

Online Roundtable Discussion
**Chasing Unicorn:
Norway's Taliban Diplomacy**

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AISS Report



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Webinar report: Chasing Unicorn: Norway's Taliban Diplomacy

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Norway has been an important actor in Afghanistan's affairs. It has acted as a facilitator for talks between the Taliban leadership and the Karzai Government, and subsequently, assisted in the back channel talks between different actors including the US and Taliban. Norway continued its contacts with the Taliban such as hosting the representatives of Taliban in different peace talks and forums. The Afghan Institute for Strategic Studies (AISS) organized a webinar titled '*Chasing Unicorn: Norway's Taliban Diplomacy*' on 20th January 2023 that focused on Norway's interest in Afghanistan and its efforts in engaging Taliban.



The speakers included Ambassador Youssof Ghafoorzai, Afghanistan's Ambassador to Norway, Dr Weeda Mehran, Lecturer Department of Politics & the Director of MA in Conflict, Security & Development, University of Exeter, Tabish Forugh, researcher and policy analyst, Naseer Ahmad Faiq, Afghanistan UN Charge d'affairs, New York, Dr Habiba Sarabi, a former member of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan Peace Negotiation Team for Doha talks, and Prof Elisabeth Eide, journalist, writer, and Professor Emerita in Journalism Studies at Oslo Metropolitan University, Norway. The session was chaired by Meetra Qutb, Researcher and Communication Specialist at, Afghan Witness Centre for Information Resilience. Please note that AISS had requested the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Norway to send an official representative to participate in the webinar but it did not materialise.

Norway's policy vis-à-vis Afghanistan

The speakers shared mixed views on Norway's policies and their success or failure. Prof Eide called that “If you summarize it [Norway’s foreign policy] in one sentence: it's a small country with big ambitions”. Big ambitions often come up with huge responsibilities. Norway, as one of the key stakeholders in the Afghan conflict, has been a penholder in the Security Council's work on Afghanistan. Mr Faiq added that “they have always tried to stick to the values to their democratic values and the principles of international also international humanitarian law and international human rights law. They have always tried to support the people of Afghanistan”.

Ambassfor Ghafoorzai also added that “as penholder in the Security Council, Norway did give a platform to civil society and activists to speak about Afghanistan’s tragedy. Mr Faiq also echoed that Norway has been very successful, especially in organizing some of the very important meetings, such as the Arria-formula meeting.

Mr Faiq and Ambassador Ghafoorzai both agreed that Norway has been trying to bridge the gaps and find some consensus on very critical issues and is one of the supporters of the development of civil society and women empowerment.

However, Forugh provided some critical reflections on Norway's engagement in international conflicts. He argues that if one analyses Norway's engagement historically, one may observe that there is a tendency in which Norway leans towards the dominant force during conflicts. He gave the example of Myanmar and the Oslo Agreement. Forugh also evaluated and questioned the outcomes of Norway's engagement. "The whole investment of Norway has produced no tangible or relatable evidence of moderation in terms of the Taliban”, he added.

The unchanging Taliban

The speakers were also critical of the Taliban's intention of keeping promises. Dr Mehran raised a pertinent question which requires answers such as that did Taliban deliver those promises committed to the international community? They didn't. She reminded that "let's not forget that the Taliban's ruling in Afghanistan in the past 16 months have not just been oppressive towards women but they have been extremely oppressive towards other ethnic and religious communities in Afghanistan". Protecting gender, religious and ethnic minorities was one of the key promises Taliban made which they have violated.

Ambassador Ghafoorzai asserted that after violating every other commitment, the world is now realising that Taliban's promises cannot be trusted. "It seems that now the international community, for the first time in a long time, is in the phase of contemplating whether or not Taliban are capable of or even interested in dialogue, negotiations, and compromise", he added. He also said that Taliban's fake promises were not a surprise to the people of Afghanistan, but perhaps it was a disappointment to the international community. "Time and again the Taliban have misused international dialogue and engagement", Ambassador Ghafoorzai reminded.

Are Taliban reliable?

The foremost thing that the speakers urged is that those who are involved in the mediation with Taliban should understand the dynamics and political context of Afghanistan. Prof Eide shared that she thinks that many people who claim to understand Afghanistan do not understand its reality.

