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AND THE ROLE OF THE UNITED STATES

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PARTICIPANTS:

**Introductory Remarks:**

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**Panel Discussion:**

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## P R O C E E D I N G S

MS. MALONEY: Good morning. I'm Suzanne Maloney, Vice-President and Director of Form Policy at the Brookings Institution. I'm delighted to welcome all of you. On behalf of our Center for Middle East Policy and the Initiative on Nonstate Armed Actors to today's event on the future of Afghanistan and the role of the United States. This morning's discussion could not be more timely as we've witnessed in recent months, the takeover of Afghanistan by the Taliban as the United States withdrew its combat forces from the country. There's been an intense discussion, especially here in Washington, surrounding the Biden administration's decision-making on Afghanistan in the aftermath. But these decisions have enormous real time implications for Afghans and their country, and so we're especially honored to bring together today several renowned experts and practitioners to discuss the immensely important topic of the future of Afghanistan.

Vanda Felbab-Brown, the Director of our Initiative on Nonstate Armed Actors and Senior Fellow in the Foreign Policy Program at Brookings, joins us to provide her expertise on armed actors and U.S. options in dealing with the Taliban. With Vanda onscreen is Fawzia Koofi, an Afghan politician and women's rights activist, who is also part of the Afghan government's negotiating team with the Taliban in 2020 and 2021. We're also joined by Saad Mohseni, Chairman and CEO of the MOBI Group, which includes the very influential TOLO news channel. Finally, moderating our panel today is Madiha Afzal, fellow in the Center for Middle East Policy and our Center for Security Strategy and Technology here at Brookings.

Our panel today will be discussing the Taliban's actions since taking power and what to expect regarding the future of human and women's rights, economic and counterterrorism policies, as well as the role of the media in and on Afghanistan. We will be taking questions from viewers which can be submitted via email to [events@brookings.edu](mailto:events@brookings.edu) or via Twitter at #FutureofAfghanistan. With that, I'll hand the mic over to Madiha. The floor is yours.

MS. AFZAL: Thank you so much, Suzanne, and thank you all for joining us in the audience and, of course, to our esteemed panel, Saad, Fawzia, and Vanda. As Suzanne said, there are questions about how we got here. You know, the heartbreak of August, when Afghanistan fell to the

Taliban. I think that that reflects nothing less, in my mind, than a collective failure on the parts of many successive U.S. administrations, Afghan leaders, Afghanistan's laborers. The Taliban is in power 20 years after the U.S. defeated them in 2001. We should be clear. It's shocking. And from a U.S. perspective and from that of many Afghans who wanted a different future for themselves, it's hard to imagine a worse outcome. But litigating the past and the war would be its own panel. And this is a week when Congressional hearings are ongoing on the topic. The question we have before us, for this panel today, is about the present and about the future of Afghanistan. And how the U.S. can engage with it going ahead.

I could not think of three panelists that are positioned to have this discussion with and who can shed light on this topic given their deep on-the-ground expertise on Afghanistan. So, without further ado, I will begin this discussion.

The first overarching question that I have for all our panelists will be on the Taliban's actions since taking power and what we can expect on various issues; on women's rights, on girls' education, on the media, the economy, the issue of counterterrorism, and the Taliban's connection with Al Qaeda and its dealing with ISIS-K. Essentially, how should we expect the Taliban to govern, or to transition to governing, really, given what we have seen so far and what we know about its history? So, Fawzia, if it's all right, I would love to start with you and, in addition to anything else that you would like to bring up, if you could, in particular, please address the question of women's rights and girls' education. What can we expect from the Taliban regarding the inclusion of women in public life in Afghanistan? Their interim cabinet announced this month does not include any women. Girls have not been allowed to go back to secondary school in Afghanistan. The boys have been. It's day 11 of boys returning to secondary school today, though girls have not been. And women are largely not back at work, especially in government offices. So, we'd welcome your input on this and anything else you would like to add to begin.

MS. KOOFI: Thank you, Madiha. I'm very delighted to be with such a distinguished panelist; Saad Mohseni, a very influential figure also running one of the most popular T.V. channels total. For me, women's rights is not just a political or social issue. Although in Afghanistan, it has always been a political issue, but for me, it's a matter of national security in the case of Afghanistan because women's

