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WEBINAR

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P R O C E E D I N G S

MR. O'HANLON: Greetings, everyone. I'm Mike O'Hanlon in the Foreign Policy Program at Brookings. And we have an important topic to discuss today, the Future of U.S. Policy Towards Afghanistan and really in a broader sense, the future of Afghanistan itself a couple of months after all of that country to the Taliban. And as winter approaches after a difficult harvest season with about half the country's population estimated by the UN to be at acute risk of malnutrition or starvation in the months to come, Covid still a scourge, and not to mention the difficulty of transitioning to a new government by a group that the United States has obviously viewed as its enemy for some two decades. An enormously complex challenge, and I haven't even mentioned the counterterrorism angle where the United States is still obviously concerned about the possibility of ISIS or a/-Qaeda using Afghan territory, whether in connivance with the Taliban or not, as a base from which to organize attacks against American allies or the United States itself.

So, the stakes are high and we have a fantastic panel to discuss them today. Our approach here will be conversational and ultimately involve your questions, which you can send to Events@Brookings.edu if you wish.

But we're going to begin by hearing a little bit about each of the panelists, who include some very brave Afghans and some very brave Americans who have spent a lot of time on the ground in Afghanistan over the years and decades and who will share their personal reflections and experiences and tell you a little bit about themselves in some of these opening comments, as well as setting up a policy discussion that awe will then focus on for much of the hour.

So, we're going to begin with my good friend, Shaqaiq Birashk, who worked at Brookings for a number of years. She's from an Afghan refugee family that settled in the United States back some three decades plus ago at the time of the Soviet invasion, or the aftermath thereof and the civil war that ensued and came to the United States. The family build a new life here. Shaqaiq worked with us at Brookings, but she also very bravely went back to Afghanistan and worked for a couple of non-governmental organizations ultimately in support of the Afghan government and its efforts to build a better

relationship with Pakistan in those final months and years before the fall of the government this past summer. And her personal story of brave service and then ultimately her safe attempt to leave the country is documented in the Washington Post in a remarkable story that I recommend to everyone. It ran just a couple of months ago.

Equally courageous and impressive is Lotfullah Najafizada, who works with TOLOnews, one of the most impressive products of the last 20 years in Afghanistan, a place that I think all of us have had the opportunity to visit in Kabul and it's been active around the country trying to highlight the situation in Afghanistan from a straight news perspective, but also wonderful documentaries, wonderful other kinds of shows that have really given voice to a lot of the Afghan people, as their voices had been suppressed for so long and are of course now at risk again. And we are delighted to have him joining us today to talk a little bit about TOLOnews and its legacy, but also of course about the future.

Carter Malkasian is one of the most remarkable American military advisors, political advisors, field researchers, and now authors that I have ever met. And with the publication of this new book about America's war in Afghanistan, which he didn't necessarily time to come out exactly when that war ended, but it's the American war in Afghanistan, the history. And it just does happen to have come out, sadly in some sense, as that war can be said to have completely wound down with the defeat of the Ghani government and the victory of the Taliban.

Carter spent time in Helmut Province, he spent time advising General Dunford when General Dunford was commander of the International Security Assistance Force. Carter also spent time advising General Dunford when he became chairman of the Joint Chiefs and had responsibility of course for Afghanistan during the 2015-19 period, and somehow was writing this book the whole way along that path at the same time. And it's just a remarkable testament to what has happened. He also attempts to wrestle with why the outcome was such as it was.

And in doing this, Carter has now joined my dear friend and colleague, Vanda Felbab-Brown, on my short list of my favorite books of Afghanistan of all time, because about 10 years ago Vanda wrote a book called *Aspiration and Ambivalence*, and it was about the first decade of the American

and NATO and international efforts to help Afghanistan rebuild itself after the overthrow of the Taliban in 2001. And the title itself captures a lot of what was going on and what Vanda identified to be happening on the ground.

And Vanda is going to begin our conversation today as we get into the policy discussion for the future.

So thank you for your patience in listening to me introduce these remarkable panelists, but now I'm going to ask each one of them, starting with Shaqaiq, to tell us a little bit more about themselves, what they did on the ground, and how that may give us a window into what strengths and opportunities that we have still with the Afghan people to try to work with them and somehow preserve some of what has been achieved these last two decades, even in the face of military defeat for the U.S. effort there.

So thank you all for your remarkable service and for joining us today.

And, with that, Shaqaiq, over to you, my friend.

MS. BIASHK: Thank you, Mike, for this opportunity. It's an honor to be here with you all and I'm delighted to share this virtual panel, a virtual stage with my co-panelist who are friends from Afghanistan and also former colleagues and mentors of the Brookings Institution.

I'll talk a little bit about what my latest role in Kabul and also — in order — I'll also lay the groundwork — I think it's ideal for us to talk about the last 20 years in order for us to move forward. And we'll just go from there.