The speakers agreed that as a matter of principle, there is nothing wrong with dialogue. However, one should not forget that Taliban show little respect for these dialogues. Dr Mehran added that "it is not just about engaging with Taliban at the top level. We have all seen that engagement at the top level or a top-down process has not been successful". She asked about the results of previous engagement with Taliban. The results were, as she added, "Taliban's government in Afghanistan, abject poverty, oppression against women, ethnic and religious minorities in the country".

Therefore, Dr Mehran reiterated the key considerations we should be aware of when dealing with Taliban i.e. are Taliban actually being honest and delivering on their promises? Other speakers suggested more ways to engage Taliban. Prof Eide proposed that "it would be more

wise to work with or to listen to the surrounding Islamic nations and who have not engaged in the recent war in Afghanistan”.

Dr Sarabi, on the other hand, suggested that "Norway can take some steps for negotiation and start some back-channel discussion involving other countries similar to what they did in Colombia. Perhaps, one of the Muslim countries and maybe Taliban can trust to that and we can start some back-channel for the facilitation of the peace process”.

Credibility and transparency are required

The speakers agreed that there should be transparency and the public should know about it. Forugh added that “unfortunately when it comes to transparency, not just Norway, but the rest of the world that intended to practice transparency” and their constituent in the West, or the people of Afghanistan have little knowledge about that kind of terms they were setting with Taliban.

Dr Habiba Sarabi also added that those who are engaging with Taliban should be impartial. She posited that unfortunately, Qatar was not impartial and, as Forugh pointed out, that “the office of the Taliban turned out to be the political capital of the Taliban”.

Mr Faiq also added credibility and reliability of any country particularly its reputation to engage and facilitating peace diplomacy is critical. He suggested that Norway has a long history of peace-making and peace facilitation, therefore, it is among the credible stakeholders.

Engagement with Taliban doesn't mean recognition

The speaker also discussed this impression that when engagement with Taliban starts or any country is willing to engage with Taliban, it means [gives impression] that they are normalizing their relations or developing or improving their relations. Mr Faiq added that “it's the main doubt or criticism by the people and this is something that people demand some kind of transparency”.

Dr Mehran also raised how Taliban manipulate engagement as some sort of recognition. “They build this narrative of how they talk to the outside world and the messages they send out. They use this opportunity to portray themselves as a legitimate and acceptable government of Afghanistan by the international community”.

Mr Faiq also mentioned that those who are engaging with Taliban don't mean they are recognising Taliban. He also reminded the fact that Taliban are de facto authorities and they are providing security or access to these people, therefore, they [states] need to engage with them at some level. He said that Norway has maintained that its engagement with Taliban does not mean giving legitimacy to them. "Norway's engagement with the Taliban is to protect human rights and also to support the humanitarian situation in Afghanistan".

Inclusion of ethnic and gender minorities when engaging with Taliban

The speakers emphasised that at any level engagement with Taliban, women and minorities should remain top on the agenda. Dr Mehran asserted that one should be mindful when engaging with Taliban, the women of Afghanistan particularly should not be forgotten. "I would hate to see that the rights of women are sidelined", she added.

Mr Faiq also reminded that we shouldn't forget women belonging to different sectors. "What about the women who are working in the government? What about the women who are working in other independent or other institutions? We don't know about their situation, because they still are at home, they are banned, and this is concerning. Of course, we should focus on women but it should include all areas i.e. social, economic, cultural, and political sectors".

Prof Eide also urged to include those who are outside Afghanistan. "Two most prominent female activists came to Norway as refugees but they were sent to very remote places, very far from Oslo". She argued that the Norwegian government could have benefited from their expertise. "There could have been at least weekly or daily consultancies with the Government about Afghanistan policy", she added. Mr Faiq also urged to include the Afghan diaspora to seek their expertise and knowledge about the country.

Way forward

Forugh added that “we may have lost the fight to Taliban, but the battle is still going on. We have to remain consistent with our values”. He also cautioned that the international community needs to uphold a principled position. "If this duality of selectivism is not removed from dealing with Afghanistan, I think the people of Afghanistan will become more suspicious of the efforts of the international community in dealing with the Taliban”. He also urged that Norway needs to officially clarify its position vis-à-vis Taliban.

Ambassador Ghafoorzai added that despite the Taliban's reluctance, the push for peace should not only continue but should be pursued as a matter of priority. “The international community should now begin a very structured viable initiative with democratic political forces from across social segments in order to mobilize and identify which core issues will need attention and outreach should include women, youth, political parties, independent figures and intellectuals. It's important for the international community to engage closer with committed responsible political figures that have a genuine desire in a peaceful, united, and democratic Afghanistan”.

The End