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AFGHANISTAN IN THE POST-KARZAI ERA

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PARTICIPANTS:

Welcome and Introduction:

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P R O C E E D I N G S

MR. O'HANLON: Good morning everyone and thank you for being here. Welcome to Brookings. I'm Mike O'Hanlon. Delighted to have Saad Mohseni with us today, who runs the most important media organization in Afghanistan, with many other international interests as well, many other international activities, and a very astute observer of all things Afghan, including Afghan politics. So we're going to have just a wonderful conversation. Appreciate your energy after a zero and three Redskins start, nonetheless, finding the way to make it to an early morning Monday event, and I think you'll be well rewarded for your ambition and getting going, because it's a real treat to have you here Saad.

MR. MOHSENI: Thank you.

MR. O'HANLON: Thank you for being here. I also want to mention that we have Ambassador Kai Eide with us here Brookings this year and in the audience today and perhaps we'll be able to hear from him in the course of the discussion, as well as from many of you. Kai Eide was the U.N. Special Representative of the Secretary General in Afghanistan for a couple of years back in the crucial period of the last elections. And we'll certainly get to the issue of Afghan elections in the course of the conversation. But I want to begin, by just saying another brief word about Saad and we'll tell a little bit of his story today. I'm going

to ask him to explain a little bit about how he had the idea for what he's doing in Afghanistan and what his trajectory in life has been to get there. I think many of you are aware that he's just built an amazing operation during the very difficult times of this last decade, right in the heart of Kabul, covering everything from hard core political news to the ongoing military campaigns, to life in Afghanistan, to trying to create everything from sitcoms to other kinds of stories about Afghan life, uplifting stories about the Afghan people. All of this is on his TV channel, on his radio networks and many other things. It's a real wonderful story and we'll tell that in just a minute.

But Saad, let's begin with soccer. Afghanistan just won a big soccer match. Why don't you tell us about that, because we always make Afghanistan such a heavy subject, but anybody who's been lucky enough to be there knows like I do that it's just a wonderful warm place. And it was great for friends and fans of Afghanistan to see this great soccer victory. So welcome to Brookings, and please tell us a little bit about your latest exploit.

MR. MOHSENI: Thank you Michael, you're too kind, as always. Well, football is, people have played football in Afghanistan since the early 1900s and the thing we discovered after coming back was that we had lost connection to the past. There were no sports, no cultural,

anything cultural, from music to dancing to traditional activities that we remembered certainly from the seventies. So three, four years ago, we decided to invest heavily in sports, one of which was football. So we created an Afghan Premier League, which is like a super league of clubs. We had a reality television program where people actually were engaged in the selection of players. We had a tournament in Kabul, we had a winner and that in some ways, the intention was to whet people's appetite. So this year, and of course it was very important for us to have to do this in a way that it wasn't going to be divisive, because a lot of the people said it was going to be the North and the South and the East and West and so forth. So we had to make it very inclusive. People had to feel patriotic by watching this National Football League, but also in terms of this sense of ownership -- the clubs and the game itself. So this year, just by coincidence, we managed to get the Pakistanis to come and play us in Kabul. It was a huge event. We sold out in seconds with ten, fifteen thousand people stuck outside the stadium. But it was a huge win for us, we won three - nil. That got people very excited. We, for the first time in my life, we saw cars outside after the game that started waving the flag. But that was only the beginning, because we actually went to Nepal to play in the South Asian Football Championships. We ended up in the finals. We beat Nepal in the presence of thirty thousand Nepalese during

the semis and then we went to the finals. We beat India two and 0. The reaction in Afghanistan was extraordinary. Literally millions of people went into the streets. People stayed up all night. You have to understand that people haven't done that in Afghanistan since the 1970's. Either they're fearful of getting kidnapped or killed, there's nothing to do in the evening. And the next morning, the people were lined up literally, they're saying a hundred thousand people came out, thirty, forty thousand people in the stadium, the football players were there, so were many politicians. Probably the first time that politicians have ventured out to a venue where there are no security checks, nothing like that. And even the Taliban apparently had turned their phones off, decided to turn their phones off for 24 hours. They had no comment to make. So it was an extraordinary day that Afghanistan was free again. And I'm not sure if it's something permanent. But I certainly believe we broke some of the spell by winning that Championship.

MR. O'HANLON: One more thing before we go back to the 70's and hear a little bit about your life and how you grew up in Afghanistan and then returned. But a lot of the soccer players, or football players on your national team presumably grew up in Afghanistan and I'm guessing just doing the math that many of them were kids during the Mujahedeen wars and the militia wars and then even Taliban rule, and

then became adolescents and young adults during the period of the last decade. Is that a fair depiction? Were most of them born and raised in Afghanistan?

MR. MOHSENI: Well some are from Afghanistan, many are from the U.S. and Europe, which is also very interesting because this is allowed, the outside Afghans and the local Afghans to be part of one team. But five or six of the players had never played at the National level. They'd just been discovered in the last twelve months. This is the thing about -- we have this -- Afghans are very patriotic. We remember that from the seventies. But a lot of the young Afghans, to them it was a new thing, to feel Afghan, to feel very proud of what their team had achieved. Flags solve that, things like this item I'm wearing today, have been selling like crazy.

MR. O'HANLON: It says I Love Afghanistan.

MR. MOHSENI: Yes, with the Afghan colors. And also, we have been desperately looking for role models, for heroes, which these players have become all of a sudden. You know, we're working with Topps, which does baseball cards in the U.S., so now we've actually just imported a container with football cards with all the stats on the back of these cards for the football teams. So a lot of interesting things are happening. We have these young players from eight clubs; you have the

National players that have become role models for the entire country today.

MR. O'HANLON: You mentioned Afghans are patriotic and even though I want to get to your story in just a second, I want to stay on that point, because I'm sure, maybe not for this audience, but for many Americans, that's almost going to sound like an oxymoronic or just a very hard to understand comment, because the image that Americans have largely formed over the years of Afghanistan is a country with a lot of great fighters. You beat the Soviets. Elements of the population have been giving N.A.T.O. a lot of trouble for a lot of years, but also a country that seems to be very fractured, that seems to be very tribal, that seems to be very splintered, that some people will say was never really a nation. And you're essentially saying something different I think. And could I just ask you to expound a little on the nature of Afghan nationhood and how it, what it means to most Afghan citizens, and just what this patriotism consists of. Is it really a commitment to the country? It sounds like maybe you are saying it is. But could I just ask you to develop that thought a little?

