

# Civil Society Forum in Vienna

Promote Dialogue Between Diaspora Groups and Civil Society Individuals Working for Peace and Reconciliation in Afghanistan

1 – 2 December 2023

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Basic issues: discussion papers on development policies, international cooperation and south-north cultural exchange, as well as anti-racist campaigning.

The views expressed in this publication are those of the author, and not necessarily those of the editor/VIDC.

## Introduction

In early December 2023, the Vienna Institute for International Dialogue and Cooperation (VIDC) convened a gathering of Afghan civil society organisations (CSOs) and diaspora groups from nine European countries. The two-day forum comprised of critical discussions on reconciliation, women's empowerment, youth and minority participation, and the proactive role that civil society in the diaspora can play in fostering a democratic and Taliban-free Afghanistan.

The inaugural day of the forum featured insightful presentations and discussions involving international researchers and members of the Afghan diaspora. Experts such as Kristian Berg Harpviken, a research professor at the Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO), Maximilian Lakitsch, a lecturer in the Department of Global Governance at the University of Graz, Austria, Brigitte Rath, a founding member of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILFP) Austria, and Horia Mosadiq, the director of the Conflict Analysis Network (CAN) and a passionate advocate for human and women's rights, shared their perspectives. The forum also hosted Wolfgang Petritsch, president of the Austrian Institute for International Affairs, as a distinguished guest.

Three key issues were covered on the second day of the forum: a) fostering trust-building, social healing and reconciliation; b) women's empowerment and participation; human rights for everyone; and d) youth engagement and the involvement of minority groups in the peace process. The Afghan diaspora groups and members of civil society, which include men and women from different ethnic, linguistic and religious backgrounds, took part in these discussion sessions and critically explored the subjects.

### Friday, 1 December 2023

#### Mixed session with international guests and experts

##### 1. Taliban State Formation Process



On the first day, following the forum's commencement by Michael Fanizadeh of the VIDC, Kristian Berg Harpviken delivered a comprehensive presentation on Taliban state formation processes. Harpviken elucidated the transformation of the Taliban from an armed resistance group to a governing entity and highlighted the consolidation of their power sources across ideological, economic, military and political domains following their return to power.

The Taliban, who are now ruling the entire country for the first time, have experienced difficulties during the transition from armed resistance to governing bodies despite building

on their prior experience in governance and many years of shadow government. Their unity is of utmost importance, and they prioritise upholding internal coherence. The Taliban is not interested in their oppositions' noises, but rather their unity. Though they are perceived as Pakistan's puppets, the Taliban aggressively pursue maximum independence and diversify economic resources. With Iran acting as a point of comparison, a theocratic model is reflected in the continuous creation of the Taliban state, with an emphasis on the 'temporary' nature of everything except the status of their Amir. According to Harpviken, the Taliban are building a theocratic state that will set them apart from other theocracies across the globe.

According to Harpviken, the Taliban has seamlessly integrated into the preexisting state apparatus while imposing a top-down hierarchical structure within their organisation. Threats, detentions, disappearances, abductions and surveillance are just a few of the tactics used by the Taliban to control the population. 'It is a harsh form of governance by all standards', argued Harpviken. Notably, the Taliban has exhibited little flexibility regarding representative politics or the adoption of a power-sharing agenda with opposing factions.

Addressing the question of how to deal with the Taliban, Harpviken outlined three strategic choices available to both the international community and the diaspora for navigating Taliban-controlled Afghanistan. First, the option of armed conflict against the Taliban, although advocated by some, is considered impractical, given the lack of international support for military intervention. The second option raised is the isolation of the Taliban and Afghanistan, but Harpviken noted that this approach had proven ineffective in the past. The third and more nuanced choice involves engaging in dialogue with the Taliban, albeit with political implications. Harpviken suggested that unless the Taliban undergoes a fundamental shift in its governance approach, internal dynamics within the Taliban will play a pivotal role in shaping any meaningful transformation.

## **2. The Role of Reconciliation in Sustainable Peace**

In his presentation, Maximilian Lakitsch provided a broad academic perspective not exclusively focused on Afghanistan but on the larger theme of the role reconciliation plays in sustainable peace. He presented an overview of international peace practice, referencing the United Nations' (UN) post-Cold War strategy outlined in the Agenda for Peace (1992). Notably, Lakitsch emphasised that peace-building goes beyond ending armed violence; it involves addressing societal dynamics for long-term stability.



Lakitsch's presentation engaged with the complexities of achieving sustainable peace by exploring ways to enhance its effectiveness and analysing global conflict data from 1946 to

2018. He challenged the perception that the world is becoming more peaceful and attributed this rise to fundamental issues in addressing societal divisions and conflicts.