I moved to Afghanistan five years ago for the first time after my time at the Brookings Institution to help in the development of the country. Eventually I helped launch a nonprofit youth empowerment organization through media, since media has quite an impact in Afghanistan and its outreach is wide. We launched a nonprofit through a media entity and a TV channel.

After that in my latest role, a USAID grant for a local nonprofit organization in Afghanistan, I was the advisor of Afghanistan's president for the special envoy for Pakistan. In that role I helped, along with another colleague, develop policies that created — our mandate was to create more of

bridge building and trust building avenues with Pakistan. We wanted to have genuine conversation with them and really underline and strengthen our bilateral diplomacy in order for us to have result-based conversation in Doha with the Taliban. We were able to develop road maps and bilateral strategic policies to move along. And in the midst of all of that we obviously faced a lot of challenges and push backs, but we still pushed forward — but in the midst of all of that the republic collapsed.

I will now touch upon — as I mentioned, it's hard for us to move forward without talking about the past. There's a lot of shared blame for all, for everybody to talk about. But I will just, because of the time — I'm only given 4-5 minutes — I have used a few of it already — I'm just going to drop a couple of lines. We cannot blame Afghan leaders without talking about the issues and without really holding the American leadership accountable as well. Both sides are responsible for everything that happened in the last 20 years, the good and the bad, and also the collapse of the country.

I think all my fellow American and Afghans on the ground can reiterate this and share this.

Additionally, another thing we lacked before going to Afghanistan, and continuously while we were in Afghanistan, we lacked understanding of the people and we didn't draw from the lessons of the post Viet Nam War and also from U.S. involvement in Afghanistan between '79 and '89. Even though our role I Afghanistan was in the background, but we still had a lot to learn from that experience.

The third mistake and what went wrong is during our time there U.S. lacked a concrete vision and objective, a goal to be there. Therefore, which resulted from short-term and short vision unsustainable projects. Our solutions lacked indigenous insight and we moved from counterterrorism to nation building to empowering and saving Afghan women, but at the end we handed it all back to the group that we were preventing Afghanistan to fall in the hands of. During all of which both elites — the U.S. and Afghan elites enjoyed cashing big checks and benefited from this war.

Additionally, our creation of unity government was a big mistake, which set the wrong precedent. Our surge in 2009 lacked vision, which was a quick fix. We increased our numbers, but when we decreased our numbers in 2004 Taliban still had their numbers at a higher level and then they

continued to, you know, take part in the — what we saw until now.

There is also a trust issue which was quite widened between the Afghans and our American friends — I'm sorry, America's friends, NATO despite our warning about the corruption by SIGARS report continuously, we looked away. For example, we were there for national building strategies at one point, but we looked away when reality, such as the bacha bazi practice surfaced and then, you know, our generals admitted that they looked another way. Afghanistan became the playground for arms and our military. The mother of all bombs was dropped there. And then in addition to that, night raids, drones, our only dealing with the elites.

And lastly — I know my time is running up — our Doha deal was the foundation of what was a failed strategy, which we saw on August 15 the result of. It was a one side commitment. Only the U.S. held its side of the bargain. The language and the agreement were something that really Afghans completely lost their trust and their long-term partner, despite their promises of not having to ever leave them. Language like the reduction of violence made them question if their blood was less than their American allies' blood. And then also continuously involving the Envoy Khalilzad, and both of the administrations doing this, which I think that we definitely more upon that hopefully later on in our conversation.

So, I'll end with this, hopefully this lays the basic — and this is just the surface level. We can talk about this for hours, but for the sake of time I'll end here.

MR. O'HANLON: Thank you, Shaiq. I think it is important to set some of the backdrop and also to — from an Afghan and an American perspective to explain so many of the things that have gone wrong, although ultimately, we will of course want to be talking largely about the future.

So, we turn now to you, Lotfullah, please feel free to pick up and reflect a little on the past, but also with an eye towards identifying either strengths in Afghan society or anything else that you want to put your finger on that can help us going forward as we come back to that topic in the second round.

But over to you and thanks again for joining us today.

MR. NAJAFIZADA: Thank you, Michael. Good to be here. Good morning to the other panelists and good to see my old friend, Carter, after a very long time.

I think —- well, yes, things have happened, as people say, things have changed. After August 15 has probably —- after the split, Afghanistan's journey into two —- or ended one journey and, you know, started a new one, but it's certainly a new era for Afghanistan. As Shaqaiq mentioned, as Afghans we are very sentimental. You know, we want to talk about past and we want to spend hours and hours, if not days, to see who did what and who to blame most, which is quite important I must say. But what's way more important is what to do next and to analyze the situation on the ground as we speak and what to expect I think in the future.

Let me start with media because that's where I come from. So, media was one of the, you know, huge (inaudible) of the country, a community of 10,000 people. Unfortunately, that space has been reduced and shrunk, as well as in quality as well as in number. And a lot of Afghan journalists have left the country post August 15, but there are hundreds of them who have bravely chosen to stay behind and to continue to do their work, including many of my colleagues, that we are so grateful to what they do. And they are our eyes and ears on the ground, not just for Afghans but also for the international community.

