

Documentation

Afghanistan

From Taliban to Democracy?

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Edited by Michael Fanizadeh

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Michael Fanizadeh



I would like to warmly welcome you to today's discussion "Afghanistan: From the Taliban to Democracy?" We are very happy about the large audience and I am especially pleased to welcome our speakers Mahbouba Seraj and Ali Ahmad here in Vienna. I would like to extend a special welcome to Ms. Seraj. She traveled all the way from Kabul in order to inform us about the current situation in Afghanistan. Martin Staudinger, a journalist from Profil, will be the moderator today. Mr. Staudinger will also briefly introduce our speakers.

I would now like to warmly welcome His Excellency Ayoob Erfani, Ambassador of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. The embassy actively supported us in publicizing today's event. In addition, I welcome Ghousuddin Mir from AKIS cultural organization and Shokat Ali Walizadeh from the organization "Afghanische Jugendliche-NEUER START in Österreich," both of whom helped me spread news of today's event within the Afghan community. Both organizations are very active helping Afghans and refugees who have recently arrived in Austria get settled. The spectrum of their activity ranges from integrative football tournaments and cultural events to counseling and support, also for refugees who are minors. I would like to express my deepest thanks to them for this important work. I would also like to thank the Austrian Development Agency, which financed today's event, as well as my colleagues at VIDC, especially Irène Hochauer-Kpoda, who actively supported me with organizing the event.

It is not a coincidence that we scheduled today's event on International Women's Day. As you know, VIDC has been addressing gender relations in conflict regions, concepts of masculinity, and gender-specific violence for years. A feminist perspective is especially important to us when discussing the events in the Middle and Near East. And you may remember that when the USA and its allies started the "War on Terror" on October 7, 2001, in response to the September 11th attacks in New York and Washington, this confrontation was also waged "as a fight for the rights and dignity of women" (First Lady Laura Bush in the Los Angeles Times, 18 Nov. 2001).

Mahbouba Seraj will talk to us about the rights and dignity of women in Afghan society today, 14 years later and after the end of occupation.

A second area covered in today's event will be freedom of speech and diversity of opinion in Afghanistan. We have invited Ali Ahmad, a researcher and journalist, who will give us insight into developments since the collapse of the Taliban. He wrote an extensive work on this topic, which you will find on our info table. Ali Ahmad also helped me develop the concept for today's event.

Before I hand you over to our moderator Martin Staudinger, I would like to ask the Ambassador of Afghanistan, his excellency Ayoob Erfani, to give a few words of welcome.

Ayoob Erfani



Mr. Fanizadeh, thank you very much for your warm welcome. Let me thank the Vienne Institute for International Dialogue and Cooperation for organizing today's event. Let me welcome the panelists here and in particular I am very pleased and have the great honor of seeing here Ms. Mahbouba Seraj, a prominent woman of Afghanistan. A woman who can be a testimony of Afghanistan's rich history of culture of women's rights, not just that which started in the last 13 years. She has done great work for the Afghan people, for the Afghan women. And let me welcome warmly all of you and thank you for being here for such an important discussion. I was here also for the national day of Lithuania; a lady approached me and she said she had been in Afghanistan. She started to say we should travel to Afghanistan; she stayed in Afghanistan 50, 40 years ago, and she has a great respect for Afghanistan. She has had a desire to go back to Afghanistan, to see Afghanistan for some time. I'm trying to say that Afghanistan was absolutely a different place, that the three decades of war and conflict unfortunately changed Afghanistan, took everything, and one of the most devastating consequences of the conflict of war was the victimization of Afghan women. The Afghan women were the prime victims of the three

decades of war and conflict in Afghanistan. So therefore, tonight we came here to salute the Afghan women and to wish them all the best and I thank you very much for your solidarity and support for the Afghan women by being here tonight.

Again, I just want to tell you to welcome them and congratulate them on the occasion of the International Day of Women, which was celebrated yesterday. As I said, Afghanistan suffered for the last three decades, but supported by you, by the international community, we started a new journey back in 2001. We have made a lot of progress in Afghanistan, we have made a lot of achievements in Afghanistan. And one of the areas we are very proud of is the empowerment of women—the change of the situation of women for the better. The women of Afghanistan—in 2001 we didn't have a single school, the women of Afghanistan didn't have the right to go to school, to work; they were deprived of any very basic main elementary human rights. But today we have more than—out of ten million—more than 30% of women or girls going to school. We have thousands of them enrolled in universities in Afghanistan, and for the last 13 years Afghanistan has made a successful transition to the decade of transformation. The women of Afghanistan have been the main force behind our changes, positive changes, from Afghanistan's transition to the decade of transformation we just started. The active reports all speak of democratic processes in Afghanistan. I know today you said we are discussing two main issues, one is freedom of speech, another is women's rights. They were the main forces behind all achievements in Afghanistan and their role will remain crucial for peace and stability and for a better future for Afghanistan, in particular for the coming decade of transformation. So Afghan women now are involved in all areas, but still, as I said, we have a long way to go. We've crossed borders from the cultural, from the ethnical, from villages—a lot of barriers—and we've made a lot of achievements. But still we have a lot of work to do. Yesterday in the United Nations during the celebration of Women's Day everybody acknowledged that unfortunately not just in Afghanistan, but everywhere, in every corner of the world, women are facing some discrimination. Let's work together to provide a better opportunity for the Afghan women, to protect their rights, their rights which will be guaranteed, so that no one could ever have the right to take them away from them. In Afghanistan we have now the constitution, which guarantees equal rights between Afghan men and women. And we are proud of our

achievement. The constitution of Afghanistan provided all the opportunities for Afghan women, and I'm pretty sure that Ms. Mahbouba Seraj will share with you all kinds of other stories of achievements and challenges .. Your role, your support will remain crucial for our future, for a better future, for a stable Afghanistan and a great hope we have in Afghanistan, again the role of women in Afghanistan and the role of youth in Afghanistan. Without Afghan women's participation, which constitutes more than 50% of Afghan population, we'd not have a stable Afghanistan. The women's role, the youth's role, will be vital. We wish them all the best. I would like to express on behalf of the Afghanistan government, the national unity government, our strong support for and commitment to the empowerment of women in Afghanistan. And we express our commitment to face the remaining challenges together to provide a better future for the Afghan people, in particular for the women of Afghanistan. Again, thank you for inviting me, thank you for being here and I wish you all a productive discussion tonight. Thank you very much.

Michael Fanizadeh

I would now like to introduce our moderator, Martin Staudinger.

He has been with Profil magazine since 2004 (economics, foreign policy), prior to that with Format (domestic policy, 1998-2003) and Falter (domestic policy, 1994-1998). Today he runs the foreign news department at Profil with Robert Treichler.

He has reported from Afghanistan, Libya, Syria, Chad, the Congo, Mexico, Venezuela, Ukraine, and other war and crisis regions for Profil. He was the winner of the Prälat-Leopold-Ungar award in 2008

He is published in: Der Spiegel, Die Zeit, Financial Times Deutschland, Capital, and has made various contributions to books.

