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Transcript

How Will the Withdrawal of International Forces Affect Afghanistan?

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Robin Niblett:

Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to Chatham House. I will state the obvious and say that I am not Cherie Booth. But I am Robin Niblett, the Director of Chatham House. Very sadly, Cherie Booth wasn't able to be with us right now. She's had to pull out at the very last minute. But that is rather wonderful news for me, because it means that I get to chair this meeting and get to hear the talk that we're going to hear in a minute about how the withdrawal of international forces is likely to affect Afghanistan from Fawzia Koofi, who is going to be, I think – I don't want to over set you up – but a fascinating and interesting speaker for us here today.

She's the first female deputy speaker, or second deputy speaker, in the Afghan parliament. And she will be a candidate, I believe, for the presidential elections in 2014. She is somebody who started her political career in 2001 after the overthrow of the Taliban and was elected to parliament in 2005. And she had served beforehand as somebody working very closely in UNICEF in child protection and aspects of women's rights and improving the social lot of civilians in what has been, as we know, a traumatised country for many, many decades.

And so she's somebody who's given a lot of her life to try to improve the lot of Afghanistan and improve the lot of its people. And she has written a book which has touched on her own personal experiences through this dramatic and traumatic period for Afghanistan, *The Favoured Daughter*, copies of which are available there to my left, to your right of the stage. And we'll have an opportunity to touch on some of the issues both in the book. But also, and very importantly as we were discussing a minute ago, the future of Afghanistan at this very uncertain period where we have to assess whether negotiations are part of the solution or whether negotiations with groups such as the Taliban may be part of a problem as we look to the future.

Fawzia has spoken in many fora. I notice here that you've been elected one of the World Economic Forum's young global leaders in 2009. So she's somebody who is certainly taking the message of the future of Afghanistan well beyond its borders. We're delighted that you would take the time to come to Chatham House and come and share your thoughts with us here today. Welcome. We look forward to your thoughts and then to engaging in a conversation afterwards.

Fawzia Koofi:

Thank you very much. Ladies and gentlemen, I would like to thank Chatham House and all of you for coming to this event and for hosting this, to listen to an Afghan perspective from somebody who lived in Afghanistan all of her life.

I remember in 2005 and before that, when I stood before the audiences to speak about the situation, everybody expected me and people like me from Afghanistan to say what we want. But now the difference is, we need to stand here and convince the world to stay engaged in Afghanistan after five years since 2005, since the whole notion of support to Afghanistan has changed.

In 2001, when the international community first came to Afghanistan, I was then working with one of the international organisations, UNICEF. When the war began everybody, no matter where Afghans lived, in north or south, east or west, they were optimistic and they were hopeful about their future. Back then, nobody took this issue seriously, that Afghanistan is invaded by any force. For us, the important thing was that, for women of Afghanistan, that we [could] go to the streets of Kabul or any other province, and we [could] breathe like a human being without the fear of being beaten up by a Talib or without the fear of being taken to the prison for not wearing a burka. So international community intervention into Afghanistan was warmly welcomed in Afghanistan.

And we all agree that the international community didn't come to Afghanistan just to save Afghans. You came to Afghanistan basically after 11 September attack, when your own security was at risk, you decided to come to Afghanistan. And this, we thought this is the beginning of a longer term strategic partnership with the world, because Afghanistan was fed up with being in the hands of its neighbours, which was not a very healthy process. The neighbours were not very honest and Afghanistan suffered 30 years of conflicts and war being in the hands of the neighbours.

So we all were happy about the future. And of course enormous positive changes happened. I don't want to go to statistics, but I remember setting up tents everywhere in the country for girls to go back to school, for boys and for everybody to go back to school. And young children, aged seven, eight, were walking two to three hours to get to school. This was the difference of my time. When I was a child, I had to struggle to go to school because nobody in my family was happy, except my mother, my brothers were not happy.

But when I was in a situation that I could help others, the difference was that many families wanted their girls to go to school. Women's political and social participation of course increased. Hospitals were open again for women. And

this was a golden opportunity for Afghan people as a whole but for women of Afghanistan, I could say.

We never thought that something will go wrong and we will be once again forgotten. I think it was basically from an Afghan perspective when the Iraq invasion happened, when the international community went to Iraq, this was the time that a lot of focus was shifted to Iraq and Afghanistan was not on the top of the agenda of the world again.

This gave time and energy back to Taliban and their supporters to revise their strategy and to come back stronger. And they came back stronger militarily, but also the so-called peace process and the peace talk of President Karzai, that he started this, initiated this in 2006, gave Taliban political strength and morality to claim that they will win this war.

Now I hear sometimes that people will argue that Afghanistan was initially not a winnable war. I think there were certain mistakes that we commit as the international community and as the government of Afghanistan, to make this impossible now. But back then, there was all the opportunity, it was there to make this a winnable war for Afghans and for our partners.

So in the peace process initiated by President Karzai, from day one there was a lack of transparency and lack of inclusiveness in this peace process. As a result, a lot of uncertainty was there among the public. When I say lack of inclusiveness, as a woman, the main victims of Taliban regime was women. I as somebody who lived my life in Afghanistan, I know what does that mean to live under Taliban. I know what does it mean when they say, 'We want Islamic rights of women.'

As a Muslim woman, my interpretation of Islamic values is completely different from what they want, because the beginning of Islam is with reading and writing. But they, as the flag-holder of Islam, they came and they deprived 55% of society from their basic Islamic rights to go to school. So how can they convince me that they are implementing Sharia and Islamic values in Afghanistan?