rights could be regarded as a benchmark for how the government or the power in Kabul deal with, you know, the cause of freedom, basically. The freedom of media, the freedom of free speech, the freedom of voting. How a government acts and the principles of democracy values is basically directly linked to how they deal with women, and that's how I look at it. So, it's not just a cardinal issue of women's rights, but it's a matter of how the country's future politics is shaped. If the Taliban try to, you know, accept women as a reality of Afghanistan, and one of the realities as the Taliban are also another reality, like Taliban, women are also a reality of Afghanistan. If they try to accept women as first-class citizens and learn to co-exist with women, that means they can live with, you know, principle -- with the group -- to the principles of co-existence in the world. And so, therefore, I would like to really put strong benchmarks, so far, despite Taliban generate statements or even during the negotiations, we have had, you know, that I was presently engaged with them in different dialogues and events since 2019, and the first time when I actually met Taliban after their government collapsed in 2019, in February, one of the Taliban leaders who is now in Kabul as part of the negotiation -- he was then -- clearly mentioned their position about women's rights and the future of women in Afghanistan, if they come to some sort of power sharing, and he said, from their perspective, there is no problem -- no contradiction if women become, you know, politically engaged up to the level of Foreign Minister, Prime Minister, and hold cabinet positions that engage in business, education, etc., it does not contradict Islam. But on the contrary, actually when they took power, we all know that they have started from where they -- from the scratch, basically. They pulled us back to where we were, making us invisible, literally. In terms of women's political participation, we know that there is no constitutional order. The Parliament is kind of on hold. We don't know if we have a parliament. The Parliament are still elected bodies, but there is no parliament. Women in the civil service were asked to stay home until further notice, until the "environment" is safe for them. Women from primary school onward, secondary, and high school are asked to stay at home because their implication of the issues are that when women are beyond -- or girls are beyond 12 years old -- grade six -- then they become mature enough, and for male teachers to teach them is un-Islamic, and therefore, they want to make the situation according to what they say in a way that women are able to -- that the students have -- that there are enough girls' female teacher, which we don't have enough female teachers to teach only girls, and enough men teachers to teach only boys.

And everything that they do right now, we know that actually contradicts not only what they say, but also contradicts the principles of Islamic beliefs, because how could they claim that they are actually doing everything under the name of Islam, when the same religion starts with okra, means read. The first, you know, word that came to our mind, say, okra read. Reading and writing is a principle of Islam. So, therefore, they're doing everything based on a traditional right because the view of traditional aspect, during the negotiation, also, they tried to demonstrate a moderate view and were regarding the poor woman negotiator as politicians. But what I see is disappointing. I hope these are temporary measures. Moving forward, I hope that the Taliban understands that women are an unavoidable part of the society and no government, even in the Muslim countries -- in the Muslim countries -- look in the same country that Taliban had their office, Tatars -- they have more females in school than males, actually. And they have women at all levels of social and political sphere. So, I think they claim that this is a temporary measure, but my concern is that that's exactly what they did when they first came to power in 1996. You know, the temporary measures became permanent then. But the good thing is that we have an opportunity to (inaudible) kind of government. I hope with the social uprising and the civilians that we see nowadays being formed in Afghanistan -- which I'm hoping to join them soon -- we will be able to hopefully, you know, pressurize the Taliban to accept and learn to live in diversity and difference.

MS. AFZAI: Thanks so much, Fawzia. That is exactly right, you know? The fact that they're saying that their measures are temporary, but this is exactly what happened in the '96 to 2001 timeframe, and you bring up a few really essential points. I think, one, is the role of civil society and what role can it play? In terms of protest movements, of course, the Taliban, when they announced their interim cabinet, the first round on September 7, the day after that, they said, essentially, that any spontaneous protests would not be allowed to take place unless they were pre-approved a day in advance, especially in terms of certain topics and slogans. You know, effectively trying to quash the civil dissent, but certainly Afghanistan is not the same as it was 20 years ago, and, of course, Saad will speak more, I'm sure, to the role of the media. So, that is really essential.

And I think that the second point -- and I ask this to all the panelists -- is what can we say about the Taliban's leadership, right? So, the Taliban's leadership certainly may not all see eye-to-eye on these issues. So, there is a question of what, you know, the Taliban spokesperson is saying, those who

are talking to the international media are saying, those ostensibly more moderate are saying, and then there is the question of, you know, what is being implemented in practice. So, if you could also highlight that in your answers, that would be great.

But, Saad, I will turn to you with the same overarching question, you know, what do we see from the Taliban right now and what can we expect? And specifically for you, in addition to anything else, you know, the role of the media. So, how have the Taliban been with TOLO News and what role do you expect the media to play going forward in holding the Taliban to account? And, of course, we know they've been targeting journalists. You know, the public -- the lashing of the journalists, you know. So, that's a concern. If you can just sort of speak to those issues, that would be great.

MR. MOHSENI: Thank you, Madiha. Well, it's, you know, as most things, it's not that black and white. Yes, we've had journalists beaten -- apprehended over the last, you know, five weeks. But that was also the case during the Honey (phonetic) administration and that was also the case during the Karzai administration. As a matter of fact, three full months ago, one of our journalists was badly beaten that, you know, I was forced to bring in the Minister of Interior and have a, you know, very honest chat with him as to why this was allowed to happen. And they also failed to prosecute the police officer who physically assaulted one of our people. So, for us, this is nothing new. We had six or seven people arrested during the Karzai time. One for two weeks. One time, they held my brother in the Intelligence Agency for two days. So, this is not unusual for us. The problem is, today, we have no safety nets, whereas in the past, we had friends in government. We had friends in Parliament. We could rely on some of the judges if we were, you know, once we were indicted, we had the international community. Today, we have -- we operate without any safety nets. And there is absolutely little doubt that the Taliban is going to become more restrictive.

