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MR. HANLON: Greetings everyone. I'm Michael O'Hanlon with the Foreign Policy Program at Brookings and I'm privileged today to be hosting three esteemed colleagues from the American University in Afghanistan, professors there, all patriots in their country, all committed to the future well-being of their nation and all very courageous and distinguished and accomplished already in their generally young careers and what they've been contributing.

This is a crucial moment in Afghanistan, as most of you will know. And I realized much of our audiences in the United States. So good morning to you.

But also some of our audience could be in Afghanistan or in Europe as this concern about the future of Afghanistan remains very much a priority for all of South Asia, all of Europe, with the NATO operations still ongoing in Afghanistan and many other parts of the world too. We know friends in Japan, Australia, New Zealand, and elsewhere have been an important part of the overall effort. So wherever you are, thank you for your interest in this great country that I've had the privilege of visiting some 14 times in my life.

And thank you for contributing to our conversation today, where if you wish to send in questions, you could do so by email at events@Brookings.edu. But we will get to your questions a little bit later in our hour-long discussion. I want to begin by welcoming personally, Muska Dastageer, Omar Sharifi, and Omar Sadr. I know them all a bit. I know Omar Sharifi the best. I've had the privilege of visiting with him before in Kabul and Washington.

And again, we are really privileged at Brookings where we have a number of people who have been very, very interested in the Afghanistan issue over the years, not least my colleague John Allen, the president of Brookings who was the commander of the military force there some eight years ago. My colleague Vanda Felbab-Brown, Bruce Riedel, who helped lead President Obama's first policy review on Afghanistan and Pakistan back in 2009, and Madiha Afzal, another scholar. So we are all, as well as other Brookings associates, privileged to be part of this conversation.

The way we will proceed today is after just a few more moments of warm up and introduction by myself, I will pose a couple of broad questions to each of the panelists and asked them to

speak for a few minutes in response to each question, probably go through two rounds of those questions and then a little follow-up before we get to your questions as well. For those who are not following Afghanistan quite as carefully as others, let me just begin with a little bit of broad framing, very brief, however.

But I think many of you know that the United States as we enter 2021 will be soon reaching its 20th year anniversary of its presence in Afghanistan after the 9/11 attacks. That's been a very difficult and tragic period for many Americans and Afghans, but of course our Afghan friends have been living through difficult times at least since 1979 when the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan and the United States benefited from the bravery of many Afghans who fought against that Soviet presence. And we cooperated with Pakistan and others to try to drive the Soviets out in a successful effort that was ultimately seen as a big part of why the Cold War ended favorably for the United States.

But of course that was not so favorable for Afghanistan and for Afghans who were left with the consequences of that conflict ultimately leading to the Taliban taking power in the mid-1990s and controlling the country with some collaboration with al-Qaida until the United States with the Northern Alliance and others overthrew the Taliban in 2001. Since that time, Afghanistan has been a fledgling democracy trying very hard to piece the nation together against the forces of centrifugal separation, conflict, corruption, state weakness, sometimes nefarious action by neighbors and of course the ongoing presence of the Taliban insurgency.

Since February 29, 2020 the United States and the Taliban have had a general understanding on the need for a peace deal, but of course that could only go so far without the involvement of the Afghan government and that peace process is about to pick up again in coming days.

But it's made essentially no headway yet on power-sharing or any other modalities for reducing violence or stabilizing the country. The war continues even as the United States presence is now down well below 5,000 U.S. troops, maybe even down to 3,000 at this point, more than a 95% reduction from its peak. So a much lower level of American and NATO involvement, but hardly any resolution in sight about how the conflict war and more generally and with uncertainty about the future

presence of al-Qaida or ISIS or other extremist groups that might seek to profit from sanctuary on Afghan soil if the country again descends into all-out civil war and anarchy.

So we are truly at a fraught moment as the Biden administration prepares to assume power in Washington and figure out its policy on Afghanistan including whether it would feel obliged to pull all U.S. forces out of Afghanistan by this May, which is the way that some people, not myself, but some people interpret the requirements of the February 29, 2020 deal that I just referred to a moment ago. With all of that as background, let me stop talking myself and welcome my Afghan colleagues.

And I want to begin with following question, very simple, broad question starting with Professor Dastageer. Can you tell us -- tell me about Afghanistan today. Help us understand life and the situation on the ground that we Americans may not be appreciating sufficiently from our vantage point here many thousands of miles away. And the Europeans and others in your region may not understand as well as they should either. So I'm not looking for a comprehensive primer on the state of the country, but just something that you feel is not adequately appreciated or understood.

And once we go through that question for each of the palace, then we will start thinking about the policy agenda and the future.

But again, welcome to all three of you. And Muska, if I could begin with you on that question, please.

PROFESSOR DASTAGEER: Sure. So I hope that my -- I'm coming through clearly enough. I think my connection is a little bit -- not too good right now, but I hope I'm coming through, nevertheless. I want to give a snapshot overview of some of the thornier issues that we are dealing with domestically aside from insecurity, and try to sort of -- try to sort of comment on what that means for the continuity of our political system.

So there is a litany of ills that plague our -- that plagued the Afghan body politic including endemic corruption, crushing poverty for the vast majority of Afghans, and something like impunity under rule of law or some strongmen, warlords, etc. There's also a fundamental disconnect between Afghan political leads and the Afghan population. The former play self-interest.