Martin Staudinger



Good evening. I'll quickly present our panelists for today:

Mahbouba Seraj was born in Kabul and at the end of 2003 returned to Afghanistan after 26 years in exile. Since then she has been engaged with women and children's rights, above all as Executive Board Member of the Afghan Women's Network (AWN)—the largest network of its kind. Recently she has created a popular radio special for women called "Our Beloved Afghanistan by Mahbouba Seraj." She also organizes meetings with women in villages, in order to discuss the content of radio programs. Ms. Seraj is a tireless advocate for women's rights in the public life of Afghanistan and uses her position as correspondent to the Huffington Post to call for an increase in the inclusion of women in the country's political councils (Loya Jirga) and their representation in international conferences about the future of Afghanistan.

Ali Ahmad is a researcher with a Masters degree in Peace and Conflict Studies. He is also a qualified Medical Doctor. His research interests include Non-State Security Actors, peace talks, nonviolent strategies, Afghanistan's foreign policy and peace journalism. He is currently pursuing his doctorate at the University of Vienna and is specializing in de-radicalization processes adopted in conflict-affected societies. He has been published extensively on Afghanistan in international media. Prior to moving to Vienna he lived and worked in Kabul, Afghanistan.

Mahbouba Seraj



2014 was a pivotal year for Afghanistan. The country went through a series of transitions: withdrawal of international troops, elections, a willing and peaceful transfer of power from one president to another, and dramatic economic changes, including the decrease in foreign aid which had provided 80% of Afghanistan’s budget and a similar decline in the provision of services to international troops at bases throughout Afghanistan, principally affecting private sector service providers and their associates.

Today, 14 years after the end of the Taliban Regime and two months after the official end of the “War on Terror” conducted in this country by the United States and its allies, Afghanistan still sees no end of its struggles with a collapsed economy, widespread unemployment, corruption (Number 2 in the world), and continued armed conflict with insurgents all over the country, especially in the east, south, and north.

Ongoing Challenges

Women in general are unsure about their own futures as well as the future of Afghanistan. They were not involved in security arrangements, peace talks, or the entire political transition. Women contributed 38% of the total votes cast in the presidential election, yet they have been marginalized, their ideas unsolicited and their needs disregarded. In direct contradiction of U.N. Security Council 1325, women have been excluded from participation in public life at leadership levels, denied access to information, and left out of the decisions that will have a direct effect on their lives.

During the recent cabinet selection by President Ashraf Ghani and CEO Dr. Abdullah Abdullah, three women were proposed to lead different ministries and all were rejected by the Parliament. In the case of one of the Ministries (Culture and Information), when the woman was not approved, a man was presented right away and voted in as Minister.

The women of Afghanistan, together with the Afghan Women's Network, organized a peaceful demonstration and took to the streets of Kabul, calling for their rightful place in the political arena of their country. They demanded that at least 4 or 5 women be nominated as Ministers and that other women be named as Deputy Ministers, Directors, and Ambassadors. To date, the demands of Afghan women have been ignored.

Afghan women are also very concerned about the upcoming peace talks between the Taliban and Afghanistan's Government. Every Afghan man, woman and child wants to have peace, but what women particularly want is a durable peace; that is, a peace with justice which includes all members of society. Women will not settle merely for a cease-fire handled by the military; we call for a just peace for all men, woman and children of this country. Let us not forget that it was not long ago when girls found the school doors closed to them, and women were beaten if they left their homes and walked alone on the streets to go to the shops. Women were flogged in the street and Afghanistan was set back by centuries.

Today, on the other hand, of 10 million students going to schools throughout Afghanistan, 4 million are girls. Today we have more women University graduates, Masters, and PhDs than at any other time in the history of Afghanistan, even in the golden era of this country from the mid 1960s to the mid 70s. Women are entering Afghanistan's work force; they are in the military, police, and politics. A quota system introduced in Afghanistan's Constitution called for women to make up 25 percent of the parliament, and today they constitute almost 28 percent. Women also serve on Provincial Councils although the women's quota there has been reduced by 5 percent, and currently the Afghan Women's Network is working hard to get the District councils to at least 25 percent women at the next Parliamentary election in mid 2015.

Next to Afghan women, children are the most vulnerable sector of society. Although, as I mentioned, 10 million children are going to school, the number of kids who live in poverty is about 4 million. Many of these poor kids are the children of widows who lost their husbands in the last 14 years of war, while others have parents who are unemployed, disabled, ill, or addicted to drugs. The children take to the streets to beg or find work performing the hardest tasks.

The withdrawal of international troops and the transfer of their responsibilities to the Afghan National Army have been positive. In the beginning, the loss of Afghan soldiers in combat was alarming, but now with additional training and equipment, they are holding their own well. As for women's security, in the areas where international forces have been replaced by national forces, depending on the geographical situation of these troops, women feel more secure in some areas and less secure in others. On the other hand, men in general in all these areas are more relaxed now that the international forces have left; they let their women go out more freely and are not as fearful for their security as when the international forces were in their provinces. Now that all other international forces have left Afghanistan, only the United States has some forces remaining in the country as advisors and trainers. The Taliban, however "defeated", also remain and still create problems, especially for women who in some areas under Taliban influence are subject to "Mahkame Saharee" tribal courts and may be married by force, given as compensation, or stoned to death.

Despite all the remaining problems, there has been great progress in the empowerment of women in Afghanistan over the past 13 years. The following are some of the legal and policy achievements noted by the international community and Afghan women themselves:

- The codification of women's rights in the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan.
- The Afghan Government's National Action plan for the women of Afghanistan 2008-18 (NAPWA).
- The Afghan Government's National Action Plan for Women, Peace and Security (UNSCR 1325) which will be launched in the middle of 2015.
- The law on the Elimination of Violence Against Women (EVAW, 2009), although it is a presidential decree by President Karzai and has neither been passed by nor thrown out of the Parliament.
- The commitment of Afghanistan's new Unity Government to prioritize women's rights and empowerment.

In the area of gender equality and equity, much has improved in Afghanistan since 2003-4 when gender equality was being introduced for the first time to Afghan women and men. The women of Afghanistan still have a long way to go towards gender equality, but the afore-mentioned legal documents and policies have laid the groundwork. Now the responsibility rests not only on the government but also on the shoulders of Afghan civil society, including women's organizations such as the Afghan Women's Network, to monitor and make sure that gender equality is implemented, especially in Afghanistan's new National Action Plan.

Yet another area of great concern for the women of Afghanistan is the impact of entrenched hierarchies that inhibit the involvement of a wider public in decision-making processes that should be democratic. To be involved in democracy, women must carve their own place; women have to prove themselves twice as committed and knowledgeable as men in order to have a voice and be able to participate in public life.

Over all, despite one of the most unthinkable political marriages in Afghanistan, that of Dr. Ghani and Dr. Abdullah, who were such die-hard political opponents and now have created a Unity Government, the position of these political leaders in regard to gender equality, the peace process, and women's role seems promising. It's true that the results so far call that promise into question, yet the women and the majority of the people of Afghanistan in general are optimistic about the commitment of Afghanistan's Unity Government to the national interest and the well-being of the people.