Initially -- I think in the first few days -- they had little bandwidth that (inaudible) on top of their game. They have a ministry. They have a minister in charge. They have a deputy minister in charge. They are starting to issue directives to media and others in civil society. However, are the Taliban different? Well, if you freeze -- if you're judging the Taliban by how far they are today, yes, they are different. A, there's a media that didn't exist in the 1990s. There was no T.V. in the 1990s, so there's now dozens of T.V. channels. We have dozens of regular stations, in addition to the state broadcaster.

We have men and women who are on a very reliable networks, as well as in front of the camera. Certainly on TOLO and TOLO News and Lemar T.V. We have the Taliban being forced to defend our positions, whether it's on women's rights or the fighting that happened in Panjshir. Human rights abusers. Various reports that are coming out that we always address and we highlight. But that's, you know, to assume that this will continue, if things in six months are the way they are today, then that's a success. I'm not sure if that's -- if we can maintain what we have today in six months' time.

But what's interesting is that I think we've discovered that the Taliban is not one organization, one movement. Unlike the 1990s, they don't have this leader in Maloma. It's a more fragmented movement. We have the Haqqani's. We have the groups from Kandahar, and we have others. We have the Iranians backing certain individuals. The Pakistanis backing others. There are others certainly closer to Russia. So, there is -- perhaps, there are opportunities, as well.

I think that what's important -- I was in Washington last week and my message was, you have to engage. You have to engage with the Taliban leadership. You have to use what leverage you have for the benefit of the, you know, 30 million Afghans stuck inside the country. The priority right now seems to be evacuating 10 or 20 thousand people, and the worst thing they could do would be to give away, you know, every bit of leverage they have in order to secure evacuating these individuals, but then in six months, be left with nothing besides, perhaps, recognition of the new regime. So, engaging is very important. I think we need to have a longer term, you know, bigger picture policy. This engaging right now, I don't think is good for us. It's not good for the rest of the country. And as we've seen in other parts of the world, the regime is usually the last to suffer. And Afghanistan today is facing a political, humanitarian, and now an economic crisis. It's so bad that something like 90 plus percent of the population will be under the poverty line if this continues.

So, media-wise, I think they're doing an extraordinary job, our folks in Kabul. Not just in our outlets, but other outlets. They're speaking truth to power. And the Taliban are responding by holding press conferences, by coming on T.V. and responding, reacting, for example, the beating of the journalist was, you know, they apologized, sort of. They said the investigator, one of the people who physically assaulted one of our reports -- two of our reporters -- and they tried to find a camera on the phone that was confiscated. So, these are positive baby steps. And for them to change, I think ongoing pressure

and engagement carrot-and-stick approach as probably one that we need to see from everyone.

MS. AFZAL: Excellent. Thank you so much for that nuanced and very detailed picture, and we'll certainly come back to the question of engagement and how to engage from the U.S. perspective -- from the western perspective, as well as, you know, try to talk about the region a little bit towards the end, as well. Vanda, I'll turn to you now, and again, same overarching question. I was wondering if I could also add on, you know, your thoughts -- ask you to add on your thoughts about the Taliban's interim government. You know, both the initial few appointments that were announced on September 7, and then the added appointments announced more recently. Of course, they've expanded it from the initial appointments announced to include more ethnic groups. Still no women. And then if you could also speak to, you know -- Saad addressed the economic and humanitarian crisis, you know, obviously, that Afghanistan is facing, what are the challenges that the Taliban faces in terms of sort of dealing with the economy, for banking sector, you know, the Central Bank is effectively frozen. Dealing also with terrorist groups, such as ISIS-K, that want to attack the Taliban, and dealing with an Al Qaeda that might want to, you know, reprise itself in a way that might sort of hold the Taliban back in terms of its engagement with the international community. So, if you could address, you know, any of those questions that you would like to, as well. Thanks.

MS. FELBAB-BROWN: Great. Thank you, Madiha. I'll pick up, maybe, Saad's point about the Taliban having all kinds of internal cleavages. And, indeed, the role that we have seen so far, the set of decisions that we have seen, I believe are primarily driven by the Taliban's desire to reuse those cleavages that have become amplified by the fact that they want and that they need to make policy decisions. Indeed, the Taliban knew that those cleavages existed and, in many ways, avoided making all kinds of definite policy pronouncements, including thinking about what the cabinet would look like for months, both because they did not expect they would begin that quickly. They were as shocked as anyone by the speed of the takeover, although they were assuming they would take over, and because they wanted to deal with the real problematic internal bargaining. So, yes, seeing a set of cleavages -- on the one hand, there is the (inaudible) line in division. It's more complex than that. There are all kinds of satellite axis around that's impact on the triangle, but for our purposes, that's one set of divisions. Another set of divisions is the Kandahari vs. Helmand's Taliban site that is again more complicated. We're already



