

The Quest for Inclusive Peace in Afghanistan

On December 13, the Afghanistan Policy Lab (APL) at Princeton University's School of Public and International Affairs (SPIA) hosted a high-level, one-day event titled *The Quest for Inclusive Peace in Afghanistan*. Held at the SPIA DC Center, the event brought together experts and stakeholders to address critical challenges facing Afghanistan. The event was structured to create open and candid dialogue through a combination of private and public discussions.

The day started with two off-the-record sessions that provided a secure environment for in-depth reflection and debate, with a public panel in the afternoon that offered key insights and policy recommendations to a broader audience. The outcomes of these discussions will be compiled into a comprehensive report, synthesizing the key findings, lessons learned, and actionable recommendations. This record is intended to serve as a guiding resource for advancing peacebuilding efforts in Afghanistan.

The event began with welcome remarks by Ambassador Adela Raz, Director of the Afghanistan Policy Lab, followed by opening remarks from Amaney Jamal, Dean of Princeton University's School of Public and International Affairs. These remarks set the tone for a day of reflective and solution-focused dialogue.

The Chatham House discussions focused on two critical themes:

1. Breaking the Cycle of Conflict in Afghanistan: Lessons from the Past
2. Navigating the Present: Can Afghanistan Move Toward Inclusive Politics?

Breaking the Cycle of Conflict in Afghanistan: Lessons from the Past

The first morning panel delved into the historical factors that have contributed to Afghanistan's 40-year cycle of conflict, focusing particularly on the failures of peace efforts between 2001 and 2021. Panelists highlighted several key issues, starting with the lack of inclusivity during pivotal moments such as the Bonn Conference, which excluded important stakeholders and weakened state-building processes.

They also emphasized the detrimental effects of poorly sequenced political and institutional reforms, which undermined prospects for long-term stability. The absence of justice and accountability mechanisms was identified as a major factor in perpetuating cycles of violence and fostering mistrust among communities.

Navigating the Present: Can Afghanistan Move Toward Inclusive Politics?

The second panel of the morning examined Afghanistan's current political landscape under Taliban governance, focusing on significant challenges to inclusion and representation. The session looked into barriers to inclusivity, focusing on marginalized groups. Discussions assessed the role of regional powers and international diplomacy and highlighted the potential of grassroots peacebuilding efforts and the centering of Afghan voices to challenge exclusionary practices and promote inclusive governance.

Panelists shared insights into the structural issues within the Taliban regime, including its hierarchical power dynamics and the suppression of minority rights. Dr. Habiba Sarabi emphasized the increased education and awareness among minority communities, which now challenge the Taliban's efforts to suppress progress. Dr. Omar Sadr discussed the sporadic nature of protests and local resistance, emphasizing the importance of understanding these dynamics in the context of authoritarian rule. Dr. Vanda Felbab-Brown reflected on international parallels, drawing comparisons with regimes like Syria and Iran, and discussed the economic and ideological factors that sustain Taliban governance.

Public Session: Healing and Reconciliation Strategies

The public session commenced with welcome remarks by Afghanistan Policy Lab Fellow Gran Hewad, followed by opening remarks from Zach Vertin, Director of SPIA DC. This session aimed to address healing and reconciliation strategies for Afghanistan's deeply divided society.

Dr. Dipali Mukhopadhyay, Associate Professor at Johns Hopkins University's School of Advanced International Studies, moderated the panel discussion, which featured esteemed panelists:

- Ambassador Ronald Neumann, Former U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan
- Matin Bek, Fellow at New America's Future Security Program and former member of Afghanistan's Negotiating Team
- Lotfullah Najafizada, Journalist and CEO of Amu TV

Panelists emphasized the need for comprehensive healing strategies. Najafizada offered a stark assessment of the current situation: "There is not much conversation happening inside Afghanistan, the Taliban are not allowing it... there is no national reconciliation process from a grassroots level." Drawing from global experiences in conflict resolution, panelists emphasized lessons and recommendations tailored to Afghanistan's unique challenges. Matin Bek critically reflected on the Doha negotiations, noting, "If the process was designed in a better way during the Doha negotiations, still we had a chance at peace".

The discussions looked into the importance of incorporating Afghan perspectives, including voices from within the country and exiled communities. Ambassador Neumann highlighted the complexities of the international community's approach: "There is a general consensus to refuse legitimacy to the Taliban, but trade [with them] continues."

Traditional conflict-resolution practices and transitional justice measures were identified as essential tools to ensure accountability and long-term stability. Dr. Habiba Sarabi, a former member of Afghanistan's Peace Negotiation Team and the first Afghan woman to become a provincial governor, concluded the event by emphasizing "justice as the foundation for healing and reconciliation." She also stressed the important role of empowering women and introducing a culture of tolerance and peace in society.

For over half an hour, participants engaged in a dynamic exchange, posing a diverse range of questions and sharing their perspectives on initiating a healing and reconciliation process among Afghans, encompassing ethnic, tribal, and other societal groups. This discussion further reinforced the collective commitment to finding sustainable pathways towards peace.