

Event report

The New Great Game: Afghanistan's Taliban Takeover and its Implications for Europe and the Region

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Panelists

- **Dr. Ellinor Zeino**, Member of the German Bundestag Study Commission on Afghanistan and Director of the KAS Regional Programme for Southwest Asia (based in Tashkent, previously based in Kabul)
- **Sulaiman Bin Shah**, Founder and CEO of Catalysts Afghanistan and former Deputy Minister for Industry and Commerce of Afghanistan, Kabul
- **Deren Derya**, Head of Division for Afghanistan and Pakistan, European External Action Service (EEAS)

In the panel organized by the KAS Multinational Development Policy Dialogue and the European Institute for Asian Studies (EIAS), moderated by EIAS Director Lin Goethals, the panelists discussed the developments in Afghanistan since the Taliban takeover in August 2021 as well as its implications for the region and for Europe.

In their opening remarks, the panelists shared their perspectives on the current situation in Afghanistan. In her initial remarks, Dr. Ellinor Zeino explained that it is important to acknowledge the new situation in Afghanistan and to find appropriate ways to continue to support the people in the country. Sulaiman Bin Shah, who has been staying in the country since the Taliban takeover, described the situation on the ground as severe. For one, the rule of the Taliban has led to a major humanitarian crisis. People are exposed to arbitrariness and violence. Women are systematically suppressed. Furthermore, he pointed out that Afghanistan is facing multiple other challenges that go beyond the Taliban, for instance a fragile economy,

vulnerability to climate change, a massive brain drain and development gaps between urban and rural areas. In her opening remarks Deren Derya explained the main engagement of the European External Action Service (EEAS) in Afghanistan after the Taliban takeover. According to Derya, it is indispensable to engage in the country itself to promote an Afghanistan-centric approach, while increasing local ownership. Since the re-establishment of its delegation in Kabul in early 2022, the EEAS has prioritised several focuses including human rights, inclusivity, education, humanitarian assistance, counter-terrorism and security. Even though there is no official financial support to Afghanistan's de-facto government, the EU is still providing financial support for development and humanitarian aid for the people of the country. Derya stressed that the EU continues providing materialized humanitarian aid to protect the Afghan people, no financial support is delivered to the Taliban regime. All assistance is coordinated via the United Nations, international NGOs and with the local civil society.



Furthermore, the panelists discussed the situation of the Afghan economy. Bin Shah explained that the economy was already fragile before the Taliban takeover. Afterwards, Afghanistan was immediately disconnected from the global finance market as banks are not connected to major international payment systems. However, the ability to do business with foreign entities is essential for the Afghan economy. Additionally, Derya explained that the Taliban have

contributed to the instability and isolation of the economy by for example putting sanctioned, UN-listed individuals in key positions of the Afghan Central Bank. Despite the bank not being affected by sanctions itself, these circumstances forbid cooperations due to the overall counter-terrorism aims. In contrast to the Central Bank, Bin Shah stressed the role of the private sector, which is not directly sanctioned. Therefore, foreign actors have to find a way to support businesses in Afghanistan even though the current circumstances make it difficult to effectively contribute to the stabilization of the country's economy.

Regarding the lessons learned during the last twenty years, Zeino explained that one of the major lessons for future engagement in Afghanistan, is to keep goals and expectations realistic. The long-term goal has to be Afghan ownership which also requires to conceive Afghanistan "beyond an aid economy". Bin Shah mentioned inclusivity, the importance of education and economic prosperity as well as the need to re-define Afghanistan's relationship with the world as challenges for the future. Derya pointed out that the EEAS has been working towards solutions, especially by building up the Afghan civil society and by enabling access to education for Afghans during the years of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. In order to grant inclusivity and an Afghan people centric approach in the future, Derya stated that it is essential to keep civic space open for debate in order to determine the expectations and priorities of the Afghan people in this changed situation.

In his comment, Nazifullah Salarzai, the Ambassador of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan to Belgium, Luxembourg, the EU and NATO, shared his points of view. He stated that due to the trust deficit of many Afghans towards foreign actors, which results from the events in 2021, Afghanistan will mainly have to find its own way in the future. New international partnerships will have to be carefully considered. Concerning the role of foreign actors in the country, the Ambassador explained that they should not only focus on the question of how to deal with the Taliban rule, but instead broaden their scope of engagement in the country and cooperate with different local stakeholders.