seeing cleavages in different alliances between Kilzi (inaudible) more associated with Yakub, and Durrani, more associated with Padadar. A third line of division is how the political leadership, the (inaudible) vs. some of the military commanders and Sheikhs. People like Zakia, who have now been brought into government positions, but again, more complicated than that. And as I mentioned, that international community interact in different ways that projects of clients, or sought-after clients, in the same way that they were trying to do during the Ghani and Karzai regimes. But the divisions and the uncertainty over the divisions has really pushed the Taliban to two principal forms of governance responses. One is (inaudible) on any difficult questions, particularly economic questions, and essentially not governed on that space. Governed in the areas which they are comfortable governing, which is suppressing crime. They have been rather successful in doing so. Places like Kabul, but not just Kabul -- Herat -- safer in terms of the amount of kidnapping, the amount of robberies. Of course, women often don't feel very safe to go out on the streets. Certainly, the absence of being covered even with a burqa. They're also achieving some impressive results on their use in corruptions, including at customs. Long something they have experienced with very effective in taxing and the Afghan economy.

But, the flip side to this is that they have also taken very rigid positions on all kinds of issues of personal freedoms, civil liberties, and social restrictions. And as Saad said, those are (inaudible). And, frankly, I don't expect that we will see loosening very rapidly. In the second part, we can talk about what is or is not, in fact, both domestic and international leverage to effectuate some sort of loosening.

In my time in Afghanistan, when I was studying the history of the Taliban, so when the Taliban was the de facto authority, we saw tremendous continuity from how they should evolve into what they are adopting in the national level, including in the hardening of policies on national freedoms, on personal freedoms, on civil liberties. So, progressing hardening of those, particularly in the initial phases, as they try to establish authority, but often, there is space for local communities to push back. And whether those local communities are effective in pushing back depends on both idiosyncrasy of both the Taliban officials. In some ways, this has changed because now, there is more central directives and it's still a very centralist government who hardly omnipresent and omnipotent, and it depends on the local communities and, frankly, it's courage because often, the Taliban is not welcoming of community

pushback and, as such, the people have no right to complain. So, that's a line that they frequently use in the shadow governments. And so, it depends, really, on how close the commander is to the -- shadow government in this case now -- not shadow -- official governor is to local communities or not.

Let me make a few comments on the Islamic state and Al Qaeda. To get the Taliban to disavow Al Qaeda and sever its links against Al Qaeda, we would require that the Taliban be defeated. The Taliban never promised that in the (inaudible) Agreement. They merely promised that they will not allow terrorists from Afghanistan against external countries. That was not random wording on the part of the Taliban, well reflecting their sensitivities about breaking with Al Qaeda, both because so many low-level and middle-level Al Qaeda practices are implemented in the Taliban families and because of the international Jihad, that's an obligation they face and they would lose if they were to break with them. Those are even more important for them now, as they are grappling with international sanctions, something I'll talk more in the second round, but let me just say that the more they fear the fist of international sanctions, the more they are actually going to be leaning towards not jeopardizing some of the international Jihad networks that they have.

The Islamic state is a different. The Taliban has been active since late 2015. Often, the Taliban has had the most important successes, far greater than the Afghan government, in limiting the Islamic state, but it's still there and it will be a challenge for them in urban spaces.

In conclusion to my opening comments, let me just say that beyond not in the beginning of July and beyond not in March, the Taliban is an authoritarian government, and it will always be an authoritarian government. Any kind of notion that we can somehow preserve or, in this case, resurrect the freedoms as they existed, in my view, is not realistic. Under most of the extensive element -- the greatest set of liberties and systems that we could look at would be an Iran-like system, something that you have elements within the Taliban that have been asking for it. At the same, when Iran-like propositions came out in late August, early September, in the decisions about the formation of the government, those (inaudible) the Taliban advocated the position (inaudible). So, if you're really looking at the role that's 1990s-like in its most hideous and egregious form, on the one hand, some sort of Saudi authoritarianism -- central Asian authoritarianism -- in the middle and an Iran-like system, at this point, the Iran-like system is a long reach and it will take considerable amount of time, in my view, before we get

there. At least, when we get there, it will come more from the (inaudible), including the fear of implosion and economic implosion, rather than from the ability of the international actors to really instigate that significantly. Thanks.

