wanted to start off by saying that there are no winners in any conflicts. The fear of a Taliban government, but also the fear of the current situation of uncertainty, is not something new, but at the same time we do need to remember history. When I talk about women, I sort of now roll my eyes because I keep wondering who will even want to listen to the same stuff we've been hearing for the last 20-25 years. But I also realized that there are many new younger people who have not been around that long and who do not remember 40 years ago when the conflict started.

I will start with how women are integral to any kind of conflict situation, not only in the humanitarian realm, although that is where they are placed generally. When I begin with that history the first thing that comes to my mind are the camps (the refugee camps) in Pakistan and how women were integral to the jihad in Afghanistan because, with the nine different mujahideen parties at that time, the level of aid, what kind of aid will go to which party depended upon their following, and how did following take place in the camps in Pakistan but by ensuring that refugees were given refugee status and access to camps for their families by signing a declaration of which mujahedeen leader they would be following or supporting. They did an allegiance to one of those parties. This was not well known at the time but it was very much part of giving refugee status. People who were not willing to support any of them were denied access to the camps. Furthermore, this is how the mujahedeen
were produced. The camps were used for training the mujahedeen, we all know that, and they could go back and fight the jihad because they knew that their women will not be interacting with anyone else. We remember from the 1980s and 1990s different fatwas were given about women who should not leave the camps, in fact little homes were built inside the camps. The point I am trying to make is that the Afghan jihad predicated on the isolation of women. Men could go back and fight in Afghanistan and be comfortable in the knowledge that their women were not interacting with anyone else.

These conflicts that rage on and on, also make use of women and it is not as if women were just sitting safely. They were given a specific role very consciously and only under those circumstances were the fighters willing to go back and fight. If they knew that their women were interacting with other men, they would not have been that comfortable.

So more and more under the whole garb of Islam and culture and so on, these things were further strengthened. Also, what was strengthened was when it came to women’s rights, in the camps we applied Pakistani law, we applied Sharia law, we applied Afghan law but when it came to women’s marriage, the most retrogressive interpretation of whichever law was applicable was applied. These fears still haunt us but that is not the only history that we have. On our side of the Durand Line women were deeply affected by what happened. Not only did Ziaul Haq get his lease on life and militarization continued but the whole Islamization process was possible because he was able to convince the international community that Pakistan would be an important stakeholder. Islamization was put in and we got the Hudood laws that technically and legally made women unequal citizens.

The fallout was also on this side of the border. It was there and it continues to be there today, whether it was arms and militarization of our campuses at that time, how syllabus was controlled, who would call the shots literally and metaphorically, all of that continues to be there today. The debate over syllabus, what is appropriate and what is not, all that continues till today. It is not something that has gone and passed away. It lives with us and has become a part of us to this day what Ziaul Haq imposed, which was women to cover their heads, women in parliament you would think are empowered but they all have to cover their heads because that has become something that is very acceptable. And I am not talking about post-9/11 identity politics, but of a very different politics through which this has become possible.

Coming to the present, we keep thinking 1994 or 1996 might come back all over again when the Taliban took over but that is not going to
happen this time at least that is my analysis. Despite a very pessimistic situation and outlook, I feel this time people are going to resist for many different reasons. Those who have witnessed refugee- hood in the past, do not want the same to take place this time. There will be fights. There will be resistance. Women are more vocal. They have more voices today than they had 30 years ago, or 40 years ago, or even 20 years ago. I think that is something different. Civil society has some level of presence in Afghanistan, and even though it is restricted to urban centres, yet there are people and ideas that speak out and are speaking out as indicated by the press conference today or the Afghan independent human rights commission and their statements. The complete exclusion of women will not be possible. However, as I said we still live with our past, the past is the present.

What is it, will be the cost for women on both sides of the Durand line. On both sides the Taliban are resurgent in what was formally in the federally administered tribal areas (FATA) you found many rallies taking place. They may not get press coverage against what is happening today. The resurgent Taliban, who are making their own committees making their own faislas, as in decisions, using whatever interpretation of Shariah that they wish to apply. All of this is taking place on both sides and the fundamental rights are being denied to women on both side of the Durand line, I am not saying its across Pakistan what I am saying is happening in the southern districts, former FATA of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province.

On pamphlets they are talking about restrictions on women’s mobility, restrictions on their right to work, they are all being discouraged, the right to education, once again and we have seen this happen in Swat. So it is not so far back that we can’t remember what the Taliban can do and the kind of terror with which they can enforce what they think is right. The killing of musicians in Kandahar two days back is reminiscent of what happened before. Today also women are targets, so are human rights defenders, academics, health workers, media and journalists in Afghanistan, civil servants, police, the army, everyone has been targeted. This is similar to what happened in Swat. If we want to see a small model of what can happen in Pakistan, all we need to do is go back and look at what happened in Swat.