They place narrow, parochial, group-based interest ahead of even the most basic civic virtues. But because of a perverse system of reward in our domestic politics, those who can stoke the most rage, those who can stoke the most interethnic strife, intercommunity strife, those are the ones will be rewarded the most in terms of political capital, followership, popularity, etc.

When it comes to the government's ability to govern, the Afghan administrative state is still in its nascence and you can erect formal structures in the image of Western -- in the image of your Western counterparts with all the cogs and gears that nominally constitute a public agency, a public -- an institution, a ministry, a department. But political culture takes time to take root. And if we think of political as sort of the institutional grit or the setup of institutions as the hardware, political culture, a political culture that forefronts and prioritizes accountability, transparency, etc., that's the software and it's really pivotal, and that takes time.

So as frustrated as I get, as frustrated as we all get, we are just two decades into a trajectory that takes other countries much longer to get right. And I think that brings me to the point that I want to make. You know, none of the ills that -- and I've -- this is rushed and is truncated, but none of the ills that I've mentioned so far, however considerable they are, and they are considerable, none of them in my opinion point to some deeper moral corruption at the core or heart of the post-2001 political order.

And I say this because I feel the need to say this because I see more and more -- I note that more and more Western pundits and analysts who are sort of hovering around this point, approaching this point from various different angles and it worries me. It's often used as part of an argument to defend Taliban's claim to govern in Afghanistan. And it's just something that I want to -- it's something I wanted to highlight.

Another point that I really want to make is that the longer something exists, the more subtle it becomes as a set of practices, the more it becomes in itself a claim to its own continuation. Disrupting that, continuously erecting and then dismantling political systems and structures comes at a very steep cost. The cost of that is instability. And because -- discontinuity becomes the norm and that's not conducive to stability. It's not conducive to the sort of calm that any political system needs in order to

grow, to develop.

If every second or third decade you have constitutional, societal upheaval, it starts to feel a lot like experimentation. And I would not want just, having as backdrop when you explained in the beginning the sort of -- you know, the current situation that you describe, I would not want that for the Afghan population again. I don't want the Afghan population to be subjected to that again. This is not a site of experimentation. This is not a laboratory.

So I think -- I guess what I'm trying to sort of render here, probably inelegantly and definitely in rushed and truncated form, is a defense of what is evolving right now. Our political system, our polity, is enormously flawed and imperfect. But it is in development and I think that what is required is time. And I think it's important to preserve and defend it.

Another, if I can just quickly add something. Another question that comes up here is what would the past two decades have been about for the international community and for the U.S. if they're going to allow Afghanistan to regress to the soul crushing draconian regime of the '90s. And if not that, because Taliban would be squaring off against a well-equipped, well-trained Afghan army and security forces, then something like -- something equally horrific -- you know, a civil war scenario, the sort that preceded the Taliban regime in the '90s.

So yeah, these -- a couple of reflections, a couple of questions that we might get further into, delve further into over the next 50 minutes.

MR. HANLON: That's a great framing. Thank you, Muska. And I will come back to you later. I will be curious to hear more of your thoughts on how this evolutionary process could continue even with a peace deal and power-sharing with the Taliban which it seems on its face to be fundamentally disruptive. And yet you've called for the need to try and stay as much on an evolutionary path as possible. So that's going to set up some good discussion when we come back to you in a little bit.

Let me first go to Professor Sharifi. And again, sir, thank you for joining us. I would love just your take on -- telling us a couple of things about Afghanistan today that we may not sufficiently appreciate here in the United States or around the world.

PROFESSOR SHARIFI: Thank you very much, Mike. It's a pleasure to be here with you. If I can just summarize Afghanistan, but not for the long-term, but especially in the context of the peace talks and especially all of this agreement between the United States and the Taliban. I can say that the most certain thing about how the -- about life here and about the feelings here and about the thought and understanding about life here is uncertainty.

The deal with the Taliban between the United States and the deal there I mean, created more questions than answers. But at the same time, the way it was done and the way it was rushed and the absence of the Afghan government for -- almost for the most of that process, kind of caused a lot of, not only frustration, but confusion among many of us.

And because the way we thought about Afghanistan especially in the context of corona, the war, and everything else, is that something has emerged in Afghanistan over the last 20 years that is unprecedented in our history, not just in terms of -- only in terms of infrastructure, not in terms of just how many roads built, schools are that are -- the things that actually I believe can define Afghanistan for the entire 21st century and that is for the first time you are allowed to think freely about -- to express ourselves openly, to actually -- to have a space in which we can dialogue and talk about very important things, the first time in which leadership and governance is not just about ruling, but it's also about providing services.

And more importantly, for the first time in which that certain values like human rights and specifically women's rights, now are becoming part of our sort of national discourse. So these that's when we imagined Afghanistan and -- that is for a lot of us here whether you're living in the cities or outside the cities in the rural areas. That's somehow that idea exists. And the peace talk, the way it happened, a kind of caused a lot of uncertainty, uncertainty in the sense that the way it was portrayed, the way it was presented was something of that -- nothing exists. Like it kind of ignored a lot of realities on the ground.