MR. MOHSENI: Well, it used to be certainly, and I think it will be in the future. And even today I don't think we're as fragmented as how people imagine us. It's usually the foreigners that tend to ask our

ethnicity. In most places, certainly the big cities, it's a non-issue. But we've been together for two centuries. It's not a new country. So whether we've liked it or not, and whether it was a state initially, it has developed into one. So people do feel very Afghan. Of course, a lot of the ethnicities, I think the eighties was an interesting period. The Hazara who went to Iran discovered that they're not particularly wanted; the Tajik, the Tajikistan discovered it's not easy being an Afghan Tajik in Tajikistan; same for the Uzbeks, and the same for the Pashtuns who went to Pakistan. So we, I think we've become stronger as a nation as a result. Now the government has been fairly weak in terms of developing what it means to be an Afghan. And we have a responsibility to Afghans, to our nation, to the country, to its future, and I think this is something that we probably have to develop a little bit more, but certainly the foundations of that, for what it means to be an Afghan, and for people to feel very patriotic.

MR. O'HANLON: Let me now, if you don't mind, ask you to tell us a little bit about your own story. And I know there are people in this audience who already know it, and for those of you who haven't seen it, Saad was featured in a wonderful *New York Times Magazine* piece a couple months ago which just began to do justice to his story. But like a number of Afghans of your generation, you got an incredible story. And if

you wouldn't mind just sort of sharing it in a nutshell, decade by decade, in terms of where you lived, when you came back, what you were doing, each major block of your life, I think all of us, and myself, would be fascinated to get just a little of that context.

MR. MOHSENI: Well, you're too kind. I think when many Afghans have come back and given the opportunity to do something good, and you know we've seen a lot of different businesses develop out of Afghanistan regional businesses, so we're not unique in that sense. We went back in 2002 wanting to, and for a lot of us, the nineties was a wasted opportunity, and a lot of us felt that if we had gone back after the fall of, after the withdrawal of the Soviets, even after Sibghatullah, could we have made a difference? So there's this, always this thing that if we get the opportunity again, what could we do. So in 2002, soon after 9/11, we went back to Afghanistan, like many other Afghans from the diaspora. So there was an opportunity to set up a radio station, which we did with assistance from U.S. CID and then we established a television station, then a second television station, then a third television station. Today we have a dozen or so media companies inside of Afghanistan and of course, we then went to the region and we have other stations in the region. And today Afghanistan represents less than fifty percent of our business, but we are a media organization, sort of a media organization. But you know

we were very lucky that we were in the right place at the right time, and Afghanistan really allowed us to establish this business.

MR. O'HANLON: So how do Afghans get their news today? And obviously it's largely through the MOBY group, but if you could just paint a little bit of a picture, the relative importance of radio, television, newspaper/internet, the relative importance of private media versus state run media -- just give us a little bit of that picture, because I'm leading up of course to the elections, and one big thing about elections is obviously how well the campaigns and the candidates are covered in the period before the voting. It's not just about making sure the ballot boxes aren't stuffed, as you well appreciate. So the elections are really the beginning in the sense that the campaigns are about to begin, and that's a crucial period for the population of Afghanistan to learn about what different candidates would do with any mandate that they received. So how are Afghans going to learn about politics, these elections, how do they get their news today, again, the different forms of media, and then state owned versus private entities like yours?

MR. MOHSENI: Well it has been one of the great success stories, after the last ten or fifteen years. We have something like seventy or eighty television stations in Kabul alone. Some are just commercial outlets; some are just mouthpieces for political figures. But ultimately,

Afghans consume media through different ways. They listen to a lot of radio. Something like 98 percent of the population has access to a radio set. Television penetration is like sixty percent, which is very high, considering that electricity is not really out there yet.

People actually use the internet a lot. We've seen internet access double in the last twelve months double thanks to 3G and mobile telephony. So people have different ways of consuming media, especially the younger generation of Afghans. Our median age is 17 to 18 today, and it's become urbanized very very quickly.

One of the things about these elections next year, I think that organization over the next five years, I think people will be surprised how many people actually turn out to vote from the city. So we have a very exciting environment in that we as a media group ourselves and despite the fact that we've had our issues with the government, we have the ability to allow people to express themselves, we do exposes on corruption, on corrupt ministers and government officials. We talk about social issues. We do have our challenges and our problems, but nonetheless we have been allowed to keep going.

MR. O'HANLON: And do many Afghans, and I think the answer is implied in what you just said, but let me get it explicit, do many Afghans favor private media or does the government find a way to

dominate as much of the bandwidth as possible? In other words, how widely viewed and listened to are you versus state owned channels?

MR. MOHSENI: Well our top TV channel, TOLO TV, has 59 percent market reach, so we keep that fairly consistent and there was a poll just released a few days ago. We've actually gone up slightly, I think mostly because of the football. But we have a very strong reach. The state media is important like for example, with government appointments. So people listen to it, the 8:00 news bulletin, the main news bulletin on the state broadcast is important for getting to know what's happening in terms of appointments. But people have really embraced private media. We dominate not just us, but other television stations right across the country.

MR. O'HANLON: So when we go back to the 2009 and 2010 elections, and I know that you had an important role at MOBY with the coverage of those campaigns, how would you, looking back, how would you assess the quality of the campaigns, because you and I know, here in the American context, the narrative is pretty simple and pretty negative about those elections, especially the 2009 Presidential election in which President Karzai won his second term. I think he did win. I was an election observer. We saw a lot of irregularities but we also know that Karzai certainly had by far the most votes. And I know one of the reasons the United States and President Karzai have had such a difficult

relationship for four years, five years now, is because of the fallout of those elections. Nonetheless, there were a lot of things that went better perhaps than those elections than people appreciate and I wondered if you could talk a little whether, first of all if you agree with me, that there were some positive things about at least the campaign, and specifically how you covered that campaign and how that sets us up for the next one. In other words, did you manage to cover the different candidates; did you manage to get out and about in the country; did you manage to paint a picture of the ideas candidates were proposing for how to take Afghanistan forward? Do you feel like there is something positive to build on there for the next upcoming elections next year?