According to Lakitsch, 'For peace to be sustainable, there has to be a united and reconciled society as its foundation. Otherwise, society falls back into violence'.

He stressed the importance of recognising past injustices, promoting forgiveness and engaging in healing processes, saying that 'Reconciliation is about a broken relationship' and highlighting the sensitivity and intimacy of the reconciliation process. Lakitsch emphasised that reconciliation cannot be imposed externally and must come from the affected communities. Lakitsch criticised the limitations of international peace missions, citing challenges in understanding local dynamics and the failure of the local turn strategy. Recognising and supporting local dynamics is critical to achieving sustainable peace and urging a shift from idealised notions of peace to practical, community-driven approaches.

### 3. Vienna Process for Democratic Afghanistan



'There is no other solution than to find a peaceful way to compromise and to come back to normal life again'. Wolfgang Petritsch made this statement during a presentation on his reasons for starting the [Vienna Process for a Democratic Afghanistan](#), a conference he has been organising in Vienna twice a year since the Taliban returned

to power in August 2021. Petritsch expressed his satisfaction with being present among the members of Afghan CSOs and influential groups and explained that his presence was not coincidental. He asserted that he has been in close contact with the VIDC's director, Sybille Straubinger, about various issues, with a particular focus on Afghanistan.

About two years ago, Petritsch was approached by members of the Afghan resistance in exile. He was asked to convene a meeting for Afghans who aim to construct an Afghanistan distinct from the vision the Taliban currently presents to the people of Afghanistan and the world. Despite his initial reluctance, Petritsch, drawing from his experience as a former diplomat and peace negotiator, agreed to spearhead these significant talks. The first meeting took place in Vienna in September 2022, followed by a second in April 2023 and the most recent, from 3–5 December 2023, in Vienna. Beyond Petritsch' primary motivation was his desire to support Afghans in shaping the future of their country after over forty years of civil war and external interventions.

According to Petritsch, there is a lack of interest from the West, especially Europe and the United States (US), in understanding the Afghan people's aspirations for change. He contends that there is a prevalent reluctance to address Afghanistan as a pressing political issue, distinct from the challenges posed by the Taliban. Furthermore, he emphasised the

need for global support for those Afghans who strive for a peaceful Afghanistan. Thus, Petritsch highlighted the need for a democratic framework that considers the unique cultural and historical context of Afghanistan and recognises the importance of compromise and coexistence. His key message for a peaceful Afghanistan was the idea of inclusivity – involving men, women and diverse ethnic groups – in the process of building a new Afghanistan.

Specifically, Petritsch stated, ‘The principles established in our inaugural meeting in September 2022 emphasise an inclusive approach, involving both men and women actively. It revolves around shaping the future of a country where 50 percent of the population must be actively engaged. Additionally, inclusivity extends to various ethnic groups, ensuring a comprehensive vision of what Afghan democracy can entail’.

Petritsch also outlined the progress made in the earlier two conferences with a focus on formulating a roadmap, assessing the current situation and defining future objectives. He announced that since the previous meeting in April, members of the Vienna Process for a Democratic Afghanistan have developed this roadmap and he explained that the details of this roadmap would be revealed during the meeting scheduled from 3–5 December 2023.

Petritsch acknowledged the challenges of uniting positive forces in Afghanistan but emphasised that this unity should not prioritise political hierarchy over civil society. Instead, he advocated for a balanced approach in which both pillars – a strong civil society and political structures – are essential for modern Afghanistan. On this subject, Petritsch insisted, ‘You do not only need a strong civil society, freedoms, human rights, and equality of genders, but also a political structure, rule of law, and judiciary to work and be in service of the citizens’.

Petritsch expressed that he was pleased that a few representatives from the civil society forum would be present at the Vienna Process for a Democratic Afghanistan conference on 3 December 2023, where they would be engaging with participants and sharing the main takeaways from their two-day discussion. Petritsch concluded with the following statement: ‘Afghanistan has a future. Afghanistan has a democratic future. Exile is temporary, and there will be an opportunity for return’.

#### **4. Empowering and Amplifying Afghan Women’s Voices**

During her presentation on the vital role of women in any upcoming peace negotiations, Horia Mosadiq asserted that ‘as women, we bear the brunt of war, and any peace talks, negotiations or reconciliation processes must prioritise and centre the interests of women’. Throughout her talk, she emphasised the need for global attention to the voices of Afghan people, particularly women.