MS. AFZAL: Thanks, Vanda, for that sobering and yet, you know, very, very realistic account of where we stand. I'll just encourage those in the audience. We've already been receiving your excellent questions. You can continue to email them to [events@brookings.edu](mailto:events@brookings.edu) or on Twitter, with a #FutureofAfghanistan. And about ten minutes before the end -- about 10:50 -- we'll get to some of those questions, but of course, they're being woven into this discussion, as well. I'll turn now to the second overarching question I have for all three of our panelists, and that is the question of engagement. And in particular, I'd like to start with the U.S. and western engagement. You know, Fawzia and Saad, you, of course, have been interacting with governments in Europe, as well, so feel free to please bring that in, as well. But I think the question is, what are the policy tools, what are the means, at the disposal of the international community and, in particular, the west? Thinking about the U.S., thinking about Europe, in terms of thinking about aid, sanctions, the issue of legitimacy and recognition, humanitarian assistance, to moderate the behavior? And I think, you know, there are, I guess, two questions there in my mind. You know, what can the west do? What should it do in engaging with the Taliban? And then, of course, there's the question of the ordering of it. You know, as all of you have alluded to, the, you know, there is a dire economic and humanitarian, you know, sort of collapse, essentially, you know, that is imminent in Afghanistan. So, does the west engage on these issues? You know, given that the urgency of the economic situation there, but does that then threaten the conditionality of that engagement? Right? And so, how realistic is the leverage that the west has given the challenges Afghanistan faces? So, I will start off with you, Vanda, then move to Saad and Fawzia.

MS. FELBAB-BROWN: Well, thank you. Let me first make what is a strong pitch for engagement. Any kind of hold that isolation, blanket sanctions, a la Myanmar, a la Venezuela, they'll bring about ready for changes in Afghanistan are, in my view, incorrect reading of the situation. They will push the Taliban toward being more uncooperative rigid. The regime itself has financial tools to survive by taxing both legal and other illegal economies and has countries that will not join in this kind of sanction regimes, including Russia and China, not to mention the Gulf, while the population will suffer. So, blanket

isolation, so-called maximal pressure designing sanctions a la Myanmar, Venezuela, in my view, would be deeply counterproductive and ineffective. Yet, this is what a lot of politicians within the United States, in European countries, are driving towards. So, the political pressures, in my view, are you are heading in ways that pushes policy in the counterproductive dimension.

That said, I think there are -- there is a way to engage -- to have a smart engagement that allows some inducements that is not just about stakes. As long as engagement is all about stakes, I think this sort of false notion of maximum pressure that does not produce outcomes. But nonetheless, the combination of positive inducements, such as allowing some money accounts -- not all -- some to be flowing for political actions can nudge, -- and I use the term carefully here -- the Taliban towards less egregious policies. And this is really important. If we assume that the purpose of pressure is to return to the gains of the political freedoms as they existed until the end of July, we will be disappointed. The pressure will be for nothing. In my view, both positive and pressure should be toward minimizing the most egregious policies and understanding that it will take time for policy direction to take place, and that often, policy change will need to emerge from local communities. That, however, means that local communities need to have some means of survival and cohesion and mobilization. To the extent that there is the collapsed economy -- there is pressure, they are simply a condition of starvation. The communities will be far less effective in pushing back and mobilizing. That's another illusion, in my view, there is some hope in some circles that if there is an implosion in Afghanistan, which frankly, economically, could take place next year -- quite rapidly next year -- so, November, December -- headlines, we will see massive collapse of already deficient, but still functioning, basic economic systems, that this implosion will argue the Taliban and we are in some sort of scenario. I propose that, yes, we could head into an explosion, but it will probably be even worse scenario than we are right now.

Allowing (inaudible) is critical. It is extremely hampered, both by politics and by legal issues. Essentially, most of the money streams have dried up and is extremely difficult to get them in. Part of that is politics and this notion that maximum pressure will produce radical changes. That's sort of easier to (inaudible). Part of it is the legal regime that is restricting aid. So moving money in, figuring out ways that international community can bring money in, or looking at other roundabout systems around the legal aid, in my view, is critical to just ease the humanitarian situation.

Saad talked about 90 percent of people being in poverty. That number was there before the Taliban took over. That number comes from really early 2021. We're probably in a worse situation right now and we're heading into a difficult situation by then. So, the big takeaways are engagement is crucial. Engagement should take place with a wide set of factions within the Taliban. Talk with everyone in the Taliban. What we ask for, realistically, needs to be very limited in shaping policy away from the most disastrous, as I mentioned, and keeping the money coming in.

MS. AFZAL: Excellent. Over to you, Saad.

MR. MOHSENI: Yeah. I agree with Vanda. I think -- but before I talk about engagement, which I think is crucial, we have to ask ourselves, what is -- you know, given that Brookings is a U.S. based institution -- what is the post-August 15 U.S. vis-a'-vis Afghanistan? To be frank with you, I don't think there is a policy today. I think that's really important for folks in Washington to figure out, you know, how they intend dealing with issues such as, you know, Afghanistan's humanitarian needs, how intense tackling issues like narcotics and terrorism and refugees, which is going to impact the Europeans more than the Americans. But nonetheless, it's a very important consideration. But also, I think it's important for the Americans to also work towards -- they have to strive to protect our gains, you know, of the last 20 years, including women's rights, education, and free expression.