MR. MOHSENI: The campaign itself was very interesting. Different candidates went out, they met people, they had town hall meetings, and they discussed policy. So it was a very exciting period leading up to the elections. We had the first debates ever in Afghanistan – - television debates where the candidates were grilled on different policy issues. That aspect of it was quite good. The problem was that the population itself was very apathetic, so the voter turnout was quite low. I think it officially it was four and a half million but I suspect it was a lot less than that. But the result itself and what happened after election day, where we started to get footage of individuals stuffing ballot boxes, that to

a large extent soured the experience for everyone, including most Afghans, and namely the President, where his people were, maybe he was oblivious to what was going on , but certainly his people were the biggest culprits. And so were others, it wasn't just the Karzai team. I do agree with you that he probably would have, even if he hadn't won in the first run, he would have cruised home in the second run, according to the polls that we had done straight after the elections. But we've learned from that experience I think, that the election's officials are certainly mindful of what happened. But the media in particular, we are developing different types of campaigns where people could report when they do see people stuffing boxes. We will have to monitor for example, polling centers in Uruzgan where they may have seventy centers where the centers are small and voter turnout is expected to be low. We need to be able to see if people are going to turn out and vote. So the media is going to play an important role. And also the other thing which is very important is to be about the personality of the policy, and that's where we come in and we talk about, what are your policies in relation to the economy and jobs, or foreign or security for that matter.

MR. O'HANLON: So I want to get to the issue of the upcoming campaign in just a moment, and that will be the last subject I raise before we go to all of you. But before that, I'd like to ask a little bit

about how you understand and assess the nature of the relationship between President Karzai and the United States. I know you've been a critic of President Karzai, but you've also been an advisor in the sense that you've spoken your mind, and I think had a lot of good input and, at times, I hope he's listened to you. I've been struck that President Karzai is a person that we in the United States have a hard time properly understanding. For a number of years, he was the great hero and the great green cape who was riding to our rescue collectively. And he's being perceived now as this machine politician at best, who presides over a corrupt enterprise and whether people individually consider him corrupt or not, they certainly view most of his friends and family as on the dole and a big part of the problem. So we've really swung in the American understanding of Karzai.

One more thing I'd like to put on the table before I ask you to comment on how you understand President Karzai. We had a chance in Brookings to meet with him in Doha in June, the week before the big fiasco over the opening of the Taliban office. And he basically predicted the problem. He told us the Taliban are going to try to milk this thing for everything they can, they're going to treat it like an embassy, please be aware of that, please tell your government about that, let's please try collectively try to do what we can to prevent that. And we all know what

happened. He was exactly right. And whether it was really preventable or not, the brouhaha that followed I don't know, but I was struck at his clairvoyance in a sense. So he's a fascinating politician. You know him better than I do. You know him much better than most of us. How do you understand him and also the nature of his tortured relationship with the United States at this point?

MR. MOHSENI: Well I think he's a very complicated character, but you can almost appreciate his predicament, let's say, with war lords. He basically gets told in 2001 that you have to work with these people. Then in 2004 he's told he should ban these people. And then later on he's told he should have a more inclusive approach to work with these people. So I think what confuses him is the contradictory approaches from the international community. And I think he also always believes the international community is less than honest. So what do you really think about Pakistan? What can we do about Pakistan? Level with me so we can collectively approach the issue of Taliban sanctuaries in Pakistan. And I think whether it's a double game from the U.S. side or the American approach to Pakistan is a very complicated one, he always feels that he's being undermined. And of course the incident in Doha is a case in point, where he did say that, please make sure that there is no plaque outside, please make sure that they don't raise the flag, please make sure

they have no press conference. And the exact opposite happened. And he had a written commitment from President Obama that these things would not happen. So he's a bit paranoid, but maybe understandably.

But of course, the flip side is of course, that the President is a great tactician. But he doesn't have the best long term approach to the Afghan problem. He doesn't really understand the economy and how to tackle our economic problems or challenges. Because he's so paranoid, he doesn't delegate, he's a micro manager. And his paranoia is such that it's very difficult for him now to have full trust, not just in your government and other governments, but also in his own people.

MR. O'HANLON: One more question on Karzai, I know many of you may want to get back to this question when we get to discussion, but do you think that he fundamentally wants a bilateral security agreement with the United States and that he'll probably ultimately negotiate one in his time in office? Or for all of you who, I'm sure everyone in this room knows what I'm talking about, but just to be clear, this is the kind of legal and political underpinning of a long term American commitment to Afghanistan that would allow some level of forces to stay after 2014 and also help provide a foundation for ongoing economic and security assistance. Do you think he really wants that? Or is he so anti American at this point that he may just make unreasonable demands even at the risk of never getting it? Or do

you think he overestimates the leverage he has vis-a-vis the United States and he's going to maximize his demands and prolong the process but at the end he'll sort of back down and take what he can get as long as we're semi reasonable on our side. How much does he really want a long term relationship with the U.S. and the international community to be part of his legacy, or is he prepared to just see it go away and see Afghanistan on its own after 2014?

MR. MOHSENI: Well, I think he wants it, but he has his conditions, obviously his legacy is very important to him. He doesn't want to be seen as the guy who sold out. And he wants certain guarantees from the international community. He's very mindful of the Taliban returning to the south and creating their own sort of enclave. So he has some issues and that's why he wants to window dress it through convening a (inaudible) which they will do probably at the end of the month. But I think he's also aware of the fact that the Afghan public is in favor of an ongoing commitment from the international community.

The international troops, despite the fact that they've been there for a decade and a half, still their approval rating is over 50 percent, depending on the poll you look at, so he understands that the Afghan public is demanding this agreement, and a residual force. It's almost like having some hostages. The international community's commitment to

Afghanistan will be ongoing as long as they have troops inside the country. He understands all of that, but at the same time, he doesn't want to be seen as the guy that sold out. So if he can window dress it, and if he has some of his concerns addressed by the international community, we will have an agreement by the end of this month.

MR. O'HANLON: By the end of this month?

MR. MOHSENI: Yes, October. Next month.

MR. O'HANLON: That's encouraging. Let me ask you about --

MR. MOHSENI: By the way, the negotiations that have been going on, the feedback I've been getting from both sides, they're quite positive actually.

MR. O'HANLON: And now let me tee up the issue of the coming campaign, and I'm just going to ask one or two questions, and I'm sure others will follow on this same vein, but we know now that it's just a week, or two weeks, until Afghan candidates must formally announce, and no one has yet, right?

MR. MOHSENI: I think one person has.