At the end of this presentation I would like to introduce an overall view of the recommendations of Afghan Women in eight critical areas: 1) good governance; 2) peace and security; 3) access to justice; 4) political participation; 5) economic development; 6) healthcare; 7) education; and 8) international community and donor support for GoIRA.

Recommendations

1. Good Governance

- Appoint women to decision-making positions within government, ministries and independent institutions.

- Consult women in government and civil society in the planning, implementation and monitoring of national and international frameworks to guarantee participation, transparency and accountability on the part of the Afghan government.
- Prioritize women's participation in leading the fight against administrative corruption. More competent women should be given authority and responsibility in an independent, joint Anti-corruption Monitoring and Evaluation Committee and a High Office of Anti-corruption.
- Develop strategies and serious follow-up to end all forms of structural and social discrimination against women.

2. Peace and Security

- Enforce and implement the Afghanistan National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security.
- Recruit, retain and strategically integrate women into the Afghan National Security Forces, including at the decision-making and leadership levels.
- Allocate 20 percent of seats on the National Security Council to women in order to factor gender considerations into national security planning.
- Create an oversight committee including policewomen and civil society representatives to monitor the appointment and daily work of the Afghan Local Police units (ALP).
- Review the performance of the High Peace Council (HPC). This should focus on assessing the level of participation of women in the Afghan Peace Process. The analysis should identify gaps and advise changes to the HPC structure to ensure that experienced and qualified women are appointed.

3. Access to Justice

- Empower the formal judicial system to contend with administrative corruption that interferes with women's access to justice.

- Support specific strategies and plans to monitor implementation of the Elimination of Violence Against Women law (EVAW).
- Support mechanisms to ratify and implement family law to address elimination of domestic and social violence against women.
- Support measures to ratify and enforce regulations to prevent discrimination against women and all forms of sexual harassment against girls and women.
- Implement specific regulations and policies to guarantee prevention and protection of women and girls from sexual harassment and sexual and gender based violence within government institutions, education, higher education and social platforms.
- Increase the number of judges at the provincial level, and establish special courts for the elimination of violence against women at the national level. Establish women's shelters to support victims of all forms of violence in all provinces.

4. Political Participation

- Provide political and diplomatic support for women-led advocacy organizations to reform the electoral law in order to increase the quota for women on Provincial Councils from 20 percent back to 25 percent.
- Increase women's representation to a minimum of 30 percent within senior leadership positions in the administrative and judicial branches of Government.
- Support participation of women at the national, regional and international decision-making levels through diplomatic pressures and financial support as and when needed.
- Support further formation of women's networks for shared learning on local and regional cooperation to include women in politics and government.

5. Economic Development

- Increase the participation of women in the Economic High Council of the Ministers to advocate for women's economic empowerment.

- Facilitate networks and create links between Afghan Business Women and GoIRA, private sector and CSO's.
- Provide easy lines of credit to business women; create simplified conditions for women's access to loans (especially to those women who do not own land and/or property).
- Develop and increase women's entrepreneurial education and training opportunities (technical and vocational trainings).
- Implement economic procedures considering gender requirements based on urban economic development, as well as on rural and regional economic development.
- Support initiatives that provide easier access for women in the labor market.

6. Healthcare

- Develop and increase the number of healthcare centers for women at the provincial level.
- Allocate specific budgets for reproductive health care and prevention of maternal mortality.
- Develop healthcare insurance for women, especially cancer patients; their number is on the rise in Afghanistan.
- Evaluate and improve the quality of healthcare services for women (including psychological care).

7. Education

- Include women in decision-making and managing educational and scientific opportunities.
- Increase women's access to vocational and educational trainings.
- Support the creation of educational opportunities for people with disabilities.

- Promote literacy, higher education and technical skill-building for women.
 - Develop and improve the capacity of technical instructors across the country.
 - Increase the number of women professional teachers.
8. International Donor Support for Government
- Encourage and support the allocation of gender-based budgeting to empower women through government Ministries.
 - Ensure programming, consultation and funding for women activists and organizations to develop effective long term and sustainable programs for women across the country.
 - Support the inclusion of women in implementing and monitoring women-focused programs to ensure the transparency of Tokyo Mutual Accountability Framework (TMAF) implementation.
 - Make funding available for the Afghan Government conditional on attention to gender and inclusion of women with particular focus on women in the justice sector.

Ali Ahmad



Reporters Without Borders ranked Afghanistan 122 out of 180 countries in the 2015 World Press Freedom Index; a strong move upward from last year's ranking at 128. This is a positive shift in the status of free speech in the country. After the invasion by U.S.-led coalition forces in 2001 to oust the Taliban regime from power, Afghanistan

has faced many challenges. However, one clear beneficiary of the war was the media sector.

The development of the media sector in Afghanistan has been one of the most significant success stories for Afghanistan and its international partners in a post-Taliban situation. In the immediate aftermath of 9/11, the U.S. government, along with the rest of the international community involved in Afghanistan, poured hundreds of millions of dollars into the media sector to win the 'hearts and minds' of the Afghan people and rally on-ground as well as international support for the war. There was another reason at work - media could be an effective means of promoting democracy in a country that had been affected by years of violent conflict; it could be an agent of change.

This space has developed from near non-existence to finding expression in hundreds of media outlets in just over a decade. Under the Taliban regime, "Radio Shari'at" was the only radio channel that broadcasted, and only specific and targeted programs at that. There was not even a single television channel. Today there are 65 television stations, 174 radio stations and nearly one thousand publications in operation. This increase has also spun off diversity in viewpoints. Besides all this, the rapid rise of social media—Facebook, Twitter and YouTube are the most commonly accessed modes of communication—has, in a short period of time, fostered not only more active communication between families and friends but also public debate at the local, regional and the national level on a range of civic and governance issues including corruption and democratic principles. Social media has become a platform where its users express mass support for the Afghan Security forces, even as NATO combat troops ended their mission at the end of 2014. Social media has also broken down social taboos. This puts the media in a very

powerful position that can effect social change, despite the fragile political environment in Afghanistan.

Freedom of speech is a fundamental human right and media is one of the foremost upholders of this right, since it encourages and enables public discussion and open dialogue. Even the Afghan Constitution has guaranteed the freedom of expression, noting, "Freedom of expression is inviolable". By law, the media has the freedom to print and broadcast without any prior censorship, however, in practice, social censorship is practiced when it comes to anything deemed to be anti-Islamic, offensive to other religions or issues, such as military information, that may endanger national security.

The U.S. and NATO forces officially ended their combat mission in Afghanistan and handed domestic security back to the Afghan troops at the end of last year. Their role now, termed as "Resolute Support", began January 1, 2015 and is limited to training, advising and assisting the Afghan security forces. Meanwhile, domestically, the country is plagued with an ongoing insurgency that challenges many aspects of Afghan life, including the media sector. This withdrawal will have a direct, as well as an indirect, impact on media. The industry will face a drastic reduction in funding due to the exit of foreign troops. As the pullout of U.S. and other members of international community troops began, the financial support for media petered out, posing serious financial threats to the sustainability of the sector. A weak domestic economy and the lack of a private business sector mean low marketing opportunities for the media, particularly the print media, and as such financial sustainability will continue to remain suspect.