So, I think because institutions like TOLOnews and others are still running, because of them and t hanks to them, I think we know a little bit of, you know, what's happening in Afghanistan. But at the same time, this says so much about how well and deep rooted the Afghan media and free press was in the country. So definitely it was disrupted, but it was not eradicated. So hopefully we can build on that as we move forward.

On the political security and economic front —- I mean as you all know and you're experts of Afghanistan —- I view that we're still in this period of uncertainty. We're not really sure how the Taliban's vision of long-term or permanent government is going to look like. That affects probably policy makers and policy making around the word on counterterrorism, on recognition of the Taliban, and even as we speak on aid delivery and the Taliban's interaction with the rest of the world.

So, I think we have talked also about whether the Taliban would make — well, that's probably the most I would say promising scenario that we will come to that. We will come to that best case. But we also have I think not necessarily very promising scenarios where the Taliban might not (inaudible). People argue that there is a brand, Taliban is Taliban, and their views in the past 20-30 years is what defines them. And now their hate for the U.S. is what defines them. If you go to Kabul then you see billboards where they brag about and their proud of, you know, defeating the United States. So how can you be proud of that, but at the same time expect support from the U.S. So, if the Taliban don't necessarily change, how will that affect their relationship with the rest of the world?

And we know that there are certain Taliban figures within the country — I think, you know, the dominant ones, who do not necessarily think that this was a diplomatic (inaudible), they think this was a military win. And going forward I think that's what (inaudible). So those who were on the military side, sitting on the military commissions, they would probably call the shots on counterterrorism, on how to deal with other groups, including al-Qaeda, as well as how to be with the rest of the world.

And then I think the third scenario is that if Afghanistan is taken into some source of — lacks proper — you know, full fail state, then what will happen given that it's not really an inclusive representation of the country right now. One might even argue that this is not even Taliban inclusive. So how would that affect long-term Taliban's relationship with other minorities and groups within the country and how some sort of, you know, a gradual slow, you know, resistance might unfold.

So, I think the future is quite uncertain if I wrap up here. And it's very important to stay engaged, focused, talk to all stakeholders, and empower those, you know, who make a good difference.

MR. O'HANLON: Thank you very much.

And it's a nice segue to Carter. Carter, of course, say whatever you'd like about your reflections on the past and what's in your great book, which I really want to congratulate you on, but also Lotfullah mentioned that one of the defining characteristics, maybe even the central ideology of the Taliban at some level is opposition to foreigners and to the United States. But you also said in your book that somehow the Taliban had the advantage over the government and over us in their inspiration and

their sense of authenticity about what it meant to really be an Afghan. And of course, that's an uncomfortable conclusion at some level to reach, because a group that was so misogynistic and so violent, you'd hate to think it really is the authentic Afghan identity or culture.

On the other hand, to the extent that the Taliban want to think of themselves that way, perhaps it creates some opportunities for us in how we deal with them. And perhaps they don't need to define themselves just as the opposition to the outside and to the United States, but that they are now in sort of a better mindset than they were in the 1990s to try to build a functioning county. So that's a question that occurs to me having read your book and I just wanted to ask you that question, but also any other reflections you want to begin with today, please.

MR. MALKASIAN: No, thank you, Mike, and thank you for the comments on the book. I Really appreciate that. And it's great to see everyone here.

So, I mean I definitely don't mean to say that the Taliban are the authentic representation of what it is to be Afghan. I don't think — that would be definitely quite a stretch. But the Taliban have been able to argue that they were closer to what it means to be Afghan, represent themselves in that way, than the government was able to represent itself to be that way. So, the idea of resisting occupation, I mean that runs fairly deep and certainly something that I think a lot of us saw in our time in Afghanistan. And I think it goes before the British occupations back to the Mughal period. You can read it in the poetry of Khushal *Khan, you can read it in the poetry of Albaram (phonetic) and Baba. And it's definitely very thick whenever you talk to the Taliban about things, but you can also hear it in what government leaders or government officials and commanders themselves have spoken about the Taliban and their morale and what drives them to fight harder than the police or the army fought.*

And another component of this — I mean a lot of this is us, Americans, being there. I think it's less about something about the nature of the government there itself and the fact that they were next to us the whole time. And our cause isn't helped by the fact that we're largely not Muslims. That gives the Taliban something else to organize themselves around and something to point to themselves as being different and more Afghan than — well, certainly than we were.

I mean so resistance occupation is one part of Taliban, how Taliban have been able to identify themselves or connect themselves to Afghan identity. The other thing that they care a lot about is Islamic law and the implementation of Sharia. And that's of course their interpretation of Shari, but when we say that we should remember that the Taliban, they really hold the corner on interpreting Sharia in Afghanistan. There may be people who are more educated and people who have, you know, greater credentials to say so, to say what the interpretation of Sharia should be, but the Taliban at the village level, they are the mullahs, they are the people that many folks will go to to hear that interpretation, so they have a corner on being able to say what's right and what's wrong, even though if we can say in a broader sense that that's not quite accurate.