MR. O'HANLON: Abdullah Abdullah?

MR. MOHSENI: No no no, just some --

MR. O'HANLON: Lesser --

MR. MOHSENI: Yes.

MR. O'HANLON: Lesser figure.

MR. MOHSENI: I don't even know who he is. But, yeah.

MR. O'HANLON: Okay. Well, if you don't know who he is, that tells you something. So within two weeks, however, we expect a number of candidates. So I want to ask about, I want to ask two questions, I'll just put them on the table. One is to sort of predict who at least some of the candidates may be and not just their names but the tickets they seem to be forming. Because there's the talk about let's have a consensus group, and maybe more than one consensus group, and presumably multi-ethnic, and presumably different political constituencies, and hopefully trying to avoid the winner take all feel that young democracies don't always do well with when they have elections early in their history. So that has some elements of wisdom behind it, but of course it all depends on who gets to choose the consensus ticket, and who gets to reflect the aspirations of the Afghan people as opposed to their own parochial or patronage interests. So one question is just, who do you think might run, and the individuals as well as their supporting casts?

And then the other question is, how do you expect these campaigns to pick up in the course of the fall? Is this going to be something that doesn't really get intense until a month before Election

Day, so we could invite you back for a March event here, and not much will have happened in the intervening six months? But at that point you'll be ready to go do an intense four week coverage? Or do you think there will be a lot of campaigning and a lot of policy discourse through these next six months, in the early phases of campaign? So you can answer those sequentially. Probably the playing the name game is more fun, so let's start with that. If I could ask you who you think might run in terms of key individuals and their allies and associates.

MR. MOHSENI: Well we could come back in March and nothing will have changed. We're seeing a lot of movement, we're seeing a lot of noise, but we're not seeing anything real and I don't think that the tickets will really emerge until probably the last week. Registration period ends on October the sixth, so I think that around October the third or fourth, is when we'll see the big players emerge and they will go and register officially, with a lot of media following.

So who will emerge? At the moment, you have to look at the people of influence in Afghanistan, and I want to go through them. The most influential man today is still Hamid Karzai. He still controls all the governors, the district chiefs, the police chiefs, all the ministries, and he does have a lot of money. Now the reason why it's important, and people say, well he's going to leave anyway, so why would a district chief feel

loyal to Karzai? It's because, if a new President emerges, they may potentially lose their jobs. So continuity, the status quo is good for them. So they will to a large extent support the Karzai candidate. Then after President Karzai we have Abdullah Rashid Dostum. I think that Abdul Rashid Dostum could deliver up to a million votes. His endorsement does have a lot of, and certainly helped Karzai in 2009.

MR. O'HANLON: The Uzbek war lord.

MR. MOHSENI: Yes. Who still is the most popular man among the Uzbeks. And then we have Mohaqeq, who is the Hazara leader, and though he's not going to have as much influence as Dostum, and the Hazara vote is slightly more fragmented than the Uzbek vote, but nonetheless he will have, he will deliver a fair number of votes, we could speculate 300, 400, 500 thousand votes. And then way down, we have someone like Atta Mohammad Noor, the governor of Balkh. Now his endorsement may not mean as much as if he were actually able to be a Vice Presidential candidate. He would be a fairly charismatic Vice Presidential candidate who gives speeches and rallies the troops so to speak. So these are the four people of influence. And of course, everyone's attempting to become Karzai's favorite candidate, or have Dostum as a partner, same with Mohaqeq and so forth. So we're seeing lots of activities, lots of meetings, as we speak. Now the President has

essentially promised his endorsement to three individuals, Ashraf Ghani, the former finance minister, Sayyaf, a prominent Afghan politician and former jihadi leader, and Zalmay Rassoul. But from what we see, his team seems to be, the inner circle seems to be working very closely with Zalmay Rassoul.

MR. O'HANLON: The foreign minister.

MR. MOHSENI: The foreign minister. At this stage, and the President has changed his mind many times before, and he's inclined to change his mind again, potentially, Zalmay Rassoul seems to be his candidate, but don't hold your breath. Now the thing for all these candidates is, they may have the President's endorsement, but they also have to secure various alliances with these other individuals we talked about. So once we have these things in place, then they can go in and register. And then, we have a month before the IC approves them as candidates, and then from November the sixth through April the fifth, we have the campaign period. Now that's going to be very important. I think a lot of people would be naïve to think that these alliances are enough to deliver the Presidency. I think the voter turnout this time will be higher than 2009, especially for a lot of young Afghans. A twelve, thirteen year old is now eighteen and can vote. We will have two million voters, so we have up to fourteen million people who could vote. It's going to be an

exciting period. Sadly, I cannot say anything beyond that, because it's too early.

MR. O'HANLON: Let me ask one more follow-up which is, as you spell this out, and I know again, this crowd has a lot of people that understand Afghanistan very well, as well as some perhaps who don't know it quite as well, but you mention people, you mentioned a prominent Uzbek leader, a prominent Hazara leader, Governor Atta from the Mazar-e-Sharif area who is Tajik, you mentioned a couple of Pashtun. I realize I'm playing; I'm doing the same thing you complain that foreigners often do, reduce it all to ethnicity, but nonetheless, the question gets to this bottom line. Could a Tajik win the presidency? And Mr. Abdullah is one possibility. I don't know if there's another prominent Tajik that would be a likely winner. But in the first round, you could certainly imagine Ashraf Ghani and Foreign Minister Rassoul and maybe another prominent Pashtun splitting the Pashtun vote. Also the Pashtun vote comes from the part of the country that's more unstable, where voter turnout could well be substantially less. And so it's plausible to me at least, just doing the simple back of the envelope arithmetic, that you could actually get more Tajik voters than Pashtun voters, and maybe that's why you began with an Uzbek sort of as a tie breaker. Maybe where the Uzbeks decide to go could be very influential in determining a winner. And again, I apologize

for overemphasizing ethnicity, and I guess you could come back obviously and correct me, but I guess the question really boils down to the possibility, could a Tajik win? Or is it going to be whatever Pashtun Karzai ultimately really supports?