Medium to long-term challenges to freedom of speech in Afghanistan include those presented by the religious heads, warlords and Taliban. There is no difference in viewpoints of the Taliban and government-paid religious leaders when it comes to media. They both share similar concerns, which are centered on 'immoral' and 'un-Islamic' programs. "Some of the broadcasting of the current media in Afghanistan are far more dangerous than suicide bombings. If suicide bombing kills humans, some of the media take away our people's faith and beliefs," said Mir Farooq Hussaini, the spokesman of the Social and Religious Society of Western

Herat City in a Friday congregation, Radio Azadi reported. Separately, the Taliban spokesman, Zabihullah Mujahid, has also said that the current media would incite ethnic conflict and would carry on a “cold war for the invading forces”. However, the exact distinction between Islamic and un-Islamic remains arbitrary.

Afghan journalists face enormous pressure and are routinely threatened by all parties in the conflict – the insurgents, warlords, the government and non-state security actors. The biggest concern to the Afghan media would be the government and non-state security actors because they will try to exert pressure on media personnel to broadcast their agenda. Afghan journalists also, on many occasions, self-censor due to personal security threats and this trend will probably be exacerbated in the future. Additionally, Afghanistan is a dangerous place for journalists to work in. Afghanistan Journalist Safety Committee, a media watchdog, has reported 35 incidents of violence and threats against journalists just in the second half of 2013, of which the Afghan government officials were responsible for 63%, and armed groups, including the Taliban, were responsible for the remaining.

Afghanistan is on the path to consolidating democratic values and institutions and will continue to do so in the years to come. Free, independent and vibrant media is vital for the democratization in Afghanistan, but the sector remains vulnerable to the agendas of different actors including government officials, non-state security actors, religious networks and the insurgents. The Afghan government and its international partners need to continue supporting the diversity of media if they want Afghanistan to emerge truly victorious from the chaos of the past.

Panel Discussion



Staudinger: I'd like to come back first to Ms. Seraj, to the things you said about the women's situation in Afghanistan. This brought to my mind a little story from the Uruzgan province in the south of Afghanistan, a province north of Kandahar. I spent a few days there with Dutch troops in 2009. There was a female Dutch officer who had the idea to open a women's center in a little town. And she advocated it and they had the idea to open it at the cemetery, which seems to be a little bit bizarre, but I was told this was the only place that women could go without male company. I don't know if it's true, if it's correct; maybe it's not true. The fact is, the women of the town were in favor of the project, the men of the town were in favor of the project, but in the end, after two years I learned that the project had been dropped, because there was still so much objection. So what I'm wondering is: there is a strong demand, a wide-spread demand for gender equality, for women's participation, but at the end it doesn't work. How come?

Seraj: This is a very interesting situation that you're talking about. There are a lot of programs like this all over Afghanistan, they start with people really, extremely willing to do it—and you know, this going to the graveyard; women do go there without their husbands because they go to pray for the dead or whatever. But one of the reasons why it did not take, even though it did have the support, it didn't happen because the idea did not come from the people themselves. It was still something that was introduced to them from the outside. So there is a total kind of rejection and resentment, although they know that the program is good. They might know that it's very interesting and it will work and all of that. But because the idea was not introduced as an idea that came from the people, it did not get the support. And also, the way one gets the support for these kinds of programs is very different in Afghanistan. You have to start with the elders of the group, the *mullahs* and the religious leaders. You go and talk to them, you convince them, you talk to the elders, the men mostly. After you get their OK and their support then you can do whatever you want in that area. But if, God forbid, you do not approach them first, even if you come back later and talk to them you won't get anywhere. Because they say,

“At first you ignored me, so that’s it. You cannot be doing that”. But this is one of the reasons why that happened. And it’s not only that it happened in Uruzgan, it happened in a lot of places in Afghanistan with a lot of good will by a lot of the international foreigners, especially troops, that were there. But it, the idea, never somehow gelled—and the reason was that the people thought it was not born of their own. And that’s why.

Staudinger: So it’s not that the society wouldn’t be prepared for it, it’s because the ideas are not coming from within society.



Seraj: Exactly. The ideas have to come from within the society in order for the society to accept them. And also when you really look at it, you know, from that point of view, it’s got to be that way. Otherwise it’s going to be considered as a foreign idea and foreign ideas—some of them might be good ideas, but at the same time people resent it in general. It’s like, you know, ‘what is this foreign idea you are bringing to me?’. But if it is born of the people, by the people themselves and they come up with it, then it’s very successful. And we are changing the way we are doing things in Afghanistan a little bit.. What we are doing is: although the introduction or the birth of the idea might take place in me, I have to sell it to the people. And when I go and sell it, the way I do it is like this: by the end of the whole conversation, I give them the feeling that they are the ones that came up with the idea. Then I’m successful. Otherwise I won’t be.

Staudinger: OK. Mr. Ahmad, do we have to think in generations rather than in years if we talk about change in the Afghan society?

Ahmad: Absolutely. Actually, I believe there is a generation change in Afghanistan already. The majority of the Afghan population is under the age of 25, or actually, some studies show that it’s under the age of 30. So the majority of the Afghan population is quite young. It’s a major force; it’s a major power for change. Obviously it’s not—the conflict in Afghanistan, the insecurity in Afghanistan is not something that has been generated in or has originated from Afghanistan itself. It has many aspects: internal and of course external. The generational change is already

there. We just need some more time. Actually the last 14 years have been a great opportunity for Afghanistan, and for the international community supporting Afghanistan. However, the question was raised earlier and I do agree with Ms. Seraj that the idea of supporting and the rehabilitation of a country affected by conflict has to originate from the people themselves. If you bring ideas from outside and tell people, 'this is good for you because it was good for me', it doesn't work. The ideas for the rehabilitation and reconstruction of the society have to come from the people themselves.

Staudinger: As I see, there are a lot of young people from Afghanistan in their 20s or so in the room. So this is not a lost generation.

Seraj: Absolutely not.

Staudinger: This is a generation that will probably bring change in the society.

Seraj: This is the generation that is going to make it actually happen in Afghanistan. They really will. At this point you know, seeing some of the wonderful faces in here and the faces of their brothers and sisters in Afghanistan, it is such a pleasure to work with them, to be around them. They are—and I always say, "OK fine, this is the part, there are changes in the world happening". But then there is another force that is actually moving the society, and that's the young force. And they are going ahead. So I don't care how many of whoever is behind them are hitting their head on the wall and on top of their hands saying, "Oh we don't want this! We don't want this!". There's a force that's happening, it's going to take everybody forward. And that's the one that the young people have. There's no X generation as far as that's concerned—lost generation, as far as that's concerned. Not in the world and not in Afghanistan. I'm all for the young, but then maybe that's...