So, I suspect that tie, that they see themselves as the rightful interpreters of Islamic law and Sharia and wanting to see a government that's run by Sharia, I think that is going to be something that strongly continues in how the Taliban want to rule.

Now, I don't want to take too much time, so I think the only point I'll bring up other than this is, you know, the last few months have given this kind of view, and even as I talk about the Taliban — and resistance occupation I think contributes to this view — but it gives a view that no Afghans fought, that everyone ran, that everyone surrendered, that they never had the will to defend themselves at all. And that's not really accurate. In no words is that what I'm trying to say. Saying that the Taliban had an advantage in morale is not the same thing as saying that Afghans didn't fight. I know many, many Afghans who fought and suffered quite horribly through the conflict. I know families who have lost brothers who were tribal leaders, who have lost other brothers who were police commanders, who have lost sons in the course of the fight, nephews in the course of the fight. I know whole families that have been decimated through it. I know during August itself, I have many, many pictures that show just how clear the fighting was and how tough it was in the earlier stages of it. Many pictures of Taliban corpses, many pictures of Pakistani IDs. And we know from previously just how much the Afghan forces suffered. We know in 2015 they suffered 20,000-25,000 casualties, dead and wounded. The same thing happened in 2016 and similar losses were suffered every year after that. That's quite a large toll. And I think we

shouldn't remember the Afghan war as a case of the Afghans fleeing. We should remember it was a hard-fought war in which the Taliban had some advantages.

And those sacrifices aren't only what were suffered on the side of the military forces. Think no further than Shukria Barakzai and Fawzia Koofi being wounded in suicide bombings to know that Afghans across the board were fighting hard throughout the existence of its democracy.

So, with that, I will stop. And I look forward to hearing from Vanda.

MR. O'HANLON: Well, as do I, Vanda, so over to you. And I know you're very concerned about the humanitarian situation. And you've also had a lot of experience talking with the Taliban and various Track IIs over the years trying to understand them. And so I'm curious how you would bring these different, you know, concerns about the future, but also potential opportunities to figure out how we can collaborate, at least at a minimal level, to alleviate the worst of the humanitarian situation and anything else you'd like to put on the table today.

Thanks for joining.

MS. FELBAB-BROWN: Well, thank you.

I will perhaps make one comment looking at the 20 years. You were very kind, Mike, to mention *Aspiration and Ambivalence*, which came out in 2013. And I have a posit that the reason ultimately why we and the Afghan government lost in the enterprise is because we were not able to address and resolve the problems that have long been known. So essentially all the problems that were identified in *Aspiration and Ambivalence*, poor, corrupt, parochial, rapacious, self interest in governance by the Afghan government and associated elite, critical deficiency in the Afghan security services, corruption, poor unit leadership, poor logistics, U.S. constant ambivalence about whether our purpose was simply to kill enough Taliban and constant embrace of those who delivered short-term battlefield deaths of the Taliban, success in killing the Taliban even as the governance record was often awful and their attitude towards civil liberties and human rights as egregious as that of Taliban. They're all in the book. They were known a decade ago. And essentially the decades since have produced very little changes.

But, with that, let me focus on where we are. It's also inevitable that when the Taliban would come to power, we would see significant restrictions on civil liberties and human rights and the formal Afghan constitution that embraced voting, some form of democracy, elections, and at least nominally, human rights and civil liberties. Of course, the ability of Afghan people to in fact enjoy the rights was highly unequal and varied simply not between rural and urban areas, it also varied in other ways in access to the country.

But it was clear that the Taliban would not support those. The Taliban has been, was, continues to be a religiously doctrinaire authoritarian regime. So, to me, when it became apparent that the Taliban was going to win and come to power, the question was then what kind of religious regime would the Taliban seek to run and to what extent it would have compromised in that ambition. And of course, the way the summer unfolded, and the defeat took place, it forced the Taliban not to compromise at all. They essentially rode as victors into power in Kabul.

So the range of options in my view has all along been in the best case scenario something like an Iran-like regime, religiously doctrinaire, obviously authoritarian and discriminatory, but with some elections taking place, however imperfect, with a role for a parliament, with a role for an executive branch that has competent technocrats and the ability to administer the state, and with a situation for women that is full of restrictions and constraints, but where women still have the capacity to vote, be even elected, have access to higher level university education, and importantly, can have jobs. That was the best-case scenario in my view.

The worst-case scenario would be the repeat of the 1990s, with the catastrophic meltdown of the country and economically, politically a Taliban hellbent on destroying institutions and trying to change the country to what it imagined it looked like or should look like somewhere back in the ninth century.

And the middle ground would of course be an evolution and change between those, perhaps with something like the Saudi Arabia-like regime.