Everybody expected the talk, the kind of -- there should be an agreement on the some understanding with -- at least there should be like a settlement, like a negotiated settlement on the Afghan crisis, on Afghan kind of conflict. But the understanding was that conflict can be resolved when

Afghanistan is connected with the world because we kind of historically, the only time Afghanistan was overrun completely by all these extremist groups in South Asia, Central Asian, Middle Eastern extremist groups in the 1990s was when Afghanistan completely lost connect -- completely was cut from the rest of the world.

And the way with all the -- kind of the era began with us with that fear and kind of evolved that fear of what it might be. And then when the talks began in Doha, which was kind of a welcome -- you could say it was like a welcome step towards some level of understanding. But in general while -- from our side who live that we live in Afghanistan, it was like all right, there should be a talk.

But on the other side from international side, we heard sort of a sense of abandonment by then. And from the Taliban and al-Qaida and everybody else it was a feeling of tribalism that sort of kind of defined the whole sort of life here.

Now there are a lot of things -- there are more and more questions about how the situation will go on and what will happen in the coming months, especially with this sort of deadline that the international forces have to leave Afghanistan. Obviously, in my opinion, when I'm thinking of international forces leaving Afghanistan, it's not much about how many troops, foreign troops have to be in Afghanistan to fight the Taliban. It's more about like how much we remain connected with the world because we know for a fact that the Afghan army, despite a lot of deficiencies that Muska has mentioned in her speech. They are taking the brunt of what's going on for them ensuring security and actually also fighting the Taliban and their allies in the region.

And then this rush to leave everything kind of in a way aggravated and re-fueled the sense of uncertainty. And the sense of uncertainty in a way also let -- I mean, if you hear what's happening on the ground today and day by day, it just simply encouraged Taliban and a lot of their supporters in the region to actually see this whole peace agreement not as a -- something that eventually led to peace, but actually something that eventually should be like their victory or they are taking over Afghanistan, which I don't think it will happen.

And at the same time, the other thing that kind of confuses quite a lot is the way that

whole negotiation with Taliban and the way all this U.S. -- the United States-Taliban deal was done, which it was less to do with actually ensuring security and peace in Afghanistan. Not only can Afghanistan, but actually for the region because it was very vague about not working with al-Qaida and everything else.

It was more about the way it was perceived for all of us, it was like the United States wants to leave simply and nobody actually think about what would be the next step as to the possibility of fight continue because for a lot of us the expense of the 1990s -- when lack of international presence in Afghanistan will definitely lead to a certain of regional conflict and in a way more further destructive regional development in the whole country, which probably made the whole idea of the peace process in a way, complicated.

So now when we think about all of it, I think the only way we can -- but this kind of made it line is coming and stuff and all this message of tribalism I can see around in the Taliban in Pakistan and other places; there is a lot of concern that we are not actually even with -- even if the United States, if the international community completely to leave Afghanistan, then these peace talks in Doha or whatever, it may not actually have much meaning.

And it actually is another step for war. So there is less motivation for lawfulness, and I have to say an appreciation or understanding of peace by itself, but actually we are looking for the whole process, the way it unfolds is not something that contributes for the lasting peace and actually securing Afghanistan from this extremist groups, but actually might be another step for war.

So a lot of uncertainty and anxiety and concerns. I can say that kind of summarize all of it. So our expense of 2020 and the whole peace talks between Taliban and the United States.

MR. HANLON: That's very helpful and sobering. So from one Omar to the other.
Professor Sadr, over to you my friend.

PROFESSOR SADR: Thank you Michael. And it's a pleasure to be here with you and thank you for having this event for us.

Let me put a couple of points on the table and then maybe -- if I can elaborate and maybe discuss it later with you. The very first thing is that I think today we are -- the very burning issue at

the moment in Afghanistan is the survival of self and survival of the republican system. I mean, self because an unprecedented level of targeted killing and at least in the urban centers. And of course republican system because there's been written by the Taliban at least not target -- not directly by proposing an emirate but of course we understand that the alternative is an extremely ultra-radical religious kind of system.

Now we are also caught in a kind of three vicious circles. So to name them, the very first one is an evil terrorist organization. The second one is an irresponsible and reluctant international partners. And thirdly, what I call is vicious republic. And we come to each of them. It doesn't need any kind of evidence that Taliban -- the level of atrocities that they are conducting at the moment is quite high. And we cannot call it crime. It's high at the level that it could be called a international crime or something which we are deliberately targeting civilians, civil society activists, maybe activists and academics.

Unfortunately, why I called the second irresponsible international partners, because all of our partners has turned a blind eye on what's going on the ground here in Afghanistan. And reluctantly they just want to abandon whatever was built jointly by the locals and internationals here just because of their own circumstances or the national interests. So that's why the second layer is a kind of irresponsible but at same time reluctant international partner.

But the most important and third one is vicious republic. I don't want to blame everything on the internationals and the United States, because what is going on here, the locals should behave responsibly. And when I call it -- it's a republic. Unfortunately, what you hear these days at least in Kabul, is a kind of romanticized pronunciation of the term democracy, the term liberalism, or a republican system without any kind of substantiated argument. And very -- I don't know, indigenous kind of roots for all this kind of discussions will take place.

Now by a vicious republic I -- I would like to highlight a couple of the crises that the system is facing. And that has created kind of a vicious republic. The first one is kind of what you see is a structural challenge and problem to the system because there is no rule of law, constitution constraints are eventually violated by those who are in the government of the day. There is not enough measures to

counter majoritarianism. So that is why there is a structural crisis in system.

