

# **Shabnam Nasimi – British Afghan Social and Political Activist – Written evidence (AFG0029)**

**House of Lords International Relations and Defence Committee**

## **UK AND AFGHANISTAN INQUIRY**

**1<sup>st</sup> November 2020**

The following insights and observations are based on approximately 10 years of experience and work in Afghanistan and with British Afghans.

### **What are the prospects for the implementation of the peace agreement between the US and the Taliban signed in February? To what extent have its provisions been implemented, and what are the principal challenges?**

Afghanistan is at a critical juncture. A fragile framework has been arrived at that seeks to end almost 50 years of violent conflict. Most Afghans are tired of war and yearn for peace—but caution needs to be exercised. Any hastily ushered-in agreement could once again leave the country in chaos and repeat the mistakes of the Soviet withdrawal in 1989.

50 per cent of peace deals breakdown, often when small elite groups make agreements that exclude the hopes and dreams of the majority of the population. The 2001 Bonn Agreement was intended to re-create the state of Afghanistan following the US's invasion in response to the 9/11 terrorist attacks. The political culture in Afghanistan is one of shifting alliances and back-room deals where warlords and extremists are the main beneficiaries of the spoils of war—and peace.

While the nature of peacebuilding may involve in the early stages an “ugly peace,” where elite bargains are made with the men of violence, this is ultimately unsustainable: the other 95 per cent of the people must feel that their voices are heard.

The sequencing of US withdrawal will be critical: if the US troops leave Afghanistan too quickly, this could lead to the Taliban refusing to adhere to the terms of any agreement and have the capacity to over-run the country and return to power. In 2017, President Trump himself highlighted that a hasty US withdrawal would likely create a power vacuum and fertile ground for the re-emergence of more extreme groups such as Al Qaeda and Islamic State.

What matters is whether the framework that the US put in place is motivated by a desire for a speedy withdrawal or a commitment to an inclusive and sustainable peace. US troops will need to remain and act both as leverage and safety net for the terms of a more comprehensive

agreement. By leaving before an intra-Afghan peace deal is reached, the US and NATO risk's plunging Afghanistan into further conflict leading to a Taliban victory; not only would that be a disservice to Afghans who have benefited from a realization of their rights, but it would do a disservice to American and British troops who have lost their lives wiping away the gains they have helped achieve. To say that we have zero responsibility to safeguard these gains is disingenuous and will not be looked upon kindly by Afghans.

Rumours abound of the US imposing an interim government as part of a transitional phase; it can only be hoped that these remain hearsay, as a political backroom deal between the warlords and the Taliban would undermine progress made in the last two decades. Peace is not only about the end of fighting but about how people can peaceably live together.

Similarly, a new social contract cannot be achieved through talks between the power holders alone. Digital technology can amplify the necessary public outreach, with conversations extended using WhatsApp, Twitter and Facebook. This will need to include a range of voices, including religiously conservative and progressive ones, reflecting the changes in Afghanistan society. Indeed, research shows that peace processes in which women participate are more likely to succeed, and dialogue between Taliban women and the more progressive women's voices could be one of the keys to future stability.

Afghanistan has advanced over the last 20 years, and these tentative gains need to be protected. At the core of this is ceasefire – in order to move forward the Taliban will need to stop violence and attacks; and it is crucial that the UK supports this before any political settlement is agreed upon.

### **What are Afghanistan's principal economic sectors and trade relationships? How can these be built upon to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals and create jobs and livelihoods?**

The UK needs to take a new approach with Afghanistan – an economic one, because after all economic prosperity creates jobs and livelihoods and the path to peace and stability. It is time to realise the importance and critical capability of economically empowering the country. This would be an opportunity to innovate a new approach to post-conflict reconstruction that accelerates industrialisation, improves transparency and governance and broadens financial markets in Afghanistan.

The UK has taken a humanitarian and development approach to Afghanistan for the past 20 years – which has increased corruption, created a foreign-aid dependant nation and hasn't developed a long-term

or sustainable solution. The UK can develop a commerce/business relationship with Afghanistan that looks at agriculture and investing in people.

There are opportunities to build upon all three to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals and create jobs and livelihoods. In particular, reforms to tackle corruption, inappropriate regulation, excessive taxation, unfair competition and an unstable policy environment would promote investment and the development of a more efficient market system.

The UK is part of the core group of major development donors that ensures aid delivers reforms and accountability, and tackles corruption. However, almost 20 years of aid and humanitarian assistance has led to a fragile nation and endemic corruption with SIGAR recently reporting that approximately \$19 billion has been lost to waste, fraud and abuse.