Mosadiq addressed the complex dynamics of dealing with the Taliban by recounting personal experiences and highlighting contradictory narratives regarding the group's treatment of women. She decried the lack of justice and accountability for the human rights violations committed by both the Taliban and international forces during two decades of US-led NATO military engagement in Afghanistan and expressed scepticism about the international community's commitment to justice. Mosadiq also expressed her frustration with international institutions, especially the UN and the International Criminal Court (ICC). She called for the recognition of gender apartheid as a crime against humanity under international law and to label the Taliban as a gendered oppressor due to its systematic discrimination against women.



Mosadiq pleaded for the international community to listen to the voices of Afghan women and reevaluate their standards and practices. She underscored the need for critical solutions that acknowledge, prepare, compensate for, and deliver justice to the people of Afghanistan. Despite her frustration and loss of faith in international institutions, she put forth an unwavering call for continued engagement to address the pressing issues facing Afghanistan and its people.

Mosadiq discussed how the distinction between the 'good Taliban' and the 'bad Taliban' paralleled the act of labelling human rights abusers as either good or bad. According to Mosadiq, this selective application of values has eroded her trust in the international community and the UN: 'I've observed how principles, especially regarding human rights, can be conveniently changed when engaging with the Taliban'.

In reflecting on her experiences with the international community, Mosadiq described how she, as part of a group of women, had actively advocated for the inclusion of women in the peace talks between the US and the Taliban, which eventually resulted in the February 2020 Doha agreement, but explained that the women's voices were not heard: 'Unfortunately, we were actively knocking on the doors of every embassy in Afghanistan; we sought acknowledgement for our role in the talks with the Taliban. We emphasised that, as women, we continuously desire to participate in these discussions. We presented our concerns, outlining the conditions vital to these peace talks. Regrettably, we faced scepticism and were unjustly labelled as warmongers. Despite our sincere intentions for peace, we found ourselves excluded from various international platforms'. She observed individuals who were formerly dedicated to peace now endorsing the acceptance of the Taliban as Afghanistan's reality. She asserted her rights and the rights of millions of Afghan women to be acknowledged as a reality of Afghanistan, too.

During her talk, Mosadiq stood firm in rejecting the Taliban, warlords and those responsible for the devastation and loss of hundreds of thousands of lives in her country. As she noted,

these actions and atrocities, including those committed by international forces led by NATO, have caused the displacement of millions of Afghans. The Taliban takeover of Afghanistan in August 2021 further underscores the urgency to listen to her pleas for a different course of action.

## 5. Peaceful Feminism



The founding member of WILFP Austria, Brigitte Rath, spoke at the forum and elaborated on the organisation's diverse activities, including hosting meetings, lectures, demonstrations, peace conferences and supporting and empowering female refugees. WILFP places particular emphasis on women's empowerment, evident in its Afghan

women's group.

[WILFP](#) has a rich history that dates back to its founding in April 1915 during the First World War. More than 1,100 women from twelve countries gathered in the Hague to discuss the root causes of conflict and an end to the war. WILFP's Austrian chapter was established only recently in 2021.

With its core objectives centred on preventing and ending wars, disarmament and fostering sustainable peace and freedom rooted in social, economic and criminal justice, WILFP remains committed to these principles. The organisation emphasises the importance of involving women and girls, especially those vulnerable to discrimination, in nationwide institutions for empowerment and peace-building. WILFP Austria stands at the forefront of advocating for a more just and peaceful world and echoes the sentiments of its global counterparts.

According to Rath, in August 2023, WILFP addressed the Austrian government to urge the provision of asylum for Afghan women and girls facing persecution. She stated that WILFP called for the implementation of human rights for families through expedited family reunification procedures and highlighted the need to leverage the knowledge of the diaspora to aid peace initiatives in Afghanistan. Despite financial constraints, WILFP demonstrated the impact of grassroots efforts through a small project. Rath went on to state that after collecting €6,000, the organisation provided groceries to fifty-five vulnerable women and their families in Afghanistan, thus showcasing the potential of acknowledging hidden structures within the Afghan diaspora.

Rath concluded her speech with the statement, 'Peace is life'.



Saturday, 2 December 2023

## Internal Exchange Among Afghan diaspora and civil society representatives

The second day of the forum commenced with a brief recap of the first day. Sana Safi, the BBC journalist moderating the forum, highlighted the significant objectives of each participant. She stressed the importance of collective action and of exchanging ideas in a peaceful and respectful manner. Notably, all discussions on the second day were conducted in Afghan languages, Dari and Pashto.