Lotfullah is absolutely right, that we are in the early days and the policy and decision

making within the Taliban is evolving, reflecting the shifting, and forming coalitions. The very crude level between the Haqqanis, the Biaku faction (phonetic) and Paradar (phonetic) faction, but it's a far greater level of complexity underneath those. And in the early days the Taliban has been highly restrictive, highly exclusionary, not simply toward women, but also toward minorities. Hasn't been as bad as the 1990s, but it has been not a good picture. And it reflects to a large extent the Taliban's immediate priority of trying to prevent factionalization and the factions in the country. And, with that, I'm finding it's safest to adopt more restrictive policies because they have the greatest potential to hold the coalition together.

The persistence of the Islamic State in Afghanistan is not only a severe problem with respect to international terrorism and with respect to very bloody, brutal domestic terrorism within Afghanistan, which the Islamic State tries to set off a sectarian Sunni-Shia war. I should point out that the Islamic State is the enemy of the Taliban, and the Taliban has been very diligently fighting the Taliban[sic] in rural spaces and succeeded in defeating with the help of U.S. air power several years ago in weakening the Islamic State in the rural areas but has struggled and continues to struggle with it in urban spaces.

But one of the effects of the persistence of the Islamic State is that it makes the factions from the Taliban easy and costly, very costly for the Taliban. And hence, again, the primary driver in decisions of the Taliban have been toward very restrictive, very problematic policies geared to keeping the coalition together.

Now, has the international community reacted? Well, to the extent that it believes that somehow the gains of the past 20 years could be preserved, and much of their qualities have been bitterly disappointed. And this has revived a lot of communication, a lot about the Taliban hasn't changed, there is no such thing as the Taliban .2, and encouraged then very strong response from the international community. Or I should at least say from Europe and the United States because there are significant divisions in the international community.

One of the effects has been that the Taliban's — or Afghanistan's, I should say, foreign reserves held abroad have been frozen, foreign aid has disappeared. There is no funding going to the

Afghan government, which before the Taliban relied in 75 percent of its budget on international aid, and essentially much of the operation of the civil service was paid for by external money, and all of the functioning of the Afghan security forces was paid, almost all for all practical purposes, by foreign money. So, we are really in a terrible humanitarian situation.

Even prior to the Taliban's takeover, almost 90 percent of the country was living in poverty and 1/3 of the country was in acute food shortage. This was the winter or spring of this year. Since the Taliban takeover, essentially 23 million Afghans face acute hunger, and we are really days away from famine. The famine will worsen with levels of displacement and the winter months coming in. The fighting over the summer has left hundreds of thousands, millions of Afghans living essentially on the streets or in parks without access to stable shelter and food.

We will not break out of the humanitarian situations unless we make hard decisions about allowing some money to flow to the Afghan government, the Taliban government. The international community has not been prepared to do that and essentially assumes that it can keep upsetting and preventing famine and the deaths of hundreds of thousands, or potentially millions of Afghans, to starvation simply by relying on humanitarian aid. I would posit that we need to rethink that. That if we are going to stay in the situation where the policy is one of handing out penicillin and peanut butter, we are simply going to be moving from one form of a peak of a humanitarian crisis to another peak of a humanitarian crisis. We can only (inaudible) to break out of that if the Afghan economy starts functioning in some form, and that means that money will need to start going to paying both formal businesses and government employees.

This is extremely unappealing because the Taliban is brutal, odious, restrictive because key members of the Taliban are under international terrorist sanctions. But in the absence of that, we are going to be starving Afghan people in the name of giving them a better life.

MR. O'HANLON: Vanda, that's very powerful. And I agree, by the way. And Lise Howard of Georgetown and I wrote something recently trying to sketch out what we thought were the reasonable parameters of a deal that would, I think, as you say, have to be considered very soon.

Because this is the moment of crisis. I worry that American politics are going to hold back the Biden team, which may have the right heart and motivation, but is probably afraid of this issue. And anything that smacks of a deal with the Taliban is going to raise charges of appeasement or of, you know, kowtowing to the enemy they let come to power. But I think they're just going to have to find a way to make the deal well enough monitored and reasonable enough that they can defend it and recognize it's better than the alternatives.

So, I want to now give everybody a chance, finishing with Vanda, to come back and talk about the future in some more detail. And I think we're just going to keep this format real simple and just have one more round for everybody because I can now also, as you prepare your four to five minutes of further comments, I can quickly go through the five or six questions we've received from the audience. And feel free to weave any of them into your thoughts and answers to one or more into what you're about to say.

We've heard people ask what's the proper relationship that the Taliban should have with China and what role can China play in influencing the government. The same kind of question about Pakistan and its future role. And obviously you've all thought about that a lot. So to what extent also can the United States work with those countries, China and Pakistan. What can awe realistically expect them to do to help in the situation.

There's a question from our colleague, Bruce Riedel, about whether we should recognize the Taliban government officially and encourage other countries to do so as well.

To the extent you want to speak about our counterterrorism options and how much you're worried that they will fail or that we need to develop new ways of making sure that ISIS or al-Qaeda don't develop footholds in Afghanistan from which they could attack the West, feel free to offer any thoughts there.

And then, finally, there's a question about opium, just how tough should we be on the Taliban on the opium issue.