Secondly, there is also civic crisis system and that indicates to lack of what I can call it -- it is very central to a republican system where that's civic virtues. Unfortunately most of the incumbent political elite are not behaving responsibly. They are corrupt. They are ethno-centrists and they have turned the state structure into a private firm by behaving -- by owning it personally. So that's why civic virtue is missing. And apart from that, what we have is a liberal elite who have turned the system to a very corrupt system.

Thirdly, the other indicator of a vicious kind of republic is ideational crisis. What we have here in Afghanistan, and we try to preserve it of course, a republican system. But understand how torn on Afghanistan. There has been little discussion on how to characterize, conceptualize the nature of the system we have. It's a Islamic republic or a republican system. How do you understand what -- simply, for example, how can we differentiate an Islamic republic here in Afghanistan, the model that is practiced here from either Islamic republics in the neighboring country.

When it comes to centralization, of course there is little there on the paper. And that matters because we have not been able to present a concrete idea of Afghanistan, in order to mobilize the people, mobilize the masses, and give them concrete answer. And finally it's a kind of -- there is also a kind of functional crisis. And that is what was stated earlier by my colleagues. And what you see is the corruption, lack of good governance, and the state machinery is not functioning well, so it's all a functional crisis. So all these four elements coming together has created a vicious kind of republic.

Now for us, the common people, the educated here in Kabul, we are trapped between a number of options that all of them are not desirable for less. Of course no one was to go back to the emirate system of the Taliban. But at the same time, no one is also willing to live under a vicious republic who is not functional, corrupt, run like a private firm by the incumbent people of the state.

So unfortunately, I think Afghanistan is in a very painful kind of days at this moment. And its destiny has been shaped, unfortunately, by an orchestrated peace process, by enforced peace process, which is not organic, organic in the sense that -- I mean, the peace process did not evolve from

within the layers of the society. And two sides of the conflict, two parties to the conflict, did not come by their will to the negotiating table. You see, one side of the conflict is quite arrogant, rejecting whatever is there on the table without giving a little concession. And unfortunately, our commission conference has reinforced such kind of arrogance of the Taliban.

So for me, first of all this -- the peace process and the deal which took place in February is what I call -- it's a kind of orchestrated kind of argument, agreement rather than being organic one. Now we -- what is the way out? Having highlighted the three vicious circles, the vicious republic, reluctant and irresponsible partners, and also an evil terrorist group that we are facing, it's quite difficult to come up with a proposal whatsoever.

But of course it's important for all of us understand the nature of the parties, the nature of this conflict, and to not romanticize the outcome that we -- we are not willing to understand its consequences on the local people here on the ground, in the ground in Afghanistan.

So at least what we can do is to push and try to preserve the system which has been created in the last 18 years. Of course there are variety of problems and crisis. And try to first of all, I think, we need to reform here in Kabul. We need terror and institutional reform in Kabul because until and unless you don't have the system intact. Even if a peace process is signed with Taliban there is a high risk that the system will collapse. And that reminds me the collapse of system that Afghanistan had 30 years ago in the '90s. And that's the thing that no one wants here at least in Afghanistan, in the region, and international partners. But we need to think terribly about all of this and behave responsibly.

I think I will stop here and if there is a question, I will take it.

MR. HANLON: Thank you, Omar. And you've begun the policy discussion, which I wanted to then go to with Omar Sharifi and Muska Dastageer before we go to audience questions. And we've got a number of audience questions coming in. So let me just move smartly along in that. But going out to Omar Sharifi and then Muska.

If I could ask what do you recommend in terms of policy going forward. And a couple of things that are on my mind, do you think that NATO forces should depart Afghanistan in May? Do you

think that's required by the February 29th deal? And even if it is required, do you think we should ignore that requirement because it would be a bad development? Do you see certain kinds of models of power-sharing that could work? And maybe could you give an example?

I know that Muska, you've written about this a bit and -- at the Atlantic Council and elsewhere. And I know Omar, you've thought about this too. So at least in terms of the policy agenda going forward, at least two questions that are on my mind would be, what should NATO and the United States do with military forces starting in May. And then secondly, can you give any kind of concrete example of what meaningful power-sharing with the Taliban might look like?

So Omar Sharifi, over to you please.

MR. SHARIFI: Well, my reading of the agreement was not like a specifically -- it was rather different in a sense that I'm not sure if every force has to leave Afghanistan. But to my opinion, all -- if that is the interpretation, all international forces have to leave Afghanistan by May, I also feel it's kind of -- it must be based on the realities on the facts on the ground.

The facts on the ground is that we don't see actually a break between Taliban and al-Qaida. We see actually, in a way, a more kind of expansion of al-Qaida and kind of consolidation of it within the Taliban. Their level of operation in southern Afghanistan and areas bordering with Pakistan, especially in south of (inaudible) area and Helmand and Kandahar, we see that actually that is not -- that al-Qaida not only kind of simply disappeared or Taliban cut the relationships, but they are cooperating and congratulating each other for an ultimate victory.

