

## **The Afghanistan Question: America's Policy Impasse**

By Nazeela Elmi, APL fellow

On June 24, 2024, the Afghanistan Policy Lab hosted a virtual panel titled **The Afghanistan Question: America's Policy Impasse**. The event brought together two experts, Dave Pitts, former Assistant Director of the CIA for Central and South Asia, and Lotfullah Najafizada, founder and CEO of Amu TV and an Afghan journalist. The panel sought to explore and address the critical question of the way forward for the US in relation to Afghanistan and its future role post-presidential elections in November 2024. The discussion covered a wide range of topics crucial from Afghanistan's point of view: its relation to the U.S. and its future strategies, including girls' education, women's rights, regional and global security, humanitarian assistance, and continual attacks by ISIS-K.

The panel was moderated by Ambassador Adela Raz, director of the Afghanistan Policy Lab, and featured concluding remarks by Dr. Arian Sharifi, Lecturer and Co-chair of the Princeton School of Public and International Affairs.

Three years since the Taliban's takeover, the challenges faced by the people of Afghanistan are significant, given the catastrophic humanitarian situation and the dire state of human rights, particularly for women and girls. The Taliban's return to power has severely restricted women's and girls' rights, including banning girls from attending school beyond grade 6 and limiting their participation in the workforce. Other pressing issues include a massive wave of migration and radicalization. The rise of attacks against Shia Hazaras by ISIS raises serious concerns about the Taliban's ability to maintain security. The emergence of new conflicts has led to competing

agendas and frequent criticism over the lack of a clear strategy on how to deal with the Taliban. The speakers at the event delved deeper into these questions.

Dave Pitts began by stating that the current US interaction with the Taliban is ineffective, highlighting the lack of US leverage over the Taliban and minimal consequences for their actions. He emphasized that the US has not fully coordinated with the international community to address the Taliban. He observed a normalization of relations with the Taliban and no broader international effort to tackle the situation. Pitts further discussed that the Taliban's primary concern is the survival of their regime, not the welfare of Afghans.

In the second round of discussions, Pitts stressed the importance of a serious international dialogue around Afghanistan, led by the US. Emphasizing the counterterrorism crisis and the threats from ISIS-K and Al-Qaeda, Pitts stated that ungoverned spaces in Afghanistan could become potential safe havens for violent extremism, posing a threat to the broader region. However, he held that while Afghanistan remains a national security priority for the US, it also involves the flow of refugees across borders and the stifling of economic development, among other issues. He further referred to the need to bring together women's groups, education groups, and human rights, humanitarian, and civil rights groups. Noting that the Taliban does not represent the tens of thousands of Afghans within Afghanistan and around the world, he argued that these civil society groups represent a legitimate opposition to them, require international support, and must be present in international meetings from the halls of Congress in Washington, D.C., UN, and large NGOs in Europe. He ended his note by saying: **“There are many groups, Afghan groups that have come together to try to foster a better way forward for Afghanistan...but I think what we have is like a thousand voices, and those voices are not harmonized.”**

Lotfullah Najafizada characterized the engagement with Afghanistan as transactional and noted a policy vacuum in engaging with the Taliban, allowing countries to adopt transactional approaches. Addressing shifts in global policies and priorities that absorb a lot of energy, Lotfullah raised concerns about the limited bandwidth to address issues regarding Afghanistan. He emphasized that the Doha process is going to be difficult and certainly a very long one. Lotfullah stressed the significance of redefining Afghan-US relationships given the stark change in the past two and a half years and the decline in engagement. Lotfullah noted that studies show 70% of Afghans support democracy, a clear indicator of the demands of the people. He also acknowledged a unanimous voice among Afghans calling for education rights. Lotfullah stated that expecting unity from diverse ethnic and interest groups in Afghanistan is flawed, as he himself could not represent it, adding **“unity in purpose, unity in vision is one thing, and then unity in messaging, communication, and representation of certain groups is another.”** He defined unity as bringing different individuals and interest groups to a power-sharing arrangement rather than the traditional way of forging unity. He stressed the importance of creating communication around shared values among Afghans, particularly young people who subscribe to these values and make up two-thirds of the population. He stressed that Afghans must confront these issues as a nation before engaging with the international community. Lastly, Lotfullah emphasized the post-2024 US presidential elections as a critical opportunity to revisit the Afghanistan issue.

The event was attended by over 50 participants who directed comments and questions to both speakers on critical topics including but not limited to the representation of Afghans, political currents within the Biden administration, the best points of access for Afghan civil society in the US, the UN’s role, and problems with Taliban leadership and their stringent edicts. Concluding remarks were made by Dr. Arian Sharifi.

Dr. Sharifi outlined five key points from the discussions: 1) the failure of the status quo and a lack of an existing policy, 2) the need for a strong will to alter the situation among US and international actors, 3) redefinition and clarification of US-Afghan relations, 4) the hard interests of the US, and lastly, 5) the US's moral obligation to both its taxpayer citizens and the lives lost in Afghanistan. Dr. Sharifi concluded by endorsing the need for recognition of the legitimate Afghan opposition to the Taliban united on a shared set of values.

To watch the recording of the discussion, please click on the below link:

**[The Afghanistan Question: America's Policy Impasse](#)**