In the present context in Pakistan there are not many voices raising the human rights costs of this conflict on our side of the border except perhaps the PTM might be and that is not your normal CSO. But even the PTM has a very ambivalent relationship when it comes to women and how to raise the women’s question. Even there you find that, even in p former FATA, women’s voices are barely given any space and are barely
heard. Therefore, for many of us this should be a situation of extreme concern because we still have what happened in the 1980s, thanks to Ziaul Haq. We still suffer all of that and we do not want to suffer more. In Afghanistan it is the same. You hear the same stories that you heard of refugees in the 1980s or 1990s that they are leaving with only whatever they can gather, they are selling their properties at whatever price they can get, they are getting out within l two days of making a decision.

UNHCR has said that we will probably have about 800,000 refugees coming in except that this time ‘we will not call them refugees.’ That is not UNHCR, that is the Pakistan government saying this time they are ‘externally displaced Afghans.’ Now what this implies legally for refugees is also a matter of concern. On the other hand, our border has been fenced and is continuously being fenced. We do not know how the refugees will be treated, or what life will be for them on both sides, that is a concern.

There are many other concerns about fundamental rights, but I want to stop on one question which is about the role of the state. We keep demanding that this or that should happen and what the Taliban government can do but, frankly speaking, what one do when the state in the modern sense of the term no longer exists? A state is supposed to be made up of territory well-defined, yes that’s there, of a population that’s well defined, yes that’s there too, but what about a government and what about sovereignty? A government that is unable to enforce its writ across Afghanistan or any kind of sovereignty? And Afghanistan is not the only state that suffers like this, there are many others whether Syria, Iraq or Libya, wherever US forces have intervened. How does the international community intend to deal with such so-called states is the issue that I want to raise because all the other rights that come out of a constitution and a state that is held together come as a result of a modern state system that is working, but here we see that it is not really working. So how does one even apply any kind of international conventions and laws to a territory where only if Kabul can be sort of kept as some kind of showpiece? And if Kabul can display that, it is all is well and the Taliban can accept a few rights. Well what about the rest of the country, how does one deal with that?

Masuma Hasan: You touched a chord in my heart when you talked about what happened in Swat. We remember what the women and minorities in Swat suffered when the Taliban ruled that valley. We will now have our question and answer session. I will start with a series of questions posed by Mr Tameezul Haq who is a very senior member of our Institute. I will pose his question to Anatol. Assuming that the Taliban take control of Afghanistan, do you think they will be as friendly to
Pakistan as they were before 9/11, taking into consideration Pakistan’s support to the United States for 20 years?

**Anatol Lieven:** No, I do not think that they will be as friendly, both precisely because of what Pakistan did with them, but also because this Taliban will have other options. In the late 1990s they were extremely isolated internationally. Russia was against them, China was absent, Iran was strongly against them, India was strongly against them, and the United States was absent. Now this time most of the regional powers have established some kind of working relationship with the Taliban already. So the Taliban won’t need Pakistan so much. On the other hand, as has always been the case, Pakistan will control Afghanistan’s main road to the sea for Afghan exports and imports. Iran will play a role and, of course, the Taliban would have to ensure good relations with Iran as well which raises another set of issues. So my sense is that their relations would not be so close. I do not think that the Taliban would become enemies of Pakistan in the sense of trying to restart the civil war in Pakistan and launch some new jihad to try to abolish the Durand Line and take the Pashtun areas of Pakistan. The additional reason is that there is a force in Afghanistan which none of us has mentioned yet, which has also been responsible for some of the worst atrocities in that country in recent years, which is ISIS or Daesh. They are bitter enemies of the Taliban and they have incorporated a large part of the Pakistani Taliban who fled across the border into Afghanistan. You know, that will also in a way lead to an automatic alignment between the Taliban and Pakistan. So a Taliban-dominated Afghanistan will not be a Pakistani client state as so many people have alleged, and it never was actually, as we know. The Afghans have remarkable ability to turn around and kick in the teeth of the people who have helped them, but I do not think that it will be an enemy.

**Masuma Hasan:** Another question from Mr Tameez-ul-Haq, perhaps Zahid would like to answer it, is with respect to India’s future friendship with the Taliban and do you think it will be harmful for Pakistan?

**Zahid Hussain:** I do not think there will be friendship between India and the Taliban. Obviously, the Taliban have now become a reality and probably there is a debate going on amongst policy makers in Delhi that they should establish some kind of contact with the Taliban. And probably, according to some media reports, the Indian foreign minister had met the Taliban leader in Doha. They may have some contacts, but certainly India has a huge reservation about the Taliban and if the Taliban take over _that is not a possibility yet_ but even if the Taliban take over Afghanistan, India may try to establish some kind of contact
but it does not mean that they will have a friendly relationship or even that their interests will converge.