So I think with that in a sense -- with that in mind, I wonder what it means to leave. But at the same time, we have to be -- I have to be actually aware of the realities that maybe a lot of internationals, especially the United States, are rightfully tired. They don't want to have troops in Afghanistan and actually maybe that's our fight. In my opinion that is kind of the way -- the threat in Afghanistan right now, the way that the whole idea of a -- having a joint government or a peace process, the way it is structured it is very confusing.

I mean, as I explained before, the Taliban and their allies in the region see this as literally

another step towards victory. We see the targeted assassinations right now and I can call -- and that's kind of a symptom because we have the same type of assassinations. In 1988 and 1989 when the -- on the eve of the Soviets withdrawal from Afghanistan, a lot of Afghan intellectuals were living in exile, anti-Communist sort of intellectuals were systematically assassinated in Peshawar in approximately that period.

And the way the Taliban kind of -- kind of the Taliban attacks in the last couple of months, though not very successful, but in different parts of the country, to me it seems that they are not actually preparing to -- for -- sort of like (inaudible). And we all expect based on lots of evidence provided by the NDS and other international organizations, that they are preparing for massive operations in the spring and summer. So with all of that, I wonder if -- whether -- if kind of the complete withdrawal of the United States, all international forces from Afghanistan, actually will help the peace process to go on. So this is the first thing.

Second, so what we can do and how we can move ahead. I believe that the presence of international community in Afghanistan in a sense that is kind of based on an understanding of us on the ground in a way help peace process in Afghanistan. With -- what we've witnessed in the past, that with a lack of the presence of international in Afghanistan, diplomatically, whatever, in 1990s, Afghanistan turned into a battleground, a competition field area for a lot of neighboring troops especially we've seen even the Pakistani military intervening for the sake of Taliban to protect the Taliban after 1995. So there is no guarantee that the Taliban and the others will not push with al-Qaida and try to overrun part of the country. A presence of international community, whether kind of like a token force, some sort of international resolve in Afghanistan, in my opinion, will help the process.

The second issue is, without experience of this -- the transition of all the militant groups from being a militant group into a political group in Afghanistan has been rather problematic. With expansion of the Mujahideen in the 1990s, we witnessed that they actually had time to do a transition without like a -- without kind of an international support. They fragmented and then what we had at the end of the day, al-Qaida and all the others who take advantage of that and they kind of built their base in

Afghanistan. So for Taliban in order to kind of transform themselves from a militant group into a political entity that is capable of having a normal, meaningful peace discussion in Afghanistan and the region and actually to separate themselves from al-Qaida, (inaudible) and all these other groups. We need to have a very strong international presence and kind of not only presence mentality, but also presence internationally, diplomatically, and politically. And that will probably -- in my opinion that will help the transition for these militant groups to kind of transform themselves into a -- something that is capable of actually having a dialogue right now.

With suddenly everybody leaves, I'm worried that actually -- I'm afraid that it might actually deepen the crisis and we may never see that things and actually al-Qaida and other groups may take advantage of it. So specifically based on our experience in 1990s.

MR. HANLON: Thank you. Muska, same questions to you and I am especially curious as well about your specific ideas on power-sharing because you've been talking and writing about that subject so much. Thank you.

PROFESSOR DASTAGEER: So I think I'm going to start with the question on what needs to happen from this point on going forward. I'm going to try and also touch upon your question on a withdrawal, should it happen, how should it happen, but in a slightly roundabout way. So I knew you were going to ask this question and I -- I've been thinking that I suspect that the Trump administration might have deduced or devised a strategy for Afghanistan by balancing the win sets of the party to the conflict, specifically Afghanistan and Pakistan. And seeing which of those overlap the closest with the U.S. win set or the U.S. first-order preferences for how they wanted to wind down the war, for how they wanted to in the war. And presumably they saw more convergence with the Pakistan/Taliban win set or order preferences than they did with Afghanistan.

It could also be the realization that whatever animates Pakistan's policy preferences vis-à-vis Afghanistan or Pakistan/Taliban strategy vis-à-vis Afghanistan, it felt so much more intently or plopped in so much higher on their policy, foreign policy objectives than Afghanistan does for U.S. foreign policy. If either one of these two are correct and I think some version of it probably comes close to what

is the case, then that was myopic and irresponsible on the part of the Trump administration.

I think it's officials. I think the architects of the strategy that we've seen unfolding over the last two years sort of stared themselves blind on the putative electoral dividends that would arise from ending the war to such an extent that other important considerations are sort of fell away including that you don't solve a problem -- you don't solve a complex issue, and malaise, by re-creating the conditions that led to -- that generated it in the first place.

And this has been a very illogical feature of the Trump administration's courting of the Taliban because to paraphrase the former French President Valery Giscard d'Estaing, there is no question of returning to the pre-2001 situation only for the reason that the pre-2001 situation included the conditions that led to its own violent demise. This was, as we all know, triggered by the attack on 9/11.

So with the Taliban not changing course and continuing with its campaign of violence, there is this perverse circularity to what the Trump administration has sought to do. So my advice to the Biden administration would be factor into account that only a sustainable peace can be the logical conclusion to the past two decades. Anything less than that I think would likely mean a continuation of war. So let that be the point of departure for any sort of strategy that would be undertaken vis-à-vis Afghanistan, and work back from that.