Now, when we talk about engaging the Taliban, I think the important thing is you can always go back to the carrots. You have this window of opportunity, which may be 6 weeks, or 8 weeks, or 12 weeks to engage with the Taliban, because if the Taliban are isolated and cornered, they will go to their default mode, which is sort of a type approach to things. And it's going to strengthen the more radical elements within the movement. The isolation is to people who don't really care about the local populous. And the ones who think, well, we have to sort of go back to being dictatorial because this is the only way we can manage this country. But if you engage, then you're giving the Taliban some hope. The ultimate aim should be to recognize them if they, you know, do a whole series of other things. That should certainly be indicated to them. I'm not saying that engagement today should mean recognition, but engagement, and then if the Taliban do a series of things, eventually, you can recognize them. And certainly, that should be promised.

The other important thing is engaging the region. You have to engage the Chinese. You

have to engage the Pakistanis and the Russians and the Iranians because there are some common interests, whether it's ISIS or refugees or drugs. I think these parties are willing to get engaged. And I think there is this sort of buyer's remorse, to an extent. I think especially with the Russians and the Chinese and perhaps even the Iranians, they, to a large extent, they wanted the Americans to fail, but not that the Americans have failed, they're stuck with the Taliban. They're right next door. So, I think talking to them is important.

The other thing which I wanted to point out is, when we talk about leverage, the Americans have to figure out how to become relevant again. Humanitarian aid should to be used as leverage, to be honest with you, but there are believers, I'm sure, and I think for the Taliban, they have emerged victorious. Their victory has been absolute. They're very confident, cocky. But it's like winning a football game, not quite realizing how badly you've injured your knee, and I think that they will hobble in the weeks ahead, when they realize how difficult it will be to manage Afghanistan, which last year, received something like \$8.5 billion, 45% of its GDP, compliments of the international community. So, I think the weeks ahead, you know, they will realize that this is a country very different to the one in 2001. It has almost doubled in size. People's expectations are very high. Ninety percent who lived under the poverty line in 2001 could get by. They were entrepreneurial in a lot of ways. [TAPE GOES BLANK AT 40:44 UNTIL 40:48) different Afghanistan to the one we saw last in 2001. And they will suffer a lot more, and in some ways, they're a bit more spoiled. You know, many, many years of international assistance. They will stand up for themselves, I think, you know -- I'm certain we're not going to see street combat, but they will have protests and they will attempt to get out. They will make things difficult for the Taliban. So, this ongoing engagement will allow for, you know -- you want to keep the door slightly open as the Taliban realize that they need help.

MS. AFZAL: Thank you. And I think, you know, the sort of -- what's emerging is, of course, humanitarian aid to not be used as leverage, and so the importance of engagement -- I think the question with the Taliban always is if you sort of give them too much unconditionally, then what happens? And, of course, there's lost a lot, any goodwill that they had given to the fact that with (inaudible), they did not abide by, sort of, the notion of cutting ties with Al Qaeda, though as Vanda pointed out, that was not how they read it. They read it as not allowing Al Qaeda to conduct attacks from Afghanistan on the U.S.

Fawzia, over to you. Same question. The question of engagement, and Saad, of course, also brought up (inaudible), so if you want to weave that in, but I will ask that to the panel directly, as well, you know, the question of China, Russia, and Pakistan.

MS. KOOFI: On the question of engagement and the future policy, I think any kind of engagement with Taliban must consider a few points. First, as somebody who has been engaged personally in the whole thing. Not just political studies, but also personal experience. First of all, these are the Taliban that are detached from governing and they are basically owning a country that is so different from 1996. They are actually owning a country that only up to a few weeks ago, the situations were different. Yes, with problems and inefficiencies, but institutions were functional. And the people's expectations, as stated before, are high, so their engagement actually has to, you know -- any sort of engagement must address that issue for Taliban that is a group that does not know how to govern. This is a group that is very good at fighting. Now, do they have the required experience and expertise on governing? Time will prove it, and until now, we know that they have not also been able to use -- utilize these sources outside their own network. So, I think that is one aspect of any future policy. It's a fighter group, and the moment they face a military confrontation or any sort of confrontation, it will unite them. And that's why you see that any kind of guerilla fighting, including the Panjshir, they won. But are they going to be as united as they are -- or they were before moving forward? There were talks about this unity and different faction groups about this, and I know that, for instance, when their first military group entered Kabul, the Haqqani Network, the political office in Qatar and others were not happy about what has happened, and they seemed to be less relevant in terms of making the important decisions. So, (inaudible) that this unity moving forward when matters of governing and resources, etc. on power and position comes up, are they going to be as united as they were when they were in a position earlier -- the smaller group fighting? And I think when it comes to international pressure, unlike what Vanda believes, I believe that international pressure actually will work because they seem to be more sensitive towards international pressure. And that's why they try to behave to the extent, although in contradiction to their beliefs and inner kind of structure, they try to behave to the extent they can in response to these protests -- several protests and freedom of speech because they are in desperate desire of international cooperation for them to survive. They know that China and Russia will not substitute EU when it comes

to humanitarian or any kind of funding in the future for them to govern. So, therefore, I think they're extremely cautious about what the world perspective is towards them and that's why we have seen in the past few days -- I think it was a week ago -- that one of the Haqqani members went to Serena spontaneously, had the press conference, and invited media -- international media -- to get out of Serena hotel in Kabul to see them be alive because that indicates how, you know, international cooperation is important for them. So, for that, I think they will take international pressure to some extent, so I think international pressure on inclusion on rights and liberties on constitutional order on, you know, moving forward on how they behave towards religious minorities and others, especially women, will work, from my perspective.