And, Vanda, you already touched at the foreign reserves issue, but there's a question

from a member of the Afghan central bank about the role of reserves and how it's contributing to the stability of prices.

So those are the questions we've received from the audience. Thank you to everyone who sent those in. Don't feel obliged, Shaqaiq, Lotfullah, Carter, or Vanda to address each of those questions, but maybe if you could hopefully each touch on maybe one or two and anything else you want to offer going forward as we try to figure out how to deal with the Taliban government and Afghanistan in the future.

Shaqaiq, over to you, my friend.

MS. BIASHK: Thank you, Mike.

I'll pick up on the recognition of Taliban. I think this is a question that we really need to ask ourselves, as Americans and also as an international community. Going back again to 2001, when we helped — when bond agreement happened, we didn't give Taliban a chance then. They came and wanted to surrender, and we said — our motto was we say no to terrorism — We don't negotiate with terrorists — I'm sorry. But then in 2020 we struck a deal with them, questioning all our work of the last 20 years, and now handing Afghanistan back to them after 20 years of so much bloodshed and sacrifice and promises.

To be honest with you, I don't know the answer, the exact answer to this question myself either as an Afghan-American. We need to really again sit down. Taliban, are we willing to recognize them. We have agreement with them, we legitimized them back in 2020 by — again, with this Doha agreement. But yet, again, where we froze the — what Vanda was referring to — the assets of Afghans because of the new so-called government that has taken over. We actually really need to look within and ponder upon this, are we willing to recognize them. If we are recognizing them, under what circumstances. Every step should be evaluated, every step should be thought over and over again. If we are willing to recognize them, as America, as an international community, there needs to be leverages, there needs to be conditions on every single aspect. Women need to be given equal rights. The basic universal human rights needs to be a part of these leverages, for women, for children, for the minority

groups, and for also amnesty for the former government employees and Afghans who worked for international organizations and also Afghans who partnered with U.S. and NATO allies.

So, if we are not willing to recognize them, then what is our Plan B? We also need to talk about our Plan B right now. We can take this one day at a time, but all of the — as Vanda was alluding to it — we are at a crisis, we are at a major crisis. We don't have a lot of time to be wasted. We need to come up with every possible solution. In addition to that, protect the 40 million Afghans that are suffering right now because of the few elite's decisions that were made. We need to really — again, the 40 million Afghans do not need to suffer. They already live in a very suffocated environment that has been created for them. Afghan youths have lost their hope, which are 70 percent of the population. There are reports of them committing suicide because they don't see themselves or their future in the next couple of weeks, let alone months or years.

I'll end with that.

MR. O'HANLON: Shaqaiq, thank you for beginning that conversation and picking up also where Vanda had left off.

And now, Lotfullah, your vision for the future, and especially those particular concerns that are at the top of your list and those points of leverage you think we can most perhaps exploit to get some kind of basic minimal standard of humanitarian relief to the Afghan people.

Over to you.

MR. NAJAFIZADA: Thank you.

Well, the United States is a superpower. It had the luxury to make decisions whether they want to recognize the Taliban, not recognize the Taliban. I don't think that any of the previous decisions were that participatory in terms of, you know, dealing with Afghans, and Taliban included.

I'm not sure if now that there is no U.S. presence in the country and then you can — through some of the leverages you have you can make changes. I'm not really sure if you have that leverage. Even with the previous government, a lot was condition, you know. Think about Tokyo conference, you know, London conference, Paris conference, there were conditions about, you know,

deal with corruption, improve women's rights. And then with the peace process, you know, release prisoners. And I think later, you know, you're talking about withdrawing U.S. forces, which was probably sort of the biggest incentive for the Taliban. So if those leverages didn't work, we should ask ourselves what other leverages are left for the U.S. Releasing Afghanistan's money?

So that's one on how really powerful the U.S. position is to make a difference. You know, you want to sit in Washington, DC and want to change Afghan women's lives in Kabul and in rural Afghanistan through blocking the country's money? I'm not sure if that itself, you know, is — first of all, was logical, second, is useful given this whole leverage game for the past 20 years.

Second is do the Taliban care about what — you know, what you think or what the rest of the world thinks in terms of recognition and all. You know, we hear some stories — I think somebody mentioned China, so I'll probably touch upon that, and Uzbekistan. So, we hear that some of the counterterrorism understandings, which are happening between the Taliban and those countries, are not fulfilled and delivered upon by those who are really in power at Kabul. So are we — and that brings us to the other question that, you know, on the Taliban are we really talking to. I asked Jaza Mahalizab (phonetic) last week, I said, you know, the guy that you hang out with there for two or three years, who is he now in Kabul, you know what is his title? Mullah Baradar, is he an important guy and is he calling the shots, right?

So, I think on the leverage and recognition, I'm not sure if that's going to make a lot of difference.