In terms of a -- in terms of a withdrawal, should there be a withdrawal even if the February 29, 2020 deal stipulates that a withdrawal take place in May, I don't think the time is right for that. I don't. I see -- I see a lot of recalcitrance. I don't see any sort of tolerance and Taliban's behavior. It is very, very worrisome. Then there are various different theories as to continuing with the Doha process while targeting and assassinating educated youth and journalists, etc., on the ground in Afghanistan. I guess we might get into that a little bit later, but none of that inspires confidence. None of it inspires confidence.

You mentioned the -- you mentioned that I wrote two pieces a couple of months ago. I wrote a policy -- I wrote a policy brief for AUYF and I wrote an article for the Atlantic Council. And in both of them I contend that maybe it's a very intuitively self-evident idea that a workable power-sharing format

would have to be a political arrangement that allows for contradictory impulses to come to rest on it. So that would be on the one hand whatever informs the Taliban vision for an emirate and on the other hand what informs the government's vision for a democratic, republican polity.

And I've spent -- you know, I've spent the past couple of months thinking a lot about how -- thinking a lot about how much disagreement a function -- a functional rights based political order can encompass within it before it starts to come apart at the seams. And the conclusion that I reach again and again is yes, it absolutely has to be a political system that can stomach, that can handle a great degree of political disagreement. It cannot be one that confers primacy, that confers dominance to a single faction, a single group that then imposes on all others a specific way of life, a specific denominational system of belief, etc. That's simply not going to work.

In looking at what the Taliban seem to be pursuing right now, these two articles I authored during a fairly optimistic moment. It was from late September to December where there was some cautious optimism on my part. But from what we've seen over the past months, especially over the past couple of weeks with violence escalating sort of a very insidious form of violence, the targeting of educated youth, etc., I don't see -- I no longer see Taliban being able to compromise in that way. I no longer -- they insist on their first-order preferences. I don't think they would be content with making do with second and third order preferences and sort of compromising with the Afghan government.

And the sort of political and social order that I perceive for Afghanistan given just the tapestry that we are of different communities, and different ethnicities, much like the U.S. actually, it has to be a pluralist social and political order. And with Taliban's vision, I don't see that sort of -- I don't see the spaciousness allowing for that. So yeah, that's --

MR. HANLON: That's sobering . Well, excellent. Let me bring in audience questions. Here's what I would like to do with your permission. Starting in that same order, Omar Sadr, Omar Sharifi, and then Muska, let me ask each of you to respond to a couple of the questions that I'm about to read to you. I'm going to read them all. So I hope y'all have a pen or pencil because I think we only have time for one round of responses from each of you.

You'll each have about five minutes. So that will give you an opportunity to elucidate in some detail on the one or two questions where you feel most powerfully about responding. And I think that will also allow you to add any concluding or final thoughts as well. So about five minutes each with the following list of about eight questions. So -- and some of the two-party test on and that's why I'm not really sure how to handle this besides just reading the questions.

Question one, who is responsible for the current problems in Afghanistan most? The United States or the Afghan government? The questioner didn't allow for any other possibilities. I might blame somebody besides those two, but that's the way the question was phrased.

What obstacles and opportunities will the Biden administration faces specifically?

And also a related question, does former Vice President Biden's well-known views on Afghanistan mission of five and 10 years ago, does that influence the way that Afghans shape their expectations about what he will do now that he is about to become president, specifically the skepticism about a large-scale state building or a large-scale counterinsurgency effort and the preference for a more narrowly tailored counterinsurgency -- or excuse me, counterterrorism approach by the United States with its role in Afghanistan?

Specific question about the peace talks. How are women being represented at the peace talks in Qatar?

Another question about the state of education in Afghanistan. And do you feel that there is adequate investment in education not only in the cities, but in the more rural areas? And how can that be furthered with or without a peace deal?

Another question has to do with if the United States wants to safely end its war, its role in the war in Afghanistan, what steps should it think about taking specifically in the next few years?

Another question, and I will start to wrap up here in just a minute. I know I'm throwing a lot at you. But again, please be very selective and just pick the ones that you most are moved by or most feel important to respond to. How can economic development continue given the security situation? And has economic development even continued in recent years or has it essentially been stuck?

Question about the Taliban. Have they changed at all? I think you've all three spoken to this question to some extent, but you can put a sharper point on it. Is there anything different about the Taliban today from the Taliban of the late 1990s when they were in power?

If there were a successful peace deal, do you think that that would really end the problem of extremism and terrorism in Afghanistan, or would there be parts of the country that were still relatively ungoverned where that kind of insurgency or unrest would continue?

And finally -- well, two more questions. Are there any neighbors in Afghanistan that are benefiting somehow from this war whether economically or politically or otherwise, making them less inclined to support a peaceful outcome for negotiations?

And the very last question for all of you, or for any of you. Could you list of two or three things that Afghan security partner nations and international nongovernmental organizations could do to improve the situation further in Afghanistan? So again, sort of making the broad policy agenda as specific and concrete as possible.

That's a lot to throw at you, but again, I'm asking each of you to just had a one or two questions together with any the concluding thoughts for about five minutes each starting with you, Professor Sadr.

PROFESSOR SADR: Well thank you, Mike for that. And if you will allow me to just speak a bit about the question that earlier you asked about the modalities of power-sharing. And then I will come and pick one question from whatever you throw on us.