MR. MOHSENI: Yeah, a Tajik could win, if the voter turnout is slow in the south and the east. And Dr. Abdullah technically views himself as a Pashtun, though most voters view him as a non-Pashtun. He could potentially win. We've done no polling so it's difficult for me to predict. But the feeling in Afghanistan, within the political establishment, is that it's probably better for us, given what's going on with discussions with the Taliban, and how vulnerable we are, especially since Pashtuns feel apathetic about the entire process, so people are fearful that, although it's a possibility, it may not be the best thing for Afghanistan. So these discussions are taking place. I know a lot of people are trying to persuade Dr. Abdullah not to run and to become part of a bigger team, and you know, these are some of the challenges that we face. Ultimately, Dr. Abdullah, interestingly enough, to a large extent, lost the vote in Kabul. So people, especially, the (inaudible), Herat, Kabul, and Mazar-E-Sharif, they're not going to vote along ethnic lines. They're going to be a lot more open to what sort of candidate emerges. But of the prominent Pashtun leaders, we have of course, Dr. Ghani, and people like (inaudible) and

others who are also keen to run. The President seems so intent on running, (inaudible) is an ethnic Pashtun. So we have some prominent Pashtuns also willing to run. But the next two weeks will be very interesting. Because once you're locked in, with your Vice Presidential partners, that's it.

MR. O'HANLON: Yep.

MR. MOHSENI: Unless they resign.

MR. O'HANLON: Let me just mention a couple other names, you may or may not want to comment on these, but I wonder if Finance Minister Zakhilwal could be a possibility. I wonder about our old friend Amrullah Saleh, the Tajik former head of the NDS. BK Mohammadi, extremely effective Defense and Interior Minister. Do you think some of these names, some of these kinds of names; I won't necessarily ask you to comment on individuals, unless you wish, that some of these kinds of names might emerge as well. In other words, people who aren't always seen as part of the core political conversation, but who have national prominence in other ways.

MR. MOHSENI: Well the three people you mentioned, I doubt very much that they would run. We have two different types of candidates. We have candidates that want to win the Presidency, and we have candidates who wish to run to gain some prominence and then

secure some sort of concession from the main candidate. So you need twenty thousand odd dollars, and a hundred thousand plus cards for people to have signed endorsing your candidacy, which is a big challenge. But the real challenge is going to be the money that they may need. So people are speculating that in order to win the Presidency, you need between thirty five and fifty million dollars in Afghanistan. Buying lunches for people and entertaining people, but also buying people's votes and buying people's loyalties. So it's a lot of money for some of the lesser known, lesser prominent candidates.

MR. O'HANLON: In terms of my last question, in terms of how you anticipate the campaign unfolding, I think you already tangentially touched on this, that maybe it's going to be a gradual process into the fall and early winter, and perhaps will pick up steam, as I understood you right towards the end of the winter and early spring. Is that a correct understanding of how you anticipate this, or do you think that the debate season, the season of issuing policy papers, talking about whether the Constitution should be revised to give direct elections for Governors, these types of ideas, how to get along with Pakistan, these kinds of ideas will really start getting flushed out almost American style, the way we like to have our white papers and our policy debates early on. Or is that not as likely, and is the fall going to be a sort of quiet period before the real

intensification in early 2014?

MR. MOHSENI: Well some of those issues will be discussed, are being discussed right now. Because the key opposition group, the Front, they're advocating decentralization, district councils, people who are following for district council members and governors and so forth, they want to agree on these principles before they commit to a candidate. So these are being discussed right now as we speak. But of course as we move forward, it's going to be interesting, how will Iran react to a particular candidate, because the entire Iranian team on Afghanistan has now changed. The old team from (inaudible) has come back. They will have a new ambassador who is well known to most Afghans, and Zarif who is so involved is now the Foreign Minister. They may be a lot more accommodating than say five years ago. And of course, every other country is also involved today, from Russia to India to Pakistan to Turkey and the central Asians. So we will see a lot of interesting things develop. But I think on some of those key issues, we're going to have some of the candidates commit to certain changes in the system.

MR. O'HANLON: Thank you. Well let me invite you now to speak and ask your questions as well. We've got microphones, so please just get my attention and then once I call on you, identify yourself and please keep it to one question or at most two, if I could request that. Why

don't we begin here in the third row? Here comes the microphone.

QUESTIONER: Good morning. My name is Martha Sardinas and I'm an independent consultant. I lived in Pakistan twenty years ago and worked as a refugee officer with Afghan refugees. My question, when you said people of influence in Pakistan, I mean, I'm sorry, people of influence in Afghanistan, I wanted to know where the greatest threats are in terms of influence, people with a lot of influence. And I can't help but thinking of things like narcotrafficking or organized crime, things like that, and I wondered if you would comment on who has influence in Pakistan besides the politicians.

MR. MOHSENI: In Afghanistan?

QUESTIONER: I'm sorry, I keep saying that, I've lived in Pakistan, so sorry, Afghanistan.

MR. MOHSENI: Well, sadly, yeah, some of these individuals who have influence, have been involved in things you mentioned and they have money, and they are able to serve their communities and as a result, their influence has increased over the last ten or fifteen years. This is one of the sad ironies, that we had this opportunity in 2001 or 2002 to start fresh. But these people were allowed to come back, or emerge as people of influence, so we do have a lot of individuals right throughout the country who are powerful, but also serve their community. So although they are

involved in drugs, to most of their community members, it's not an issue of great relevance, because these people can also protect them, can give them land, can look after them in more ways than one. But they are a reality we have to deal with right now. And that's a challenge we have to face in 2014. The new government has to have policies that deal with them.

MR. O'HANLON: Let's go to Ambassador Eide if we could and feel free to share some of your observations if you could, if you wish, in addition to asking whatever question you may have for Saad.

MR. EIDE: Thank you. It was very interesting listening to you. You touched upon the two elements that I find most difficult to understand how they are evolving. First of all, you have on the one side the more modern of models that you represent. And you said television sixty percent of the population watches television, that's a tremendous increase of course, so there's been a media revolution, there's an internet revolution, there's lots of people on Facebook etcetera, social media, and education is going up even if the quality is still low. So that's the one side, the modernization of affluent society. But then, you still pointed out on the war lord side, you still have Dostum who can command more than one million votes, etcetera. How do you see the development between these forces of modernization, and what I recall was that at best, status quo?

My sense was that in 2008, 2009, there were more reformers coming into the government, but then as the election campaign drew closer, and President Karzai had to choose his running mates, he went for calm, and he brought Dostum back from Turkey in order to get the votes that his base could provide. My fear is of course, that we in the international community do not devote sufficient attention to continue to stimulate the forces of reform, be it education, civil society, and media revolution, etcetera, and that we concentrate too much on the security side, but your view of how the balance between these forces develop, how you see them developing, would be very interesting.