The forum attendees then participated in three main sessions:

1. Trust-building, social healing, and reconciliation
2. Women's participation and empowerment, ensuring human rights for all
3. Youth engagement and minority group participation in the peace process

The results and recommendations of the group discussions were presented in the plenary session. The subsequent sections offer an overview of the pivotal discussion points and recommendations from each group.

### **1. Trust-Building, Social Healing and Reconciliation**

Participants in this group recognised the intricate nature of trust-building and reconciliation among Afghans. They acknowledged that the prolonged war in their home country has led to a loss of trust among themselves, which extends to the diaspora, diaspora organisations, civil society and those engaged in Afghan affairs. The root cause is attributed to the scattered nature of the Afghan diaspora, which fosters a pervasive sense of distrust. This fragmentation extends to diaspora organisations, which, despite sharing common objectives in various host countries, face challenges in forming cohesive alliances. The group agreed that 'the lack of trust has divided the Afghan diaspora'.

The group emphasised the critical need to define trust-building and urged a clear understanding of its components, although a concrete definition was not provided. Participants highlighted the importance of trust-building initiatives that address internal divisions, with a specific focus on fostering trust among different age groups, genders and ethnicities. The group identified the challenges that contributed to a lack of trust, particularly within the Afghan diaspora.

The participants emphasised a fundamental aspect of trust-building between men and women, pointing out the historical disparities that have hindered women's active participation in governance and politics in Afghanistan. One member of the group expressed

that ‘there is no recognition of Afghan women’s capacity. There are no women-led political parties. Women must be given the full chance to present themselves in all walks of life’.

Moreover, bridging the trust gap between the old and new generations is crucial. The older generation tends to blame the younger generation for alleged detachment from Afghan culture, and the efforts of the younger generation are not valued. Conversely, the younger generation blames the older generation for not working hard enough to pave the way for a peaceful Afghanistan. They believe that had the older generation laid the groundwork for a stable and progressive Afghanistan, the younger generation would not be facing the challenges they do today.

### ***Recommendations***

The group proposed various mechanisms to overcome challenges, foster trust and ultimately contribute to the broader goal of reconciliation. These mechanisms include implementing trust-building through debates, workshops, seminars, media appearances, lobbying events and peace journalism. The key recommendations that emerged from the discussion group are as follows:

1. **Own and lead:** The Afghan diaspora should take charge of the trust-building and reconciliation processes and avoid ‘foreign’ intervention. Afghans should be well represented to ensure alignment with their shared objectives. Afghans must own and lead any reconciliation processes.
2. **Cooperation and collaboration:** The diaspora should collaborate with international nongovernmental organisations (INGOs) at different levels. The group emphasised establishing trust and seeking support for social healing from INGOs. Furthermore, trustworthy organisations should be established by the Afghan diaspora to form institutional relationships with entities in the countries where they reside.
3. **Networking:** It is crucial to leverage the resources available in European countries for the Afghan diaspora, such as financial and political capital. Utilising these resources to create new narratives and build networks across the continent was recommended.
4. **Media and online platforms:** Peace journalism promotion and increased engagement in public speaking, advocacy and lobby groups were recommended. Fellow diaspora members were encouraged to actively participate in promoting Afghans’ interests in Afghanistan and diaspora. The group stressed the importance of considering commonalities over differences by acknowledging that unity prevails.

In conclusion, the participants recognised the multifaceted problems of Afghanistan and the diaspora and advocated for a comprehensive approach to a peaceful Afghanistan. This approach involves the outlined trust-building mechanisms, genuine representation and a focus on common objectives to overcome challenges.

## **2. Women's Participation and Empowerment, Ensuring Human Rights for All**

During this discussion, one participant emphasised that 'the issue of women should not be confined to women alone; it is interwoven with every segment of society. It is inseparable. Any response made against the Taliban should be led by women. Every anti-Taliban opposition must include women in their ranks'.

The group discussion revolved around the current situation of women, the challenges they have encountered under Taliban rule and potential solutions. To enhance women's engagement in the political, cultural and economic realms, participants proposed a two-phase approach. The first is a preparatory phase involving disseminating information, raising awareness, promoting self-awareness of women's rights, utilising existing capacities and building awareness among Afghan women in the diaspora. Second, there must be a focus on women's empowerment, with a slight emphasis on technical aspects, such as finance and economics. The group suggested various strategies, including the use of social media, online platforms, educational initiatives and the creation of scientific content for empowerment.