On regards to the power-sharing, I don't have a particular formula, but I think we should go back to history and learn some lessons from practices of power-sharing in Afghanistan at least. And of course the modalities of transitional systems or interim governments. So far we have in Afghanistan, four types of interim government. One interim government came in 1963 during the king, the last king, which was mandated to frame a new constitution.

Two other interim governments were conducted in Mujahideen which was kind of more of a power-sharing. Both of them failed disastrous. The fourth one was the Bonn Agreement which also

presented another model of power-sharing and interim government. And we are now standing at this moment and judging back what are the modality of (inaudible). There are so many flaws out there.

And I think the last one is also NUG, National Unity Government, which also presented another model of power-sharing. Now, we need to study all of these different cases thoroughly and come up with what were the positive outcomes and what were the negatives or failures about these models. And to do that, I think I will present a couple of principles that we should not repeat while coming up with any kind of power-sharing model.

Number one is that there should be enough checks and balances on any forms of power-sharing model which will be presented, so that whoever is on the lead or the head of the system should not be able to exercise kind of arbitrary use of force or power or misuse their power responsibilities. That's number one.

Secondly, we should also not repeat the old formula, the way they typical way of division of power -- distribution of power in Afghanistan. That is where the primary causes of the conflict here. And that should not be repeated.

Thirdly we should also prevent any form of -- formation of an institution which provides exclusive use of power by one particular group or segment. For example, clergy. The way that people -- probably Taliban will come up with certain form of power-sharing presenting a kind of institution which can be controlled only exclusively by (inaudible) mullahs and clergy. So that should be prevented. No institution should be an exclusive control of one particular segment of population, particularly the clergy.

Now coming up to the questions, I think I will take the question that you raised about the obstacles and opportunities of Biden administration as far as this deal is concerned. For as well, I think one obstacle is that the administration receives or inherits a deal which is not been done by themselves, but somehow they don't have any other option just to receive it and what has been signed by their predecessors. And this deal cannot be violated. So now I feel the United States cannot come out of the deal with the Taliban because (inaudible). That will have certain costs to the administration and that's certain obstacles.

And now the administration should somehow manage this where it should not fall in the trap of the Taliban and give them a blank check and leave everything for them so that been there partner in Afghanistan in Kabul should be left out without anything and the republican system here. There are a big of scope and an opportunity. And I think the way that the deal has been violated a couple of times and we have certain evidence for that one, that provides a space for the United States' new administration to push at least the very first simple thing that administration can do is I think to push the timeframe up withdrawal of their forces from end of early May I think for a couple of more months. That will provide us more space to think more and also to see how the peace process unfolds. And I'm afraid the peace process will not come to conclusion in the next three months. So it's a great thing -- too long -- it will be a long process.

And if some miracle happen or a kind of interest in level of force is used on both sides, the Taliban and the government of Afghanistan so that this is not having any option except to reach a deal. But that's not somehow possible. So that's why I think we need more time for the process. And we should not rush to a conclusion and that's why if the forces remain here for a couple of more months, that's one of the solutions. And that's possible. I think that's one of the opportunities. I will stop here, I think.

MR. HANLON: Omar, thank you very, very much. And we will go to Omar Sharifi.

PROFESSOR SHARIFI: All right. So I think I have like -- I have to be even quicker. I'll take two questions about this. What is safely for the U.S. to win the war and what it takes in the next two years. I think with the United States and the international community to kind of safely in the war in Afghanistan and for Afghanistan to go into peace is I think for the international community, especially the United States they have to actually continue to trust and invest on the opportunities that kind of still exist in Afghanistan. Afghanistan is still right now, for good or for bad, despite a defuncting government, problematic administration. I don't go as far as to call it dysfunctional.

There is an Afghan Army, a security force that is actually capable of defending the country with appropriate international support and actually do very kind of adequate antiterrorist

operations. And even if some date tomorrow, even with the peace with the Taliban, which I doubt I think peace with the Taliban would end kind of the problem with extremism in the region because Taliban are composed of different groups and lots of them are actually based in Pakistan. I think the Afghan security force is capable of actually kind of managing it to a large degree. So in my opinion, building and investing on what has kind of emerged and established in Afghanistan the last 20 years may bring a lot of dividends in the future for this kind of safe U.S. withdrawal from -- and end to this war and peace.

And the fact is, have the Taliban at all changed. I am confident that there is absolutely no evidence that the Taliban fundamentally trusts -- changed their core messages and ideas since (inaudible) in terms of their views on women's rights, in terms of human rights, in terms of governance, in terms of like, militancy in terms of the support for different groups and in terms of violations of freedom of speech. Anything that somehow kind of shows that the Taliban has changed, we have -- we do not have anything. Some of the Taliban go and talk with international experts and journalists and pretend that they have changed, but on the ground when we are living here and seen it every day, we don't see -- and especially I, who lived all of my life in the Taliban, I experienced (inaudible) in Afghanistan, I don't see much change in terms of the core message and behavior. Thank you.

MR. HANLON: That's extremely sobering. And I hope it's one of the messages that resonates powerfully with our audiences. Whatever we think about the prospects for the peace talks, we have to understand the views of the respective parties.

Muska, over to you please.