MR. MOHSENI: Well, this is one of the frustrations that we've had over the last ten years is the fact that we've had this opportunity to create political parties that would dominate in Parliament, have a voting system, a preferential voting system that would allow two, three parties to emerge in Parliament, and this is something that was communicated to the President at the time. Now he chose, and of course, the internationals backed him, to not allow these things to develop. And as a result, we are where we were in 2001. The President prefers dealing with individuals. And to a large extent those some believe he's the leader of the Uzbeks because he's been allowed to lead the Uzbeks and no alternative has emerged in the meantime. And I think that these are things that we have

to actually deal with, post 2014. I think that we're not going to be able to change anything, including the President's views on so many issues. And a lot of things, we're discussing these things right now, even how the voting system should change for our Parliamentary elections in 2015. These issues are being debated right now in Afghanistan. But these are serious challenges that we face, after the new government arrives, in 2014. You are actually right. There's a tug of war inside of Afghanistan right now as we speak. We have a very young generation of Afghans, sixty percent, under the age of twenty, median age of seventeen, eighteen, they're aspirational; they're very different from their parents and their relatives in the villages. But there is no leadership. This is part of the problem. There is no vision for their country. We are going to have; our literacy rate is going to jump to over eighty percent in the next few decades. How are we going to satisfy these young people as they graduate from University? How are we going to provide them with jobs? So these are issues that we're beginning to debate and discuss. Because our politicians have an obligation to actually come up with policies that will satisfy the demands of their constituencies.

MR. O'HANLON: Let's go here in the third row.

QUESTIONER: Good morning Mr. Mohseni, I'm Kelly Cameron, I'm a lawyer here in Washington, and I do a lot of work in

Afghanistan. And I was curious, how do you as a business man, I know you're diversified beyond that in Afghanistan, but as a business man, how do you feel about the impending transition of government and the withdrawal of most foreign troops? What will the business climate be like in the future?

MR. MOHSENI: We have our concerns. I think there's going to be a drop off, certainly as far as our business is concerned in say, advertising dollars. We saw the same thing in Iraq. Iraq is a very different country that's producing 5, 6 million barrels of oil today. In Afghanistan, we have to deal with this period where international money is going to disappear. And one of the things we are discussing with some of the candidates, is what medium and longer term policies will you implement. For example, reform in the property sector, for example, to get that sector going, our mining laws have been stuck in Parliament now for months, how do we fast track those, how do we actually encourage more investors to come in? That's like the longer term, but we have to have two or three medium short term and longer term projects that are going to get the economy going. Very important. The size of our GDP is twenty odd billion, it's very small. So I think that there is, of which many people argue, up to fifty percent is international money. But to add another five or ten billion of pumping into the economy is not as difficult as it seems. Our

banks are sitting on billions of dollars. We have no capital markets. This money is not being deployed to help the economy. So there are also opportunities, it's not as challenging as it may seem. But this is one of the big concerns that we have. And we have to find solutions to these problems.

MR. O'HANLON: Here in the second row, and then we'll go to the fourth row.

QUESTIONER: Good morning, my name is Amin Ashan. I'm a student at Johns Hopkins right across the street. My question is, has the government given any thought to using media or radio, television to build Afghan national identity and nationalism? And if not, what's been the main obstacle in the way?

MR. MOHSENI: Well they've been very lazy. No they haven't done anything quite effective. We've approached them on many occasions to launch campaigns, keeping the city clean, or people having this sense of ownership, with different types of issues, and they have failed miserably. They've had funding from the international community. But I think that vision's been lacking in government corridors to do that. But the media's done it. The private media's done it with sports and music and so forth.

MR. O'HANLON: Right here please.

QUESTIONER: Cynthia Schneider from Georgetown and Brookings. Great to have you here Saad. I wanted to ask two questions. First, can you follow-up on that and talk a little bit about how some of the non-political media that you have has done exactly what this young man was asking about, and other functions it performs. And then, secondly, is there a role for the United States and the international community in achieving some of these goals for the election that you're talking about, or is it really something that just, is there anything we can do to ensure that there are more robust parties, and good candidates and a good process, or is it really just for Afghans?

MR. MOHSENI: Well, you know, you're damned if you do and you're damned if you don't. After what happened in 2009, when the U.S. government, although it had a very schizophrenic approach to our election, but obviously what happened between Ambassador Holbrook and the President, and some other individuals, it could backfire. So to answer your question, I think they should do, they should help work with the Commission, they should help work with civil society, and they should encourage the President to do the right thing. Same with other political, other candidates, but to come on too strong, it's probably going to be counterproductive, just based on what we saw in 2009.

Because one of the things, we've done poll after poll, and we

look at the results. Most Afghans assume that there's going to be international interference. Now U.S. interference is probably a lot less, it's a lot more acceptable than let's say Pakistani interference, but it is interference nonetheless. The Afghan voters are very much, very aware of how internationals will try to influence the results. But as far as, well I think the media does it, we don't do it, it's not by design. I think a lot of the things just happen naturally. We show the football team, we show their faces, they immediately become role models. When they win, they grab an Afghan flag, not because someone's told them to do that, and they wave the flag, and it gets people going and they become heroes. And same for performers who perform a song. You know, the country is desperate for role models and for heroes. Not unlike your country, our stars and our performers are heroes to some and our sports figures are heroes to others. More and more of these young people are emerging. And of these football players now, two of them have become ambassadors for the police force, and others are trying to help other institutions within Afghanistan. It's all going to work out I think. And these two young football players who have become ambassadors for the police Minister of the Interior -- they volunteered to do that. Because they very understand that a lot of the policemen are killed on a daily basis, and they want to do what they can to help that.

MR. O'HANLON: And then next to Cynthia.

QUESTIONER: Good morning Mr. Mohseni. Thanks for coming, my question is about media, could you explain about your election coverage in 2010 and 2009, but a lot changed. We are talking about 2014 election coverage. There are lots of challenges, official media, social media merging and what are the challenges lying in front of your for the media coverage of election and how would you cover the candidates? Are you going to support one, present one? At the same time, if a new person is coming like you are indicating, like maybe a Tajik or whoever, how will that affect the media role, because a lot of politics shows on your TV is really encouraging a lot of Pashtun identity. How will it be affecting with the new President?