### ***Recommendations***

1. **Prioritising women in negotiation:** The group emphasised that the issue of women should take precedence in negotiations between the Western world and the Taliban. Participants expressed the view that, thus far, women's issues have not been a priority for the West. The assumption is that the West prioritises a secure Afghanistan, a reduction in the threats emanating from Afghanistan's soil and a decrease in poppy cultivation. These factors have led to a diminished focus on women's concerns when dealing with the Taliban. Members of the diaspora should use their leverage to put pressure on key stakeholders to hold the Taliban accountable.
2. **Legal framework:** Through a legal framework, the Taliban rule must be challenged by drawing on examples from other Islamic countries, such as Indonesia and Malaysia, aiming to enable women's education and exerting pressure on the Taliban.
3. **Financial resources:** Create a donation box through which members of the diaspora can contribute by donating and collecting money to send to Afghanistan in case of an emergency. The group also recommended incorporating local and traditional tools to bolster the financial resources available to women.
4. **The role of the Afghan diaspora:** The Afghan diaspora must create a new narrative for the future of Afghanistan that clearly defines what type of governance can best shape Afghanistan's future, whether based on voting or other systems. The participants blamed the diaspora for a lack of cohesion and individual work but

nevertheless suggested the creation of a platform to aid the diaspora in mobilising for collective action.

The conversation extended beyond these few recommendations. Participants expressed scepticism about the international community and emphasised the need for Afghan-led solutions. Concerns were raised about the absence of fresh and inclusive narratives within anti-Taliban movements, including former Mujahidin, republicans and the National Resistance Front (NRF), failing to develop genuine initiatives for Afghanistan's future. They underscored the importance of broadening the focus on women beyond education and employment rights by considering women's rights a form of fundamental rights for every human being. There was unanimous support for equal rights for women and men, along with a call for sustained narratives on women's issues.

### **3. Youth Engagement and Minority Group Participation in the Peace Process**

The final group discussion explored the challenges facing youth and minority groups involved in peace processes and offered key recommendations. The group initially addressed the challenges faced by Afghan youth and minority groups within Afghanistan. They rejected the terms 'minority' and 'majority' to avoid implying privilege while emphasising that the majority refers to those opposing the Taliban. The discussion then shifted to the challenges encountered by the Afghan diaspora in various host countries.

The group participants noted that over 60 percent of Afghans are under twenty-five years of age (UNFPA Afghanistan) and face the immediate risk of youth unemployment, which increases susceptibility to radicalisation. They highlighted the Taliban's increased establishment of madrassas (religious schools), which indoctrinate and radicalise youth. The new educational curriculum in these madrassas recruits young individuals with limited job opportunities, which has left them with no alternative but to join. Additionally, youth face broader challenges, including social and health issues.

Beyond the challenges faced by Afghan youth within Afghanistan, the participants in the discussion highlighted the struggles of Afghan diaspora youth. These challenges encompass cultural shock, educational disparities and psychological pressure. Discrimination and racism were identified as significant obstacles that contributed to poor integration.

#### ***Recommendations***

1. **Online platforms:** Utilise online platforms systematically to counter the Taliban's radical narratives. Promote online programmes for debates and sharing experiences to enhance understanding of Afghanistan's culture and its diaspora. Leverage social media for constructive dialogue between Afghans inside Afghanistan, the diaspora and host nations.

2. **Advocacy:** Establish a structured civil society group to engage in debates and discussions about Afghanistan. Advocacy efforts should include facilitating scholarship programmes and disseminating educational content to counter radicalisation at both ends of migration. Similarly, the diaspora's mobilisation of resources and its strategic utilisation in key engagement spheres is crucial. It should also involve efforts to bridge the gap between hosting nations and Afghan diaspora communities.
3. **Intercultural programmes:** Increase cultural programmes, including Afghan language courses, with an emphasis on depoliticising languages. Produce videos, poetry, music and language programmes. Cultural programmes can aid in the integration of Afghan youth in Europe and serve as a tool to connect them with their home country.

In conclusion, the group proposed that to prevent a mass exodus to Europe, European Union (EU) member states should address the challenges faced by Afghanistan and its people. Hosting nations within the EU should allocate more financial resources, offer psychosocial support to Afghans, and combat discrimination and racism in various countries of residence. The participants urged the establishment of a direct line of communication with the Afghan diaspora community and emphasised the important role that unity within the diaspora plays in effective engagement.

## **Conclusion**

Following a two-day forum on the theme of 'Promoting Dialogue Between Diaspora Groups and Civil Society Individuals Working for Peace and Reconciliation in Afghanistan', attendees resolved to schedule additional sessions to explore the topics in more depth. They considered the possibility of setting up a permanent secretariat to supervise and plan the next discussions on behalf of the civil society forum. However, the success of potential future meetings will depend on how actively the Afghan diaspora participates and whether funds are available to support such events and continued advocacy efforts.