Staudinger: From a Western perspective, we are always looking at Afghanistan through the lens of terror, violence, drugs, and so on. I mean the perspective I had while being embedded with different NATO troops was very focused on dangers in the country. Do we have a wrong perception of Afghanistan and of the people?

Seraj: Definitely. You have such a wrong perception it's not even funny.

Staudinger: Give us the right one please.

Seraj: You know, Afghanistan is the country where I was born and I was raised and I got my education. And I walked the beautiful streets of it, and I talked to the most amazing people of it, and I ate the most delicious bread of it and the tea and the warmth of the people and the love of the families and their love of God and their religion. And that was so beautiful. There was nothing scary or ugly or anything about it. It came from their hearts and it went to God, to Allah, who they were praising. It was a very beautiful country. It was very calm. You could get in a car or on a bus and travel all over Afghanistan with no problem. You would just go around and talk to the people in the villages everywhere. They are hospitable, they are loving, they love their family. They care for each other. As far as the problem is concerned, as far as the fact that we have different ethnicities in that country and all of that: hey, that's the beauty of our country. So Afghanistan is like that. We have all of those beautiful different cultures, the ethnicities, I mean, when you take a look at Afghanistan's faces, honestly that always amazes me. You can see people from the blond, blue-eyed I-don't-know-where-they've-come-from all the way to the dark black hair and whatever. With all of the faces, you know, you almost feel like the world is there. All of the people of the world are actually living in this country. And it's the culture, the diversity of the culture, the beauty of the country. And I'm so sorry you had to look at it behind the concrete walls that I hate so much, through those army cars and the whole thing. It's not your fault. It's not the fault of anybody. That's the way the world has become. I'm so sorry. But at the same time, I am one of the ones that are blessed, because I've seen Afghanistan. I've seen my beautiful Afghanistan how it was. And it's that love that I have. And I always try to share it with the young generation of Afghanistan. I just want to tell them, you know the history that you have, who you are, what you were, where you are, where you were. Just keep on going, you'll be fine. You really will be fine. It was a beautiful country, my country. And I just wanted to add to it.

Staudinger: Because you have been living within this Western perspective now for a couple of years: What is your perspective?



Ahmad: Well, first of all I would like to say that the perception that you're talking about, this perception has been created and promoted by journalists who have been embedded with foreign forces. I think, I'm sorry to say, including you. Because I have worked as a journalist and I have been to 29 out of 34 provinces in Afghanistan and I, not only me, sometimes with my foreign colleagues, Europeans and Americans, we have reported a different side of Afghanistan. We have been in close contact with the people and with their hospitality, with their amazing hospitality. And they receive whoever you are, as long as you come from outside their village, outside their town, they receive you with their heart. So that perception is definitely not the correct perception, I believe. Because it's a country with a population of around 30 million—30 million people live there. They have lives and they're just people, they're humans, as human of the rest of the world. They want a good life, they want to have families, they want to have education, healthcare, everything. And I think that's a failure in many media outlets that they focus...and I know that because I have worked with TV, where the foreign correspondent was only embedded in the German troops. They go right and left and they show only the horror picture of the country. And I think that's a negative perception, which obviously people have, but that's not true.

Staudinger: Still, I think it wouldn't have been a good idea to just walk out of the gate of one of those places and say, "Hi guys, here I am, let's talk".

Seraj: You would be amazed. If you were not embedded, and if you had just gone out, you would have seen an entirely different Afghanistan accepting you.

Staudinger: Probably. My assessment was that the NATO intervention was a disaster. It probably created the violence it wanted to fight in a lot of aspects. Still, if you think back to the year 2001, do you think there could have been an alternative to military intervention in Afghanistan? And how's the outcome now? What's the balance sheet?

Seraj: I'm going to leave that for him to answer.

Ahmad: OK. Well, military intervention is always a disaster. I look at it, and see that it's always a disaster. I do not support any war anywhere. As I mentioned in my speech, you know, one of the beneficiaries of this war has been the developing media. That's true. But what I want to emphasize here is, me personally, I wouldn't go back to 14 years ago and ask what would happen if NATO didn't intervene. I would say: what can we do now to change the situation there? I, as an Afghan, and I, as a member of the world community—as a world citizen—what can I do to change the lives of the people for the better? I think that's—for me, personally, that's more important. Because Afghanistan is still facing a lot of challenges; security is an issue. Economy and all sorts of other phenomena are linked to the lack of development in that country. You know, that's all tied up to today. And I think about today, and I think about tomorrow. So, there might have been things that the world brought to Afghanistan with good intentions. Still there are a lot of challenges, as I said, but I'm hopeful for the future and I think I, and we all, can get together and move things in Afghanistan for the better.

Staudinger: Ms. Seraj, would you like to add something to this?

Seraj: Yeah, I would say, you know really, thinking back, it's a very difficult question really to answer, this one. Because in reality, so much was involved and so much did get involved in that time. There were a lot of wrong assumptions by the world. First of all: the whole recognition of the enemy. You know, till the end the world that was fighting this whole insurgent war, did not really recognize the enemy. Who was the enemy? The enemy was not inside the borders of Afghanistan, it was right outside the borders of Afghanistan. It was Pakistan. So, Pakistan played such a role in this whole thing that they really, really muddied the water very, very badly. I mean, that has had a huge effect on all of this. Because it took the whole—as you say—the train to somewhere else. It just derailed it completely. So because of that, and then because of the way the world was. You know, it was actually, well, 'we are going to go and take care of the al Qaida'—or whatever that was. And now when we look at the world from that war to the way we are today, how many mistakes has the world really committed? How many wrong assumptions have been really made by the world? And that's why it's not taking us anywhere near being better—I'm not talking about Afghanistan, I'm talking about the whole thing—anywhere near being better. But we are in a lot worse places and have much, much bigger

problems. So that means that something really didn't go right somehow. I think that the world really—and hopefully the young generation will do this—they really should sit down and take a hold of what is really happening. Do a complete study of where everybody went wrong, how it was done wrong, what they should do, how they should go about it. They really should. If they want to keep anything of this earth or anything of this world for themselves, they have to do that. Otherwise, I'm really terribly sorry, but there is not going to be a world that they can call their own or even a country of which they can say, 'well this is mine'. Because so many of people's freedoms are going to be gambled and lost in this whole thing that it will make it very difficult. So I'm hoping that there are going to be lessons learned. And what makes me very sad is the fact that I haven't seen that. I haven't seen really the world taking stock of itself and saying, "Where did I go wrong in Afghanistan? What did I do over there that was not what was I supposed to be doing? How was I supposed to be approaching this?" None of this. And the mistakes are being repeated, and they're being repeated in the same way or a much bigger way. And then every single time we turn around and we expect to have a different outcome; of course we are not going to. We are going to have the same outcome and a lot worse.

Staudinger: I mean, right now the combat troops of NATO have left. This is a decisive point, as you outlined. What would be a good approach for the whole world to proceed with in Afghanistan? What would be the right way?