We need to open a new chapter with Afghanistan in the same way as we do with Africa, India etc – business and investment. Up to now, despite the significant amounts of aid Britain spends and the strong political and diplomatic footprint it has in Afghanistan, investment lags.

There is a fresh competition for influence in Afghanistan. China has become Afghanistan's largest foreign investor, offering sizeable investments in energy and infrastructure projects and generating electricity and then transporting oil and gas from central Asia through Afghanistan. Sources have also confirmed that China is pledging to build motorways that would link Afghanistan's main cities.

This needs to change. Afghanistan provides a huge opportunity for the UK to maintain its global economic standing in the region; a switch to investment that creates value and jobs through manufacturing, agro-processing, information and communications technology etc. Now is the time for the UK government to change the framing of its relationship with Afghanistan – to one based on economic cooperation rather than simply an aid-based, donor-recipient relationship. While aid is important, the nature of the relationship, and of aid itself, must increasingly be centred on countries' own plans for their industrialisation. In this way the UK can be more responsive to Afghanistan's emerging class of leaders, and support the country facilitate investment in job-creating sectors.

The increasing young population and growing middle class in Afghanistan – bring growth and increased sophistication in consumption, presenting substantial opportunities in sectors where the UK has a strong comparative advantage.

**What is your assessment of the functioning of Afghanistan's constitutional arrangements? Can Afghanistan successfully operate as a multi-ethnic state?**

Afghanistan has changed – and the post-2001 generation have welcome freedom that the country had never experienced before. However, there is still a huge problem with representation and a growing sentiment of a civil war. For a multi-ethnic state to work in Afghanistan, the country requires a new constitution and a representative electoral system, which would accept and welcome the participation of groups and factions that are of non-Pashtun groups in government and leadership positions.

Over the last few years, particularly since 2014 (British troop withdrawal), equality and representation has been a serious problem – where many groups feel marginalised and discriminated by the system. It has been said that grievances among non-Pashtun ethnic groups likely to rise if the Taliban launches a major offensive in the north to strengthen its positions in negotiations.

For a lasting peace and just political order to be established in Afghanistan, significant structural changes need to be made to a highly centralized political and administrative system that concentrates power and financial resources in the office of the president with little accountability. The current political structures were established by the Constitution of Afghanistan adopted in 2004, which is a revised version of the Constitution adopted in 1964 when the country was ruled by a monarchy. The 2004 Constitution may have assuaged the former monarchy's beneficiaries, but it completely ignored the fundamental political transformation of the country through the upheavals of the past four decades. It has largely remained irrelevant to practical politics in Afghanistan.

The 2004 Constitution confers on the president the right to appoint and dismiss governors of the country's 34 provinces, mayors, police chiefs, district governors, senators and other officials across the political system. The people they rule over have no democratic means of holding local authorities accountable, and this has created an environment of pervasive corruption

More dangerously, in a multi-ethnic society, the centralized unitary-presidential system has fanned the flames of internal conflict. The problem is exacerbated when there have been ongoing allegations that the government is resorting to divisive and ethnocentric policies in a country that is made of ethnic minorities. Such policies by the Afghan state has sharpened ethnic identity and nationalism among all ethnic groups. The patronage of a particular group by the head of state has created a major cleavage in our society and nourished a sense of disenfranchisement among all ethnic groups, constituting a major source of conflict in the country for decades.

**Which regional and global powers are playing the most significant role in Afghanistan's political and security environment? What scope is there for that role to be more positive and constructive than it has been in the past?**

The withdrawal of U.S. troops agreed to in the deal with the Taliban signed in Doha on 29th February 2020 continues toward an initial pull-out of 8,600 that by early next year is scheduled to see U.S. and allied NATO forces in Afghanistan very likely reduced to zero.

In signing the agreement President Trump has shaken the kaleidoscope of Afghanistan - giving hope to adversaries in the region. In hopes of strengthening Russia's influence in Afghanistan, its special envoy to Afghanistan, Zamir Kabulov, then announced Russia's readiness to send troops to Afghanistan to fight terrorism. It seems Trump is doing in Afghanistan much the same as he did in Syria in December 2018 when he took the risky decision to pull out all 2,000 US troops, claiming he had defeated Islamic State in Iraq and Levant (ISIL),

Despite President Trump's claim that the US-Taliban deal is a first step to lasting peace in Afghanistan, his policies come in face of the Taliban's spring offensive that is killing Afghans on an increased scale. More than 3,458 civilians have been killed in the first half of 2020, even after the signing of the agreement between the US and Taliban. The brutal shooting of new mothers and new-born babies at a Maternity Hospital in Kabul is a grim reminder that Afghanistan's people are in peril from cradle to grave. To make matters worse, the country inaugurated two Presidents with two separate governments back in March 2020. The two rivals Abdullah Abdullah and Ashraf Ghani signed a power-sharing deal, ending months of political uncertainty. However, the poor performance of the contentious National University Government since 2014, does not instill much confidence for the future with the current government.