MR. MOHSENI: Well our biggest challenge is doing a better job than our competition. Because there are a lot more TV stations. They're going to be out there following candidates. So for us as a television station, it's how can we do the best job in the country in terms of covering the elections. How many cities can we go live from? How many candidates can we follow around the place? How many debates can we have? How many kinds of programs can we have, this kind of, how many talking heads, who will be the talking heads for the station who are going to contract to work with us? So those are the sorts of ordinary challenges

that everyone faces. But also, things like creating a way for people to send us footage if they see people trying to cheat. But as far as the future's concerned, we are very mindful that a new President would not be as tolerant as Karzai. Karzai, despite all his flaws, has been very very tolerant of free media. And so we may have to fight again. For us, we've had many fights over the years, and we may have some more ahead of us. Because we're pretty weak, we're pretty vulnerable. If legislation changes, it could really really chain us. So it's, and of course, this is one of the things we're dealing with the candidates, these questions are being asked of them, in terms of how tolerant will you be of free media.

MR. O'HANLON: And we'll go to James here and start working back.

QUESTIONER: James Kitfield from National Journal. Just two quick questions. The relative strength of the Taliban. You talked about Karzai always being mindful that they could get a foothold back in the south and the relationship between where you see the relationship with Pakistan and Afghanistan, the new Pakistani leader just released a Taliban prisoner, which suggests that they may be focusing on trying to get the reconciliation talks going, but that has always been a very fraught relationship. I'm curious about what your opinion is about where it is right now.

MR. MOHSENI: The Taliban, see, unlike the days of the Mujahedeen, the Taliban, their influence is very limited. They don't occupy any major city, or any major district, certainly not a province. They have a fighting force of ten to twenty thousand individuals. Not a huge force, if you compare it to the Afghan National Security Forces of three hundred thousand plus. They're not very popular. Their popularity, their approval rating is less than ten percent, even in the south where they, their birthplace is less than thirty percent. So you have a very unpopular force with not a huge fighting capability. They can be a nuisance, and they have been a nuisance, but you cannot expect this force to completely take over the country. I don't see that happening. But the problem is that they have sanctuary across the border, and this is one of the frustrations that we've had, with our political leaders and members of civil society to people like us, we talk about constantly, that unless you deal with the sanctuaries, they will continue to remain a nuisance. Now the Afghan National Security Forces have done quite well actually. Not perfect, far from it, and they have another twelve months in terms of building their capacity. But I think left alone, I think that not unlike the Afghan army in 1989 when the Soviets left, I think that they will do okay. But we have to ensure that the political transition is smooth. That to us is the single biggest challenge going forward. That is we have an election result that's

very controversial, then you may see the country potentially fragment. I don't see it as sounding very likely, but we have to be very, very mindful of that. As far as Pakistan is concerned, I think Nawaz Sharif, from all indications, wishes to deal with this issue, but he also has to deal with his own military. And we don't know what's really going on in terms of the thinking and Rawalpindi at the military H.Q. and Nawaz Sharif in terms of his resolve, whether he can actually stand up to the military and insist on both Afghanistan and India, time will tell. He's been almost too flexible on the domestic Taliban issue and talks with them, and you saw what happened yesterday. So I'd like to be optimistic, but we have to be fairly realistic and look at the historical relationship that people in Rawalpindi and Islamabad have had with the Taliban.

MR. O'HANLON: With apologies to others in the crowd, I'm going to keep you waiting one second because I want to follow-up on the Pakistan issue and ask Saad if you have a working theory or hypothesis in your own head about what drives the Pakistani military and its policy towards Afghanistan, because a lot of us have wrestled with this over the years, and of course, the narrative we all wanted to believe for a while, was they had seen the United States and the international community at large desert them after the Soviets were driven out of Afghanistan, they had to contend with all the mess that resulted. And they were persuaded

that we would leave them in the lurch again. And of course they saw our light footprint strategy under President Bush, where even though we successfully helped overthrow the Taliban after working with the Northern Alliance, after that we did the minimal possible for a number of years. And this persuaded many Pakistanis, a ha, Americans especially, but others too, are just not trustworthy. We're going to be left on our own; we better have a backup plan. And the Taliban are the backup plan, so that an India oriented group doesn't take power.

And maybe that's still the right way to understand Pakistan's thinking. But of course President Obama and others tried very hard to dissuade them from that by tripling combat forces, by pumping in a lot of extra money, the international community with people like Ambassador Eide and many others worked very hard at developing a much broader civil society, political infrastructure, working with people like you, and yet still, Pakistani policy didn't seem to change, didn't seem to believe that we were in it for the long haul. So it was harder to believe the theory that they're just expecting us to desert them and the region at any given moment and they're going to be left on their own again. So I began to wonder, does the Pakistani military just want to dominate Afghanistan, sort of in a hegemonic way? Or, is it a loyalty to the Taliban that is just so personal an ingrained and entrenched, that they just can't get it out of their

heads? Or is there paranoia about India that just sort of trumps all rational strategic thought? Or is it some combination of all of that? I just wanted to invite you, if you have a working hypothesis, on what drives Pakistani military and hard line policy towards Afghanistan.

MR. MOHSENI: I think that first and foremost, I think they fully, they don't understand Afghanistan. When I go to Lahore or Islamabad, as we have done in the past, with our Pakistani friends, they actually genuinely believe that the Taliban represents the majority of Afghans. And I jokingly refer to them as the Chardonnay Taliban, because while they're sipping their Chardonnays, in their houses in Lahore, they're advocating a Taliban style government in our country. Now what they don't understand also is that Afghanistan has changed since, and of course, the same people talk about the golden years in the 1970's, where they did visit Kabul, and where they went to restaurants and had picnics. So what they don't understand is how much the country has changed since 2001, how it is governable, and how there is a civil society. There's a younger generation, I mean Afghanistan's a very small country, so we have been able to change quicker than a lot of other countries. But I don't think there is, I do not believe we can convince the Pakistanis. Its only time that's going to actually prove that, for them to realize that Afghanistan has changed. You know they always say, the Taliban says

that time is on our side because the Americans will leave. But the exact opposite will happen on January 1, 2015. Every day that the Taliban have not captured a major city, or a major province, or a major part of the country, the myth will be destroyed. So I think that we will have to have a serious conversation in late 2015 and 2016, because it's only then will the Pakistanis realize that they will not be able to just completely see a collapse of the country a la 1993 or '94.