Seraj: Right now Afghanistan is a country at war. We are still at war; it's just that the shape of it might have changed. You know, you might have different enemies or I don't know. It depends on what the economy of the world is or whether Pakistan is going to be financing the Taliban or not. I don't know. But what I think is, now that we are here, they should give their support as far as equipping them properly, as far as giving them the proper weapons, the proper ammunition so they can fight this war. Because otherwise what's going to happen? These people, those soldiers of Afghanistan, the police and the soldiers, they are determined to go and fight this war and they are going to lose their lives. And they are going to die by the hundreds and by the thousands. And that's going to be because, you know, they don't have proper—they are not well equipped. So I think at this point they really have to equip them very well and then let the Afghans decide what they want to do. That's my opinion.

Staudinger: Mr. Ahmad, as you are engaged with theoreticalization and now there has been war in Afghanistan for more than 30 years, is there a way to get the war out of the heads of the people? Is it still there?

Ahmad: Yeah, obviously the war is still there. As I said, it takes time, it takes years. It will probably take a few more generations to have a peaceful Afghanistan, unless the world really eradicates the roots of the problem. If you don't look at the roots of the problems, and instead you just look at the surface and try to heal the surface, then you're not going to solve this problem. As Seraj mentioned, the causes of the conflict and insurgency in Afghanistan are not in Afghanistan, they are somewhere else. And those roots have to be dealt with. Without dealing with those roots, I don't think we could have a peaceful Afghanistan like everyone else, like what every other country has. But obviously the world is not a place where you can ignore a problem in one part of the world. If a problem arises in one country, sooner or later it will affect other parts of the world as well. So it is not only an Afghan problem, but it is the world's problem. So they need to tackle the root causes of the problem.

Staudinger: Last question on the panel, then I'd like to go into the audience. If you imagine Afghanistan in five or ten years, what do you see?

Seraj: Afghanistan in five or ten years? I'm hopeful. Really I'm very hopeful. I actually believe that this unity government is going to really do what they promise, or at least a part of it. So I am hopeful, but I am watching them. I am very, very watchful of them. I am hopeful and I think that we have very, very difficult times to go through. Because we really, at this point our economy is completely kaput, it's finished. We are in such a bad shape, it's like, 'forget it'. We are really in bad shape. So we have to get the economy back into gear, because without it we are not going to be able to do anything. And as far as the rest of it is concerned, we are going to be fine. I'm sure we are going to get along, hopefully. We are going to have our disagreements; we are going to have some problems and things like that. But to me, that is very natural, these things happen. So even with all of the concerns that I told you here, still I am hopeful. And that is the reason why people like me are continuously fighting this or being advocates or raising the voice of the women. I have to be hopeful. Because if I am not that, I don't think I can get out of

bed sometimes. You know, it's really hard. Some mornings are extremely hard, when I go through a problem or a situation that's a fight that hasn't gotten us anywhere, or the level of violence against women gets to be so ugly and so horrible, I just don't want to, I can't get out of bed. I honestly cannot. But then at the same time I have to put this hope in me, and I hope all of the young people here do the same thing. We do have a huge, a long way ahead of us. But it's not only us, believe it or not, it's humanity, we all have a long way ahead of us. The world in which we are living is a very different world. And just, you know, I'm hoping that things are going to be OK, as long as they give us, the women, what we are asking for and we are going to be fine, because the women are a power and I know that nobody believes in that, but it is the truth. We really are. Thank you.

Staudinger: Five or ten years Mr. Ahmad?

Ahmad: I think for me the five years would be too short actually to think about, but ten years; I'm pretty hopeful in ten years time. And I believe in the power of the young generation and this generation which has more interaction with the rest of the world. They know how the world functions, because we are part of the world community. In ten years time I'm hopeful that things will start shaping and reshaping in the right direction. Although it's moving one way or the other, but in ten years time I'm pretty hopeful things will be in a much better position than where it is now, or where it will be in five years time.

Audience: Q&A



Staudinger: Thank you very much. I turn now to the audience.

Audience: I come from Afghanistan and have lived in Austria for 4 years. In regards to women's rights I'd like to mention Malalai Joya, who was barred from the Loya Jirga in 2003 and also barred from the Parliament. She was simply silenced by the warlords that unfortunately govern Afghanistan at the moment. How can you justify your continued fight for women's rights? Do you see any success at all? You mentioned Pakistan for example—that

Pakistan was partly or mainly politically responsible for Afghanistan's turn. My question is: what do you think of the change between 1979, when the Soviet Union was existent in Afghanistan, and 1989, when the warlords came to Kabul?

Audience: Thank you for the valuable information that you have given us. I am a social scientist; half Austrian with Bulgarian roots. And before the end of the Cold War we, as Soviet-bloc countries, were very friendly with Afghanistan. And naturally in that time and in that situation we believed that with Russian help—with Soviet help—everything in Afghanistan would get better. History gave us a different outcome. It is interesting to me to hear how the history and politics of today evaluate the Soviet interference in Afghanistan. A different question: What does Afghanistan's political landscape look today? Are there political parties that one can compare to Western European parties—social democratic, liberal, religious parties—is there anything like that to speak of there? And another thing: are there religious minorities in Afghanistan? And what sort of position do they have in society?

Audience: Hello. You have said that the 1960s and the 1970s was a wonderful time in Afghanistan. And my question is: Why did it get so much worse? And also a concrete question: Americans marched into the country, they have always intervened, but they always wanted something. I don't know what they wanted, but. What do the regular people, the normal people think about this? Are they against this American intervention?

Seraj: OK. Thank you very much. There's really a kind of wide variety of questions. OK, first of all I just want to give you a picture. Afghanistan of ten years ago or eleven years ago is not the same Afghanistan as today. It really is not. During this whole period of 10-12 years, Afghanistan changed a lot. There was a day when they stood in front of Malalai Joya and the parliament of Afghanistan and threw bottles of water; now they do the same thing within the parliament: they hit each other on the heads with their shoes or their bottled water or whatever, and they have the same fight like other parliaments. Parliaments the world over fight. You know this is not something that just the Afghanistan parliament is doing; there are a lot of other parliaments that do that. So they just kind of get into this fist fight—and they do fight, but it has changed. It's not that the whole group is going to stand against one woman and attack Malalai Joya. So