On counterterrorism and whether Afghanistan will become this haven for international terrorists, I think that's probably something that we all should think about it and how much eyes and ears, you know, we have on the ground to monitor somebody's movement. We know that some of these foreign fights in northeastern Afghanistan have now very easy access to (inaudible) stronghold in eastern Afghanistan. And we know that, you know, TTP and Pakistani government are meeting in Afghanistan and there are talks happening.

So, I would say there is certainly more breathing space for international terrorists than

there were, you know, a few months ago. How will that redraw U.S. attention from a pure national security point of view? I think it is something the U.S. should probably think most about. You can't do nation building remotely.

MR. O'HANLON: Can I ask one follow up question before we go to Carter and then to Vanda? Very interesting point you make about recognizing the limits of our leverage. But I want to make sure I'm hearing you right. Are you saying to sort of abandon any such aspiration altogether, or are you saying to be realistic and modest in what we can realistically attain? For example, Vanda, she wasn't necessarily advocating it before, but she held out the Iran model. And Iran's a big national security problem for the United States, but, you know, it may not be the worst place in the world to live as a woman. There are certain — as I understand Iran, there are certain protections legally and educational opportunities for women. Should we be aspiring to at least that standard in Afghanistan, and if we can get it, then we should allow money to flow and the Taliban government to be recognized.

So where are you coming down on that bottom line?

MR. NAJAFIZADA: Well, Michael, I mean I don't know if I can speak for the United States and if there are any people who would listen to what we say, but Afghans know we will not abandon our country. And, you know, we should stay engaged. And that's why we have a presence there, we have journalists there who are taking enormous risk. How can a country — I mean in my short lifetime I have seen so many ups and downs, like Taliban coming and going, civil war, you know, communist government, no government at all. So, who knows where Afghanistan is going to be in two years, three years, five years down the road? So how can — as citizens of that country, you can be disconnected.

If I advise our friends in the international community, U.S. included, I would say, you know, watch out for what matters to you, whether that is, you know, national security concerns, whether that is humanitarian concerns, or other reasons. Now, I think, no, I'm pro engagement, you know, for us as Afghans and probably for the international community.

MR. O'HANLON: Thank you.

Carter, over to you with the full agenda of questions for you to choose from and speak to.

MR. MALKASIAN: Thank you, Michael.

So, let's start just to say a little bit about the terrorist threat and what can be done about that. I mean I think there is — as Lotfullah, you know, mentioned very plainly, you know, there is probably a degree of a terrorist threat that will come from Afghanistan, whether it's al-Qaeda or whether it's the Islamic State or some other group. I'm not sure how great the threat will be and if we really need to do something about it. But the talk that's usually here today is about what can we do with over the horizon capabilities to stop that threat. And it doesn't take a lot of analysis, and a lot of it is in the news anyway right now, to just kind of understand how difficult that task is. It doesn't take a lot of analysis to understand that Russia is not going to want to have bases north of Afghanistan in areas that it would be easy for us to operate. It doesn't take a lot of analysis to understand that Pakistan is going to be extremely resistant to that as well. And then you only need to know what the range of the systems are and be able to calculate on a map how far it is to Afghanistan to know, you know, what kind of tax it would be to do it from further distance away. But the capability does exist there, it's just a difficult capability.

But I guess the thing I point out more than that, and something that is much less discussed here, is the potential for the over the horizon capability to do harm. There is a strong potential that if we went after — if we go after folks in Afghanistan, that by striking them and maybe killing civilians or maybe not killing civilians, that we will create blow back, that we will create stronger support for the Taliban government than exists now, that we will make it more difficult for the Taliban government to break with these terrorist organizations as these organizations get some kind of sympathy once they're seen as being the targets of the United States. This is very much what happened in our response to the poll bombings and in our response to the bombings in Kenya in 1998 where we conducted cruise missile attacks into Afghanistan, but that actually made it more difficult for Mullah Omar to do anything against Osama bin Laden because Osama bin Laden suddenly had greater populous.

So, I mean I think that's really something that should be foremost in our minds as we consider what kind of strikes that we want to take. And I don't think that means we shouldn't take strikes,

I think that there are times when it's absolutely necessary and we want that as a tool in our toolkit. But we should recognize what dangerous possibilities also exist.

There was a question on poppy. And so, I think that it would be —- poppy push is going to be a thorn for any politician who wants to deal with it. If we want the Taliban to stop growing poppy, the Taliban revenue is going to decrease dramatically. And the number of people who are working in Afghanistan is going to decrease dramatically. So that means we would have to provide a great deal more support for the Taliban to undertake that action. And it's been very difficult for us historically to be able to do things about poppy. So really that is a real thorny issue that I think most people will want to try to avoid as much as possible, because it only makes it more difficult to have any kind of relationship with the Taliban or their government.

And the last point I'll make here, and I'll just make it quickly, is that when it comes back to the region, I think it's important to consider that our presence in the region for so many years was something in the end that united different countries with different interests together against us. That they found us being there to be a threat. We created a security dilemma. And that motivated a lot of them to support the Taliban in one way or another.