PROFESSOR DASTAGEER: All right. Thank you. I'm sitting in darkness. Sorry about that. Electricity just went out. I'm going to answer very briefly the question on -- I mean, there is -- there is a plethora of obstacles that face the Biden administration. Something that I really want to make sure that I mention before we stop is I think that the way that aid and assistance is rendered needs to be optimized. The way it's been -- the modalities through which is been disseminated, the way it's been done over the past couple -- over the past two decades, specific -- yeah, yeah, but -- the past two decades has been very unfocused, unfocused, uncoordinated. There has been a tendency for siloing.

And I think at this point given the stakes and given where we are, there is a need to invest heavily in the security sector. It needs to be a lot more focused. Interventions need to be a lot more targeted. Instead of just giving sort of willy-nilly to a plethora of different sectors, I think the goal of this -- the objective is to have a self-sufficient Afghanistan, and Afghanistan that can defend itself.

So I think that prioritizing the way that the security sector is invested in, is really, really important. And I think that could combine very well with a residual, limited counterterrorism force, an American CT force. I know that -- I mean, that doesn't go over very well with the Taliban, but I -- you know, I -- at this point it's very hard to envisage a future in the near or medium-term without that, without that sort of guarantee. So yeah, that that I think that brings us up to two minutes left.

MR. HANLON: Well, you've all been fantastic. I want to just say as a friend of Afghanistan and admirer of Afghanistan, that the three of you represent the reason why many of us believe still in the country and its future. You've all been very critical of the Taliban. You've been rather critical of your existing government and powerbrokers. And yet, you collectively represent a part of Afghanistan and maybe the real soul of the Afghan people that is a third entity that is really I think the hope of the country and the hope for the future.

And I know President David Sedney of the American University in Afghanistan who helped me conceptualize this event shares that core belief in the future of your country which is why he is dedicated so much of his career and life to the service of Afghanistan. I want to really express my admiration and support as we go into this difficult period of figuring out what's going to happen next with the Biden administration, the peace talks.

Since we are finishing up just on time, I can't help but ask one final question with just a brief response from each of you, because we haven't even talked about COVID. And as we try to make sense of the situation in Afghanistan today, this may be tangential to the main issue. But I wanted to what extent the COVID pandemic has made all of these other problems worse. Or is it almost a different kind of problem altogether that doesn't really affect the issue of the violence and peace process? Or does it even potentially open up opportunity somehow? Not that I can easily fathom how that might be the

case, but I'm just wondering how COVID effects life there, how bad health crisis is, and what the ways in which COVID may affect other parts of Afghan politics and Afghan challenges may manifest themselves.

Muska, could you begin with that question please? Just very briefly. You are still on mute, my friend.

PROFESSOR DASTAGEER: Sorry.

MR. HANLON: Thank you.

PROFESSOR DASTAGEER: So I -- just very briefly, I don't see it having sort of -- you know, any discernible impact on the fighting, on the pace of the -- the pace of violence or anything like that. I might be wrong in that, but I haven't -- I haven't seen it either slow down or accelerate or have any sort of impact on it. I don't know what my colleagues will say here.

MR. HANLON: Omar Sharifi?

PROFESSOR SHARIFI: Well, I co-authored an article with a friend of mine, a published an American anthropologist. But because our government was not able to actually respond properly. We saw that we witnessed a massive community level mobilization to actually help each other and sustain especially most of the people kind of earn their money daily and then it was communities got together, raised the money, distribution of the food and everything.

So even when the Taliban and the same (inaudible) Taliban attacked a maternity hospital, shot the babies and the mothers and there was the community he was mobilized to actually provide food for the needy in their own neighborhoods. They went and they volunteered to help the kids whose mothers were shot and those babies who were still alive. So what we saw was -- actually worked as an anthropologist with massive level of community mobilization to actually help each other in the absence of effective government even when the -- even despite the Taliban threats.

MR. HANLON: Thank you. Omar Sadr, any final thought?

PROFESSOR SADR: Yeah, so I -- it's clear that our national health system is disastrous and we don't have an of data to show the effect of COVID on various walks of life and different aspects of conflict and peace. The -- CNN when he was asked the same question he give an answer which is

completely wrong. He said the system managed well. But what's on the ground, it shows that that was disastrous.

But as far as the effect of COVID is concerned with respect to the conflict, I think there was minimal level of influence or effect on that in particular. But when it comes to peace process, why not. Yeah, it delayed the peace process particularly the first wave of COVID logistically created certain challenges for different delegates particularly the U.S. delegate and also for the talks. That credits or logistical challenges. But in terms of conflict I didn't see anything. Thank you.

MR. HANLON: Again, thanks to all of you. And again, very clear messages about the importance of patience and certainly you have to be patient whether we Americans think we have the choice of leaving or not. You are all dedicated to your country and you are willing to be patient and resolute. You've been very clear in expressing concern about the Taliban and where they are as an organization, where they are in ideology and their willingness to make peace.

And I think I heard consistent messages of hoping for international engagement continue over an extended period and not just through May. That seems to have been a consistent thread in addition to many other important points. But also a clarion call to your fellow Afghans and government and elsewhere to continue to try to build a stronger, more effective, more efficient government and one that serves the people of Afghanistan better and therefore takes away some of the rallying cry of the Taliban. I think I heard all of that today and I heard it very eloquently.

So let me just on behalf of Brookings, thank you again, wish you the very best for the new year and the same to all Afghan friends. So signing off from Brookings in Washington.

PROFESSOR SHARIFI: Thank you.

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