that is not going to happen. If Malalai Joya were in Afghanistan today and could raise the same question, there would be, you can believe it, there would be a whole lot of—a big group of women standing behind her to support her. And in the parliament she would get the support, and outside the parliament she would get the support. So Afghanistan has really changed a lot since this time. We've learned a lot more. Regarding the Pakistan situation, the Soviet situation: you know Afghanistan went through a period of changes since 1978 when the—we can start there, when the invasion of the Russians—not officially but unofficially—started. So we all went through really a lot of problems in the country. And I'm going to come back to the question of this lady who was talking about the women in that era, which, you know she has a point there. But as far as the rest of the country is concerned, we really went through the warlords and later on the Taliban and then first the Russians and then the fight. And then the world kind of ignored us and Pakistan, and then the whole birth of the Taliban, and the whole birth of the *madrassas*, and then the money situation happened. It was a huge mess, it really was. And Afghanistan really got caught smack dab in the middle of it. And the fact that the world really forgot about us after the Russians left, the world turned its back and said, 'you know we really are no longer interested' was a very, very big mistake. Because if they had stood there and if they had helped the Afghan people right after the withdrawal of the Russian troops, none of these things would have happened. The history would have been written in a different way. But unfortunately it was not done that way. So this is the way it happened. Afghanistan got involved or became a part of a lot of other games. So right now, today the warlords are still the warlords. They are there, they play their role. But, one thing I want to tell you, they don't have the same force. They don't have the same punch like before. They still do damage here and there, they're still doing that. But they are not the same people anymore. The people of Afghanistan have become a lot wiser and a lot more knowledgeable about what they are, how they are, and why they are. So we are standing in front of them and we know them. Now we really know them, every single one of them: Who they are, from where they operate, and how they operate. We know all of that. But they are still creating problems, you are right. So this is going to take some time still and hopefully by the end of this unity government most of those warlords are going to be absorbed, or something, into the system. That's what we are hoping for and hopefully it will happen.

On the question of the Iron Curtain and what you said, and the Russians when they were in Afghanistan, you are absolutely right. In those first few years that the Russians or the communist party of Afghanistan was in power and the Russians were there, the women of Afghanistan, as far as their rights were concerned, had all the rights. They really did. They were working in the government, they were going to school, they were free and all of that. But then again, another huge problem was happening. Because right then and there, the way they were positioned was against Islam. You know, this was the way they were positioned by this system. So that was not going to work. It was just not going to happen. They came and they painted the whole country red. This was not right. Or they stopped the mosques. You know, things that they did that had nothing to do with the regime itself. The regime could have been a communist regime and would have most probably worked very well in Afghanistan. And most probably Afghanistan really needed that, or a socialist regime for that matter. But this anti-Islam part, that was wrong. That should not have happened. What they did was start a war of ideologies. And then – boom! They stood in opposition to the Afghans. That was wrong. If they had gone through the system and brought the ideology, hey, it would have worked and it would have been fine for the Afghan people, I'm sure. But they touched the religion. And the Afghan people, you don't touch their religion. You don't touch their belief. I mean this is something that—for whatever they have, their belief system—they are very, very honest about. So, in my opinion again, it was wrong that they touched that. If they had left them alone, we would have had a very nice country most probably, and right now we would have changed into a socialist country and we would have been perfectly fine.

On the question of the golden age, which comes to the gentleman: it was the golden age, it really was. I was a part of it. And what the—what happened was that when the golden age really stopped, a lot happened. All of this happened. The Russian invasion took place, the government was challenged, the system was broken. They suddenly thought that they didn't need a monarchy in Afghanistan anymore. Maybe they didn't, but maybe it was a little bit early to get rid of it. Maybe they needed it. I don't know. But the whole change happened, and then the years of war, the years of this whole *mujahedeen* that stood in opposition to the government, was because of the war of the ideology in Afghanistan. And then came the

invasion of the Americans. Americans—it's very funny, in Afghanistan Americans are loved and hated at the same time. But that's the way the Americans are in most of the world. People love them and hate them at the same time. And that is because of the way they acted towards the Afghan people. If they had been a little bit kinder, a little bit calmer, this resentment would have not happened. I remember one day in the beginning, it was 2004 in the beginning of it, and the Americans were everywhere on the streets of Kabul, there were none of these concrete walls or anything. But then the American cars, the convoy was coming out of the embassy on the streets of Kabul and they were going somewhere. The nastiness that one American soldier showed while stopping people on the street, the way they were acting, I cannot tell you what it did. And it just, I stood there. I froze on the street. Not only me, every single person all around me, they all froze. It was like "Oh, my God. My country has been invaded". It was a second like that that it went to our heads, because of the way that this army person was like "do this, do this, do this", and telling people with that face, with that voice, you know, "Don't be on the street! Get out of the street!" Nasty. I could see on everybody's faces that they hated it. They hated it. It was like, 'what do you mean, I can't be walking on the streets of my own country? Who are you?' And then that created a resentment that slowly and slowly and slowly grew amongst the people. And this is because of a wrong, and then after that they did this whole winning of the hearts and souls and minds and whatever they called it, but nothing worked. Because it was too late. The damage was done. They should not have done that at that time. They should have been very careful about how they went into a country, but instead they invaded us. So what can I say?

Audience: You said that you put great hope in the young people, in the young generation; you are full of hope. I have a bit of a different opinion. Because of what I see in the media and the news one receives from Afghanistan, I am a bit pessimistic, as I am myself a Muslim; I believe in the Koran. And in the Koran it says—in chapter 11, verse 13—that Allah will not change the situation of a people if the people do not change that which is in their hearts. And what makes me pessimistic is that I hear—or rather, learn from the media—that a lot of *madrassas* in Afghanistan have been financed by foreigners for many years. And that is really the place where the hearts of the youth will be reached: from the teachers, from the Sunni side and the Shiite side—and we know that the two don't get along in reality; it's not official, nobody says it out

loud. But unofficially one knows that in the mosques a little bit of hate against each other is sown in their hearts; exactly that which the youth should be kept away from. What do you think the future will look like? Like for example in Austria a new law has been introduced that doesn't allow mosques to be financed by foreigners any longer, rather only by people within the country. How do we manage something like that in Afghanistan? That we somehow entirely forbid the foreign financing of mosques, so that we give our few liberal Muslims a chance to sow their good ideas, like Koran-based Islam, in the hearts of the youth, and not that which we already know of—that which already has become ISIS and all other radical States. So, as long as that doesn't happen in Afghanistan, I, like I said, don't see a good future. What do you think about this? How can you be optimistic in spite of this situation? Thank you.

Audience: I've lived in Austria for 13 years, and I also think, as Ms. Seraj has already mentioned, that Afghanistan is very beautiful, because it is made up of so many ethnicities. So, I think it is a very nice idea, but unfortunately I can't join in with your excitement, and I'll explain my reasons, because the sad reality is that every day in Afghanistan the Pashtuns, Tajiks and Hazaras, the minorities of the population, kill each other—the war is really between these ethnicities. Don't you believe that in the end the final solution for Afghanistan would simply be to separate Afghanistan into three geographic parts—to separate the Pashtuns and Tajiks and Hazaras.

Audience: I am a doctoral student at the University of Vienna. I come from Bangladesh and we also have a lot of connections to Afghanistan. My question is, Ali says that in the next ten years young Afghans will make a change, but I see Afghan guys in Vienna; I see their hairstyles, their fashion, their clothes, their shoes. They look like Europeans to me. So my question to you is: how do you think in ten years they will leave their European dreams? Or guys who are in America, why would they leave America or Europe in this life, why would they go to Afghanistan to do something for Afghanistan?