MR. O'HANLON: Okay, the gentleman here in the sixth row.

QUESTIONER: Good morning, my name is Farood, I'm actually from Afghanistan. I have a question and I'm interesting in your upcoming strategies with regards to the U.S. Afghan relationship. Obviously MOBY Group is one of the strongest members of the civil society these days, and obviously there is a greater expectation, at least I do. What are the upcoming strategies with regards to the U.S. Afghan relationship, and I don't want to take a lot of time but I can elaborate on that. Usually I get questions here, friends, colleagues, co-workers -- so why do Afghans hate us, why do they not like us, why do they not appreciate what we have done? My question is specifically in regards to what are the MOBY Group strategies in communicating this kind of misunderstanding. Because my understanding is that the Afghani people actually appreciate what has happened and what I call it is a decade of

opportunity that you have provided with the international allies. I think a lot of people understand that, as far as the public opinion in Afghanistan. I was wondering what MOBY Group strategies are in terms of basically settling a better communication and a better relationship between the U.S. and Afghanistan. And this question applies to even the U.S., sorry the Afghan and Pakistan relations. As a private powerful member of civil society, what are the MOBY Group channels, whether they are TV or web sites, or radio channels? Can working with civil society members in Pakistan and basically lessening the tension that exists for a very long term period.

I have basically one more question and I know I'm taking a lot of time, that's with regard to the election coverage, because it's coming very soon. Back in the days that I was working on the election project, and I think that MOBY Group's TOLO TV did a pretty good job of covering the elections, however, now, now in recent days of TOLO, and now there's a great expectation. So what are the strategies in place to not only focus on covering the elections, but also enhancing public participation and political participation in the upcoming elections, especially gender? I know back in the previous election that gender was massively under represented, especially women. Are there any strategies in place to target and encourage the gender issues in Afghanistan in regards to the

election? Thanks.

MR. MOHSENI: Let me answer your first question. Sadly, our President in the way that he has communicated in the west has been very controversial and certainly very explosive in terms of the way that he has felt with the international community, namely the Americans. It's really a reflection how the Afghans view the international community. We talked about this before. Sixty percent of the Afghan public supports the presence of international troops in the country. They realize, it's really easy, we have schools today, we have roads, we have telecommunications, we didn't have these things in the nineties. It's an easy comparison. So people are pretty much in favor of ongoing commitment from the international community. People like us. So when we come out, we say that. But really, this should have been the Afghan President; he should have communicated these things a lot more effectively. He's actually been, what's the word, I wouldn't say belligerent, but I'll use that word. His whole attitude has actually also impacted the way Afghans see Americans, so it may have been seventy percent, but today it's sixty percent.

But as Afghans, we're private citizens, we can tell you that Afghans are very appreciative of what the internationals have done in Afghanistan, and as a result are insisting on an ongoing commitment to

the country. As far as Pakistan's concerned, we did this football thing for that reason. Our population has nothing against Pakistan, the Pakistani people, and even the Pakistani government. It's only certain quarters that they feel has been out there to undermine our sovereignty, our security and so forth, but nonetheless, and two people have to come together, we would like to do more with them.

As far as the elections are concerned, we have different public service announcements as does the U.N. and others, to encourage people to vote. There is a lot of coverage of our elections. And as I said, we will have two million extra voters; we'll go up to 14 million people who will be able to vote. We're trying our best.

MR. O'HANLON: And let's do a grand finale with two questions and then we'll let Saad finish up, so the woman in the back right there, and the gentleman over here in the white shirt.

QUESTIONER: Good morning, my name is Shannon Krem. I am in Cultural Diplomacy with Afghanistan at the Department of State, and served last year in Peshawar as well. I'm just wondering Mr. Mohseni, what you think about youth participation in the elections and what media's role is in supporting that, if you have any plans or programs designed to encourage youth participation in the upcoming elections. Thank you.

MR. O'HANLON: And why don't we just take your question as well and then let you finish.

QUESTIONER: Thank you so much for your (inaudible) actually, it's interesting meeting here, yeah. My name is Orash. I am from Iran. I'm a consultant for a (inaudible). My question is regarding whether or not there is any national poll inside Afghanistan, because I couldn't find any census or anything to find the exact population of the country inside the portion of (inaudible) or the many minorities in Afghanistan. So you refer something about the sixty percent, of for example, the views of the TV, so how can you find these numbers based on that there's not any national census inside the country? Thank you.

MR. MOHSENI: Well, I'll answer that question first. We've never had a census, a proper census. We've had the Lebanon problem, that the certain politicians are afraid of finding out the real results. It should have been done years before, I think it's been stipulated in our Constitution or during the Bonn Agreement that we needed to (inaudible) after that. We should have done it ages ago. We haven't done it as yet. But we do a lot of polls. So when we, there are a lot of media polls, we do a lot of polling. So we have an understanding in terms of television ownership. But also there are other reference points in terms of the population, the break up, what percentage of the population is under the

age of twenty, and what percentage we know is over the age of thirty and all of that. Is it entirely accurate? No. We probably do need to have a census. That's one of the other conditions of some of the politicians. As they conclude their negotiations with potential candidates, is it by the proper census in the next few years. And what was the other question?

MR. O'HANLON: It was on the vote of the youth, right?

MR. MOHSENI: Yeah. To the vote of the youth, we have a lot of different programs. My colleague Sarah is there, she can probably tell you more about it after this meeting, where we have like a reality television show called The Candidate, where different young people basically vie for people's votes, and people can vote for them using a mobile phone. And they have to come up with a series of policies and convince the viewers to vote for them. So we're trying to engage them in that manner. But it will also depend on the campaign itself. If we have a number of exciting candidates, they could really mobilize people. So there's only so much we can do as a media organization. Much will also depend on the candidates and how they campaign after November the sixth.

MR. O'HANLON: Well we thank you very much. We wish you the very best. We appreciate your taking the time with us today and we look forward to more in the future. Please join me in thanking Saad.

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I, Carleton J. Anderson, III do hereby certify that the forgoing electronic file when originally transmitted was reduced to text at my direction; that said transcript is a true record of the proceedings therein referenced; that I am neither counsel for, related to, nor employed by any of the parties to the action in which these proceedings were taken; and, furthermore, that I am neither a relative or employee of any attorney or counsel employed by the parties hereto, nor financially or otherwise interested in the outcome of this action.

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