So I think we should also recognize that the degree of assistance, the relationship that we have with the new government —- or what we're doing there without being in the new government, that those countries around may not view that as a benevolent U.S. action and they may take lots of actions to undercut us or also to give the Taliban lots of assistance of their own so the Taliban don't have to do the things that we might want them to do.

So, I will leave it at that, and I look forward to more questions.

MR. O'HANLON: Thank you. Some very sobering reminders again of the limits of our leverage and our options I think would be a thematic way to unify a lot of your comments.

Vanda, over to you. And I'll remind our viewers who don't know that your first book was called *Shooting Up* and it was on the global problem, the difficulty of dealing with the narcotics challenge in places like Afghanistan. So, I know you'll hopefully want to speak to that question, as well as to

develop further your earlier recommendation for how we can engage with a Taliban government to alleviate the plight of the Afghan people this winter.

MS. FELBAB-BROWN: Well, I actually did not intend to speak about poppy, but I will just endorse what Carter said. We had no capacity to eliminate the opium poppy economy without having a stable, peace, and robustly growing economy. We have no capacity to do so. If the Taliban follows through on its hint of a promise of a ban, it will cause itself excruciating political problems in addition to eliminating one of the last vestiges of any functioning economy and sources of employment. The terrible consequences for its own fight is (inaudible) stability as well as any other actor in Afghanistan. So, let's not kid ourselves about that.

But I want to really talk about the leverage and its very strong limitation. It was no accident I started with the Iran model. Because it is the best that I think Afghanistan can arrive at and because to some extent we have some capacity encouraging that development. But our leverage is indeed very limited. But it's not nonexistent. It will play itself out as the Afghan polity, Afghan government, and coalitions are shaping and evolving.

If we design our policy on the basis of believing that we can radically transform the Taliban into accepting significant scope of humans and civil rights and restore much of the former rights as they existed over the post 20 years, our policy will fall flat. We will not accomplish that. We do not have the capacity to accomplish that. And our only tool of doing so will be the continued economics with its intolerable humanitarian consequence.

So how can we engage in that space? Well, our objectives need to be limited. And I would posit that to the extent that the Taliban takes some better steps, more desirable steps, whether it's in the counterterrorism space, on the civil liberties space, that we encourage that with some rewards. I would think of a very transactional relationship in which some policies are certain communicated as intolerable for us and meaning that certain money accounts will remain tied up, and then some policy changes take place, some money accounts can start being released. That does not involve recognition and I don't think that we should be heading to recognition very quickly. It's a binary, yes or no decision

and once a regime is recognized that's never to be un-recognized.

But I would rather see the bargaining would be, for example, enabling the Taliban to attend some international fora on issues that they will have to deal with, such as responding to drought, responding to climate change, and for which it has no technical capacity, no imagination, whatever. But that enabling the access being conditional on some specific actions.

So, for example, we have see in various parts of the country, mostly in the north and west, the girls have been able to return to high school. It's still highly imperfect, but that's an important step in the right direction, even if limited. And that should merit exploring how some money account should be made flow into Afghanistan and start paying perhaps for women's teachers. The fact that there is no money going to Afghan government also means that women who work for the Afghan government as teachers will not be paid, hence will not show up for work and hence girls' education, which is now fully dependent on female teachers, will be limited.

So this is how I would think about engaging with the Taliban, not imaging that we can transform a regime into what it will be not, but looking for opportunities where it takes right steps to encourage it with some positive inducements, with some international access, or some financial flows, and setting a set of policies that are just to egregious that they will require that some punishment, some money flows will remain tied up or some access will not be limited.

And that will mean also — and this my last word to you — has more capacity to engage with the regional realities that Carter so correctly outlined. Yes, China, Russia, Uzbekistan might not be as happy, as Lotfullah pointed out that the extent of the Taliban's counterterrorism behavior, but they are far from moving into any kind of isolationist policy with the Taliban. And so if we have more of a tit for tat bargaining transactional relationship, that in my view matches more closely with how countries like China, Russia, and Iran will continue with engaging with the regime.

MR. O'HANLON: Just a footnote, how about the access to the foreign reserves? Do you want that to be unconditional? Or do you want to make that, you know, increment by increment as well?

MS. FELBAB-BROWN: No, I would make it incremental. It's no need to unleash all $9

million all at once, but certain steps have been taken well that might justify that is a mechanism of releasing some money. Now, this gets technically difficult. I know don't have the time. Because as long as we don't recognize, it's not easy legally to simply release the money, but there could be creativity in unleashing certain amounts through IMF, for example, World Bank, which are also being pulled back by U.S. policy, what will be releasing that equivalent that was. you know, not technically, but in reality, coming from the reserves.

MR. O'HANLON: Listen, thank you all for a very illuminating, as well as a very heartfelt, conversation and a very important one I think. So, appreciate it very much. Want to thank you all as well for your continued service to the Afghan people and to the State of our relationship with the Afghan people and American national security. So, the whole enchilada of various important causes you've been contributing to.

Thanks to the audience for joining us today.

And, with that, signing off here from Brookings.

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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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