And second -- or third, rather -- on military extremist groups and their ties, let's not forget that in 2001, or even before that, there was Al Qaeda and Taliban, the two military extremists -- strong military extremist groups -- in Afghanistan. But now, there are more based on some intelligence -- I mean, security reports published. Twenty-two military extremist groups operate between Pakistan or Afghanistan and Central Asia, in addition to Al Qaeda and ISIS-K. And their attitude and behavior towards ISIS was also different from one region to the other. I know that in east, for instance, in Ingahar (phonetic), they were in military confrontation with ISIS, but in places like, you know, even in north northeast, they were working in partnership in some cases. So, moving forward, those unhappy soldiers will only know how to fight. When I was in Kabul, I actually met some of those uneducated young boys who have gained identity to fighting and the only thing they actually believe in is the gun. Moving forward to when, you know, they are more established and there is less space for those military fighters or their soldiers -- foot soldiers -- how are they going to accommodate them? Are they going to be another, you know, recruitment source for ISIS in this case or another military extreme Taliban that probably will raise, or even, you know, the military resistance against Taliban? Are they going to recruit them? So, that is another question which could oppose Afghanistan to the raise of military extremist groups and, also, as you (inaudible) Agreement, which also the United States violated in a way because the Agreement states clearly that negotiations for a political settlement, something that the Biden administration bypassed, by announcing withdrawal as early as September even, which resulted in, you know, kind of unprepared withdrawal which collapsed institutions, so are they going to, you know, bind themselves to an agreement



with the United States actually violated the agreement in terms of detaching to some of these military extremist groups and, in this case, ISIS and Al Qaeda, which I mentioned before, did approach towards ISIS, (inaudible) one region together. With all of this being said, I think my concluding remarks on this part would be that international pressure is important. It is a very narrow line between how the world will engage and how to give political boost and support and how to misuse that engagement because I know that in the recent negotiations Minister of Foreign Affairs to Afghanistan, they actually stated in their social media, that they have been using extremely well -- much better than the previous government in the P.R. -- they say that, you know, that that minister is there to congratulate, so one has to really consider this NATO line of engagement. I also think that we need to -- the world needs to engage with them to ensure that they genuinely commit themselves and do what they commit in terms of inclusion because inclusion is a very wide definition. Inclusion does not mean somebody is a deputy minister and that's inclusion. It has to be meaningful, you know, decision-making process. Something that -- that the previous government was also a major issue, and I think one of the reasons that the government collapsed was the fact that people did not see themselves being included. And in my personal meetings with people from the police and army, when I asked them the question, the same response was like, why should we fight to protect Iran's interests? So, I think that was a question before and it's a question now. Inclusion is a wide issue. How do we tackle that moving forward? We all have a responsibility -- the international community, I think, needs to monitor -- put that as a benchmark because if it's an inclusive government with women, with religious minorities, etc., that means it's a government that's willing to work with the world. The ruler from the region, who knows -- in a year's time (inaudible) that the Taliban, I mean, American flag last July, which flag will be in a year's time? No one knows. The Chinese, of course, following the footsteps of some of the neighboring countries, try to have a good relationship. They use the most -- in the region, they use the most out of the deal the Americans have with the Taliban and their removal of sanctions for Taliban to be able to travel, but that was particularly for the negotiations. They used the most of it. The region used it. The Taliban used it. I think they will try to remain engaged, but now, are they going to substitute the funds -- the political support -- the U.S. -- and the (inaudible)? That's a question that we will see how financial support will change the scenery.

In terms of the way they govern corruption, etc., let's remember that they have been

dealing with a very minor way of governing. They only have been controlling the tax and the customs. Not more than that. Moving forward, we will see how the issue of corruption, you know, governments, etc., will unfold. Thank you.

MS. AFZAL: Thanks so much, Fawzia. And to that question of the region, Fawzia, you and Saad addressed it a little bit, but again, I invite both Vanda and Saad, if you want to jump in on this question. This is something we're getting from the audience, as well, and I'll add on a little bit to that. So, thinking of regional actors; Russia, China, Pakistan, can the west and the U.S. interact with them as the international community to put pressure on the Taliban. So, you know, basically act in concert with them, or will we see, basically, Russia, China, Pakistan, perhaps Iran, you know, I think separately in a way that might counter the west's interests in putting pressure on the Taliban. So, perhaps, they put less pressure on the Taliban. Perhaps they're more -- there's an earlier recognition that comes from them that counteracts sort of what the west's leverage is and policy movers are. How do you see the U.S. interacting with Pakistan, Russia, China to put pressure on the Taliban?