Kaiser Bengali: The Taliban assure its neighbours of non-interference but Pakistan has internal Taliban ideologues. How will Pakistan protect itself from this fifth column?

Anatol Lieven: The really close links between the Pakistani militants and Afghans now are with Daesh, not with the Afghan Taliban. Obviously, an Afghan Taliban victory in Afghanistan would in some ways strengthen morally and in terms of ideological confidence amongst Islamist forces within Pakistan. Both have their own real strengths in terms of support within Pakistan but also, of course, as we have repeatedly seen over the years, they suffer from very grave limitations and weaknesses. They have never been able to get anywhere remotely close to achieving electoral majorities or majority of popular support and, when they have revolted by force of arms, they have eventually after tremendous suffering been defeated by the Pakistan Army. So I do not think that a Taliban success in Afghanistan would automatically lead to a new destabilization of Pakistan, except in terms of refugees and ongoing civil war which would obviously have a major impact.

Kaiser Bengali: How will the US monitor Afghanistan after pulling out its forces from Afghanistan?

Zahid Hussain: There is a lot of talk and some indication that the US will have some kind monitoring system in place against terrorism. That is still not clear, but after withdrawal of troops they have not much interest left in this country. They would not like Afghanistan to become the centre of global terrorist organizations and that was the key clause in the Doha agreement between the US and the Taliban. That is one of the reasons why the Americans have finally agreed to pull out their troops. In the present world, they do not need these bases. The US already maintains about 22 bases in the Middle East and in this region, and I do not think they need another military base. Certainly, they would like to have some kind of terrorism cooperation with Pakistan and what shape will it be? Nobody exactly knows. But I do not actually think that they would like to have a base in Pakistan but they certainly would like to have some kind of counter-terrorism cooperation and what shape does it takes is not clear.

Syed Hasan Habib: Zahid Hussain talked about Iran’s relations with the Taliban, but is there a future in these relations given the Taliban’s hatred for the Iranians?
Zahid Hussain: The Taliban have developed this tactical relationship with Iran and there were various reasons for Iran’s softening attitude towards the Taliban. First, when American forces were still there, the Iranians wanted to counter-balance, just to protect their interest. That was the period when quite senior Taliban leader had taken shelter there and others like Tayab Agha, the former Taliban spokesperson who was then not in the good books of the Taliban leadership, but even Mullah Mansoor Akhtar, who succeeded Mullah Omar, lived in Iran. He was killed when he was coming back from Iran. It does not mean that the Iranians would like the restoration of the old style emirate, basically a full control of the Taliban. In the latest meeting in Tehran, apart from the Taliban, Qanooni was there from the old Panjshiri group, the Northern Alliance and some Hazaras were present. The one thing the Iranians were interested was to ensure the safety of the Hazaras. The Taliban are very shrewd and over the years they have tried to develop an image that they are inclusive. Actually, one-third of the top membership of their Shura comprises of non-Pashtuns, including Tajiks. Last year they appointed Hazara Shia in their local council. They want to give the impression that they represent the entire Afghanistan.

Question: In the post-US withdrawal scenario what do you think will be Pakistan’s take on human rights issues in Afghanistan?

Saba Gul Khattak: I do not know if our foreign minister considers the Taliban to be intelligent and good people. What I would want to know is what would be the take even for us on our side of the border. In the past a lot was just clothed in the garb of culture and religion. Frankly speaking, when Saudi Arabia removed the requirement for a mehram for Hajj, we all grew up believing in a strict Islamic code that women cannot go for Hajj without being accompanied by a man, a mehram. I was just surprised that we all believed it without ever questioning it. So this whole thing of religion and culture becomes very questionable. Yes, we need to push our government to ensure that the human rights situation in both Afghanistan and Pakistan is respected. But whether that will happen or not is very, very up in the air.

Tanweer Khalid, a question for Anatol. Do you think the Taliban have learned a lesson from their earlier stage in power in Afghanistan about repression and forceful application of Islamic laws leading to isolation from the international community?

Anatol Lieven: Well, I certainly hope so. I was much more confident of that when Mullah Mansoor was the leader. The present leadership has a very hard line tradition behind them. Frankly in the Afghan countryside, the Taliban did not change very much, certainly not in
Pashtun countryside and in those areas of the countryside in some form of government control over the past 20 years, they have remained very, very conservative. I believe once again that the key issue here will be the degree of pragmatism among the Taliban leadership, the degree of their awareness of two things. First is the need for international aid and an awareness of the fact that international aid, certainly from the West, will depend on respect for women’s rights in particular, and certain freedoms. But secondly, as I said in my original remarks, whether the Taliban leadership will recognize that in order to build any kind of Afghan state, which I think they do want to do. They will require modern educated people and to keep them from simply fleeing abroad, as they did in 1990s. They will need to accord them sufficient space of freedom. That is my hope but you know in the end how much do we really know of what goes on within the heads of the Taliban leadership.