Afghanistan is now fighting another war – coronavirus COVID-19. With thousands of cases recorded according to official government numbers, the figures may still understate the virus's reach; particularly with a weak and fragile healthcare system. However, despite the impact of the pandemic on the lives of Afghans, President Trump continues to draw down forces concerned that they are vulnerable to the pandemic and his impatience with the halting progress of his peace deal with the Taliban.

It seems like the United States has no plan for how it's going to get the Afghan government, various other Afghan factions and the Taliban to arrive at a peace deal that would create a new constitution perhaps, a new government and would bring at least a semblance of peace and order in Afghanistan. It all looks like an after-thought.

Today Afghanistan is humming with new life, change and hope. Its demography is weighted towards the young, and they are impatient for change. On every patch of open ground young men play football and cricket. In this supposedly traditional society, male and female university students mix in a relaxed way. There is a building boom of glass palaces and shopping malls, glittering in the brash bling of a newly confident nation. There is poetry everywhere—in the mouths of youths on street corners, on radio stations and in public competitions that draw huge crowds. Beyond the dust, poverty and insecurity, this is a nation that has taken its soul back from the Taliban, but the continuing uncertainty has made the nation nervous and hesitant.

So yes, the people of Afghanistan, the United States and its allies are tired of this war but if they leave without a peace deal among Afghans, the country will descend into a more chaotic civil war. and order will collapse – and nobody’s going to be there to fulfil the promises that President Trump thinks he got out of there, namely that no Al-Qaeda will be allowed in Afghanistan and there’s not going to be terrorism coming out of Afghanistan. Trump therefore has not planned for peace; he has only planned for an exit, and this is very short-sighted.

The withdrawal of US and UK troops provides an opening for Russia to reassert its diplomatic presence in the country, and this prospect should concern policymakers. In addition to complicating the path to a lasting peace, Russia continues to spread disinformation about U.S. objectives in Afghanistan that is aimed at eroding Afghan public trust in US security guarantees. Russia’s state media outlet Sputnik is a leading agent of such disinformation, as it operates a Farsi-language website. Sputnik’s efforts are frequently complemented by statements from the Russian foreign ministry.

For Russia, the US and UK withdrawal will serve as a golden opportunity to reconfigure its position in the Central Asian region and reassert itself in Afghanistan. The withdrawal will certainly create a vacuum and the need for heightened Russian intervention in the region, which will be framed along the lines of preserving order.

Grievances amongst the Hazara, Uzbek and Tajik ethnic groups have been built up over a long-period of time, at least since the contentious 2014 presidential election, yielding endemic corruption, adverse poverty and inequality, pervasive insecurity, undermined rule of law, discrimination and undemocratic practices. The war in Afghanistan is the world’s most lethal conflict with over 45,000 security forces killed since 2014 and more than 10,000 civilians killed last year. This makes Afghanistan the worst conflict in the world. It is worse than in Syria and Yemen. It’s an unacceptable level of carnage that has engendered widespread of anger from people in Afghanistan, especially the people who believed the West

would keep its promise of 'we're here to stay and we're to win' – which hasn't been the case. People now feel betrayed. There is an increasing sentiment amongst these groups, that in the wake of the US and UK withdrawal, Russia's influence will be welcomed in their hope for change.

As Russia attempts to undercut gains and years of progress, Afghanistan is too weak to stand on its own. Fighting two wars, coronavirus COVID-19 pandemic and the Taliban, whilst the country has a weak political leadership, incapable to bringing an end to the decades-long conflict.

It is of utmost importance that US and UK government's decision on troop withdrawal will be made with careful consideration to conditions in country and progress towards a political settlement.

Trumps sudden flight from the field has exposed UK's military and diplomatic investment as disjointed. If we don't redouble our efforts and build enduring partnerships, we will display weakness and cause others to doubt our commitments.

The Soviet army was driven from Afghanistan 30 years ago – today Vladimir Putin wants to help US troops exit Afghanistan and play the role of 'peace-maker'. We must not be fooled.

**Received 2 November 2020**