MR. MOHSENI: Would you like me to go first? Just -- I think very quickly, I think there's an expectation from the U.S. to clean up this mess. And this was communicated to folks in Kabul by the three special envoys who were there a few days ago. I think they -- I, you know -- the Americans probably -- and if it was up to the White House, they'd probably cut and run -- and the Chinese and the Russians in particular were very vocal that the Americans need to come back and, you know, help us clean this mess up. I think one option should be to a U.N. special envoy. I think if the Americans take the lead role, I think people are too suspicious of the Americans. I think the Americans should reengage and, of course, talk to the Russians and the Chinese, Pakistanis, and even the Iranians, on the Afghan issue, as well as the Central Asians and others, but perhaps, not like before, perhaps there should be a special envoy -- a U.N. security council, you know, appointed individual, who could oversee this, and maybe there's an opportunity to have another forum -- like a one-type forum -- where they can discuss Afghanistan's issues and also invite the Taliban, as well as maybe perhaps some opposition figures who could, perhaps, join the Taliban. What we intended doing back in Qatar, maybe they can have another go of it. I think we have to think outside the box. I think the way things are going, it's not positive -- the signs are not good -- I think as Vanda pointed out. But maybe there is an opportunity, as well. And I

think the realization in the neighborhood that this could really be expensive for us, you know. I think certainly that's what the Russians are saying privately, and even the Chinese. And the Pakistanis, as well. I think there's a realization that if this explodes, who's going to suffer the most? It's going to be region.

MS. AFZAL: I think that's exactly right. That recognition is certainly coming to (inaudible) and with (inaudible) force, you know, there's sort of the threat of terrorism in terms of the TTP and other groups, as well, so real, real concerns there. Vanda?

MS. FELBAB-BROWN: Yeah. You know, I think that is so basic and profound that we touched on in many ways. And that is exercising maximum pressure or intense pressure through all kinds of isolations and sanctions and the risk of implosion potentially happening quite quickly. Or at least there is significant worsening just the daily conversation -- the daily life of people without really moving the Taliban more constructive policies. I would also say that, you know, that this notion that the region can somehow come together and the rescue of Afghanistan from various layers of problems has been there for years and years, including in the run up to Doha -- before Doha -- and while the region technically has the same interests, the alliance -- the alignment of interest, and even the ordering of preference, really never translated into unified policies. Russia certainly -- and I would say China, as well -- the west to move away from the extent of economic sanctions. They didn't like it. Russia recently said it will not recognize the Taliban any time soon and, in fact, raised issues of women and political inclusion where I had expected to do, but at the same time, they also said, do you want -- or privately, they're saying -- that they don't like the blanket sanctions as they exist right now. China is already starting to move in with some in kind aid that's still very minimal, but it's happening.

And I would also point out that the Taliban is actually very suspicious of not just the west, and they often interpret pressure as a sign of inference to undermine and destroy the Taliban. They're also very suspicious of those other actors, including the Pakistanis. So, Pakistan is often seen as this (inaudible) in many ways -- Taliban for 30 years. It's managed to insert itself and people that are closest to Pakistan, like the Makinis, into all kinds of really important portfolios in the structuring of the minister of intelligence, the defense, but at the same time, there is also lots of pushback or frustration or suspicion on the part of various Taliban actors, even Pakistan. So, I think we have to be cautious. While engaging the

region is very important, certainly talking to the region and having the U.S. be part of the conversation, we have to be both cautious of how much we expect the (inaudible) will emerge and how much we can expect that even if there is unity, it will bring radical changes. And so, this is what I go back to. In my view, the most important policy point to figure out is how much is (inaudible). And if the ask is too large, we will fail – there is the risk that we will fail. But, of course, that's a difficult calibration and often politics and other pressures drive asking for much more than might be accomplished.

My final comment is really to emphasize the role of the (inaudible) office in Afghanistan that's been tremendous and essential, and to the extent that there is really any kind of western presence right now left on the ground, any kind of engagement that the Taliban -- any kind of engagement with the people -- it is the (inaudible) office, and they need strength and support as opposed to threats and pressure regarding legal constraints, regarding to being (inaudible) perhaps in engaging with the Taliban. Thanks.

MS. AFZAL: Excellent. Thank you so much. Again, to Saad, to Vanda, to Fawzai, for an incredibly nuanced, incredibly rich, sobering, but also hopeful, discussion. You know, this was certainly very constructive and, you know, as Saad said, the U.S. needs to come up with a policy for the future for Afghanistan. And certainly, the Biden Administration needs to come up with a cohesive policy that, you know, sort of brings together the international community, and, of course, we talked about the role of the U.N. We've talked about, sort of, the complications with the region, but potential with the region, as well. But we will certainly be watching this at Brookings closely. Again, this event, cohosted by the Center for Middle East Policy and the Initiative on Nonstate Armed Actors will be keeping our eyes on this. Thank you so much for your engagement in terms of the audience. Your questions, again, show a great deal of concern and interest on this topic, so please continue to follow our work on this and we will be following this, as well. Thank you so much again to our panelists and to the audience for joining us.

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