**Question:** What is the level of support given by the Pakistan military establishment to the Afghan Taliban at the moment and how do you think it will transition in the coming months, especially in the context of the dangerous rhetoric coming out about Afghan relations?

**Zahid Hussain:** It is a fact that the Taliban got sanctuary here and they have reorganized themselves, that’s no more a secret. But I doubt it very much at the moment there is direct military support for the Taliban from Pakistan which wants the Taliban to become part of the mainstream and the power structure. But I am not sure that they would like the restoration of the Islamic emirate, the old style Taliban rule in Afghanistan, because it will have far reaching consequences for Pakistan. The main concern is that the war should come to an end, nor can Pakistan afford the adventure of directly supporting militarily the Taliban. Their support maybe there to help the Taliban become part of the government.

**Hamna Kamal:** With the prime minister’s utter refusal to give bases to America, will Pakistan and the United States have a different kind of alliance related to Afghanistan? If yes, what kind of alliance will that be?

**Anatol Lieven:** I do not believe that the United States and Pakistan will have an alliance related to Afghanistan or indeed anywhere else in the future and China’s close links to Pakistan also make such alliances such impossible. However, although not fully recognized, over the past 20 years Pakistan has worked pretty consistently to help prevent international terrorist attacks against America and the West. Quite differently from other things for the simple reason that such terrorist attacks do not help Pakistan in anyway and obviously threaten Pakistan through American retaliation. That will continue and Pakistan will
assure the US and will use its influence with the Taliban to help make sure that Afghanistan does not once again become a base for terrorism against the United States or Europe or, of course, China. But I believe that the Taliban themselves will recognize that because, after all, everyone with any sense, even the hardest Taliban leader just as the most diehard Pakistan general, recognizes that 9/11 was a disaster for them and brought catastrophe for the Taliban government of Afghanistan as well as colossal suffering and losses to Pakistan. So I think cooperation between Pakistan and the United States will continue but I think it will be a fairly narrowly focused one.

**Syed Muaz Shah:** Ashraf Ghani himself stated yesterday that the only solution can be a dialogue and there can be no military solution. Do you think the Taliban really want to negotiate with the existing government or would they rather want an unconditional negotiation or to re-establish the Islamic emirate instead of the Islamic republic that exists?

**Anatol Lieven:** Every Taliban in his heart, in some cases perhaps her heart, among their supporters wants a restoration of the emirate. They will not negotiate with the existing government in its existing form. They have said they would not again and again and given what's happening now, why should they? However I think the question is whether they will be willing to negotiate with certain parts of the existing Afghan state and its supporters and you know they will negotiate compromises with them just as the Mujahedeen’s before them were willing to not to negotiate with Najibullah but of course to make deals with certain parts of the Afghan communist state. That I think is the question for the future. Of course, the Islamic emirate does not have to be the same as the Islamic emirate that existed before in 2001. So the question I think once again is the degree of pragmatism of the Taliban leadership, but I do not think pragmatism would lead them to seek some kind of compromise with the present Afghan government.

**Aamir Riffat:** After the withdrawal of US troops from the Afghanistan to what extent will China fill the vacuum?

**Zahid Hussain:** It is not filling the vacuum. China has a role in this and over the last few months particularly we have seen China asserting itself more but it is not like filling the vacuum because China does not have the kind of ambition of political control over Afghanistan. The Chinese policy has been very pragmatic. They have very good relations with the Taliban. In fact, the day before yesterday Mullah Baradar, who is the head of the Doha office, met with Chinese leaders. Probably Canada also has reasonably good relations with the Afghan government.
China wants to play the role of a facilitator for some political arrangement that can lead to some kind of inclusive government in Afghanistan and they have made it very clear. I do not think China would like to get more deeply involved in the Afghan refugees.

**Masuma Hasan:** From Anatol, we got a vision about the future in Afghanistan should the Taliban come to power, especially what kind of relationship they would forge with minorities and ethnicities and to what extent they will give some kind of autonomy to them to live. Zahid impressively spoke about Pakistan’s longstanding relationship with the Taliban over many decades. Saba has expressed the hope that next time round, should the Taliban come to power, and they will not be able to impose the restrictions which they did, when they were in power last time in Afghanistan, on the women of that country or even on minorities. Because the women have come a long way since then, at least around Kabul they have been mainstreamed in governance and have a very big representation in parliament in Afghanistan. She predicts, hopefully rightly, that there will be resistance to impositions on women. But there are disconcerting reports that wherever the Taliban hold way today they have started imposing the same kinds of restrictions. However, this was a delightful session and I thank Anatol, Zahid and Saba for making it so very useful for everybody.