Ahmad: Thank you for the question. I think the number, the figure, that I presented earlier, this figure—number actually—the big portion of this number actually comes from Afghanistan. You know when the youth, the young generation of Afghanistan, go abroad, particularly for education purposes, not all of them stay abroad. Not all of them actually remain in Europe or

America. Some may stay, but some will go back. You know, one of the things that is important to the young generation is that job opportunities and the world have changed, actually. I came here to study in Austria and I'm still continuing. And for me, as an Afghan, I'd prefer to work for, first of all for Afghanistan, because that's where I belong. Because Afghanistan is the place where I was born and grew up and I have spent the best times of my life. And at the same time, when I look at problems, conflicts, as a peace researcher, and as someone that has studied and spent some of my time in education abroad, I feel that there might be a need for me. Not only in Afghanistan, but probably anywhere else as well. If I speak for myself, I will go back to Afghanistan. I will go back to Afghanistan. But obviously I know Afghans who have spent years in Austria—if I talk only about Austria. They are willing. The situation in Afghanistan, as having said earlier, may not fit to their condition, to their financial, economical and security situation. But if the situation improves, I'm pretty sure that at least a good portion of Afghan youth who are living abroad, who are either studying or working, they would like to go back and do something for the country that they belong to. And I think loving a country where you were born and grew up, that's in your blood. And no one can take that away. Wherever you are, you will have that love. And in the discussions I've had with some of the Afghan youth in Vienna, they have shown willingness to return if situations get better. And just one other thing actually about the question about the division of Afghanistan: whether Afghanistan should be divided or not. Obviously one reality that I want to mention is that here, the Afghan community in Austria, particularly in Vienna, is more divided than the communities in Afghanistan. In the Afghan community in Vienna, one ethnicity does not really face the other ethnicity. They do not meet each other. Whereas in Afghanistan they have intermarriages, they're living together, they're living in the same neighborhood, They visit each other on New Year's, in school, and on other happy and sad days. Unfortunately it is really, really bad news for me as an Afghan, when I see the Afghan community in Austria—particularly in Austria, where I have spent more than two years. They are divided. They are totally divided. They cannot get together. I mean, as, ma'am, you propose a division of Afghanistan or a division of tribes and ethnicities, with all due respect, I don't believe that your path will take place in Afghanistan, because Afghans have the same national conflict that exists everywhere, the conflict of this agreement between two persons, between two ethnicities, between two brothers. That's natural, the conflict and tensions and

disagreement, that's very healthy if it is managed well. If you don't accept it for any peaceful situation, you have to accept the other. You have to respect it. If you don't respect your brother, your other ethnic group, then of course things will go in the wrong direction. Thank you.

Seraj: I'm going to answer your question, which was regarding the mosques and the fact that you are a pessimist when it comes to all of that. Well, you know this all depends on the way you look at things, truly, because in reality, you're right. The whole of the *madrassa* situation or the mosques, the way people are getting the money from outside and then are building them, that is going on. It's true it's going on. Pakistan is borrowing a whole lot of money or one of the other Arab countries is doing the same thing and it's pretty chaotic. But then, at the same time, with time this is going to change. You see, the world is changing. Right now, for example, right after what happened in Pakistan, you know when they went to that school and they killed 138 students in Peshawar. That was a huge mistake made by the insurgents or by the Taliban. Because sometimes actions like that change the whole course of history, and this time it has been changed. It really did change. Because what happened? The world said: "No more. We are not going to give you a single penny anymore, Pakistan," they said, "for you to go and start financing a group of people that will do something like that to your own people. That means that there is something extremely wrong here." And Pakistan finally realized that. Why do you think the Taliban right now is going all over the place and there is this whole talk that the Daish or ISIS will come and join them and they're going to be under new management? It is all because of economy. There's no more money. Nobody is going to be supporting these people. So that's a change that happened in the making of the whole thing, in the political scenario of the world. And the world's political scenario keeps on changing. So it's never going to stay like this forever. There's not going to be a whole lot of money to be building mosques in Afghanistan coming from the Pakistanis – no. Believe me, it's not going to happen that way, because they're going to need their money in their own country and they have to do things there. Now we come to the fact—you brought up another point, which is the Shias and the Sunnis in Afghanistan. The Shias and the Sunnis in Afghanistan, they have differences. Maybe it is a problem for outside—you guys are outside Afghanistan—but it's not as big of a problem as you think in Afghanistan. There is a difference, there are Shias and there are Sunnis, but they are all living together and

everybody's fine. And what we really are very aware of and we don't want to allow is the fact that somebody from outside can play this card against us. Remember: Iraq happened. Remember, just remember these Islamic countries, you don't have to go much further—you don't have to go back in history. Just do a study of what is going on in the world today. Just do a study of Syria, just do a study of Egypt, just do a study of Iraq. Just do a little study. Just study these countries. It will tell you, when you allow a little bit of a difference in your area to be used against you, they will use it against you to the max. And they will make you miserable. So that is why we have to be aware of it. As people, we should not allow that. And when I talk to the Afghans, when I talk to the women and the people I talk to, this is the one area where I always beg: please, don't allow it. Because if you allow it, we are going to go somewhere there is no returning from. Because what are we going to do? Kill our own brothers? Again? Just because he happens to believe in a different sect of Islam? Is that what I'm going to do? Just chop his head off? Is that it? No. That is not supposed to be allowed. You don't allow that. And you have to work on it. And you have to work on it consciously: accepting the problem, seeing it, but working on it. As for the partition of Afghanistan, I have to mention something. I will die if Afghanistan goes through a situation like that. I will literally die. Not only me, I can promise you there are so many people in that country that will die. They will really die, because that's not what we fought for. That is not what we have. That tiny little country with all of us different ethnicities is the only land that the people of that country know and we want to keep it that way. By dividing it in three, four pieces, what do you think is going to be left of us? We are going to become the servants of the bigger countries that are around us. That's what's going to happen to us. The part of us in the east and the south is going to be the servant of Pakistan, the other one of us a servant of Iran, the rest of us a servant of Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. We are going to be so little that we are going to become their servants. Is that what we want for Afghanistan? Really? As Afghans? Is that what you want? That's why you left that country? I had to leave Afghanistan also, but then I went back. It's been 14 or 13 years now. I'm working in Afghanistan, but you know, you cannot be doing that. That's not what it is. And as to what Ali said, I'm really sorry if this is what is going on amongst the whole group in Vienna. Please, come on guys. You're living in the most beautiful country in the world. What's wrong with you? Just get along and live and have a marvelous time. Let your children learn, let your children study.

Let them—you know, they have the most amazing education system in this country. You are living in the most beautiful country in the world. Come on, take this opportunity, make something of yourselves and just, you know, become somebody that everybody's proud of. We live in America like that. There is no problem. Our neighbors, half of them are Hazaras, Pashtuns, and Uzbeks and Tajiks. We don't care. So what? What am I supposed to do? Kill myself? Because there's a Hazara sitting next to me? What? Come on.

Staudinger: Many thanks Mrs. Seraj, Mr. Ahmed, and many thanks to the audience too. Please enjoy the reception outside.

Seraj: Thank you very much. Good night.