With all of this controversy around the peace process and peace talks, President Karzai marginalised himself by pushing more into the peace process, because he was pushing for peace process, and in the meantime, Taliban were rejecting this. And the response was more violence and more killing. And in fact last year, in 2011, we had a series of assassinations of our leaders because Taliban not only politically would like to control Afghanistan, but also morally they would like to control Afghanistan. So they killed all those

leaders who had strong networks in the community to morally also have control of Afghanistan.

I think it was in 2008 when the international community also joined, or basically [the] Americans, joined President Karzai to pursue the peace process. Recently, they started a process which is called the Qatar Process, the Doha office. Well, it's good on one sense that at least Taliban are being taken out of the intelligence of our neighbouring countries. And they don't have a direct control of this, but there are many questions and many uncertainties to this process.

The first thing is that it's basically a talk between a Mullah, which by no chance represents me, and Americans. Where are Afghans in this process? And we say Afghans, where are women's groups? Where is civil society? Where are those groups that they will be the main victims of any changes in Afghanistan?

On the other hand, the peace process has become a competitive process between the government of Afghanistan and our international partners, and the neighbours of Afghanistan. Everybody would like to compete over this process, and as a result they made it so complicated that now we're kind of lost in the middle of this. Along with the peace process, they also started transition. Now, many people say transition is not an option. It's a need, because Afghanistan needs to stand on its own feet. We need to economically, politically and militarily become strong enough to take responsibility of our own territory.

The thing here is that it was only in 2008 when [the] international community started investing in Afghanistan forces, on Afghan Army and Afghan police. Before that, it was basically a day-to-day activity, not an in depth assistance to build the capacity of our security forces. The quantity and quality kind of assistance to our security forces.

So the army was doing pretty good, but the police still, you know, it's a police which is very fragile. We have uneducated people in the police forces. You have people who don't know anything about human rights or women's issues and they're supposed to be the battlefield and the law enforcing police forces.

Equipment that was provided to police and army and all security of Afghanistan was such basic equipment, according to the Minister of Interior of Afghanistan, the equipment that the Taliban use could attack 21 kilometres distance. While the equipment that our forces use could attack only three kilometres. So this is the difference. Plus, the Taliban pay high salaries. They

give \$500 to somebody who joins Taliban. Our police and army gave only \$200. This is recently. Before that, it was only \$100.

In addition to this, they gave a lot of motivation and their communication strategy in terms of changing people's minds is very strong. That's why they train people to suicide themselves. We, as international community and the government of Afghanistan, have not been able to inject that kind of motivation. They can encourage people to go to that level, to extreme levels, to kill themselves. I'm not promoting that we should also do similar training for people to kill themselves. But we need to inject certain motivation.

At this situation, we need motivation, we hear from the world that we would like to withdraw from Afghanistan. The perspective in Afghanistan is that [the] international community basically came to Afghanistan without asking Afghans whether we are needed or not in 2001. They came because their own security was at risk. Now they are leaving without asking Afghans whether we should leave. Is this a proper time for us to leave or not?

You have financial crisis, the economy also a problem. You have political problems. I know the United States election has also a direct impact on the situation. So you basically leave in a situation [in] which we are in the middle of issues. We need to make a proper end to this war.

Proper end means... we are favouring a political settlement. But that political settlement, first of all, has to be clear and transparent and guarantee all the gains we have had. Because if there is no guarantee for the gains in terms of women's rights, human rights, all the values that we have invested blood and treasure for, for the past ten years... In the worst case scenario, the following things will happen.

First of all, if the world goes to share power with Taliban, through undemocratic means, just by a political deal, then there are certain elements in Afghan political arena that certainly oppose this. The political opponents of the government will not agree with this. In addition to that, based on a research that was conducted by one of the international organisations, it says that only 20 - 25% of Afghan population supports the reconciliation and peace process and the emerging of Taliban again. So this is very minority.

Now, if anybody would like to or try to bring Taliban back, it's not only the political opponents of the government which will stand against it, but also majority of Afghan population. Why I am saying this? Because there has been a lot of awareness raised and the population in Afghanistan has become progressive. This is something you cannot measure. This is something that the media cannot measure. This is something that you cannot report,

because this is a societal perspective change that [has] happened in Afghanistan.

And we have so many examples of that. One of the examples I will give to you is in the last parliamentary election in 2005, we have a quota for women to get to parliament. According to the quota, at least one woman per province should be represented in the parliament. We have some provinces who had one seat for women, one seat for man. But both of the provinces were actually represented by a woman, and a woman managed to win the seats.

I don't think there was any American or British who went to those provinces and encouraged people to vote for a woman. This was people themselves who actually changed their mindset and they thought women could equally deliver as men could. So they voted for a woman. This is a perspective change that nobody reported about and nobody talks about it, because we basically want to see the statistics, the big buildings and the schools, etc. We don't see the change of perspective.

So these groups who have become progressive parts of the society will certainly resist [the] Talibanisation of Afghanistan. And in the worst case scenario, if Taliban are brought to power through a political deal, without a process through which everybody sees themselves, everybody becomes part of that process, what will happen is that a civil war will begin. And a civil war will pave the way for our, once again, insecure Afghanistan. Security in Afghanistan, I'm sure you will agree with me, has a direct link to the security of the world. The negative consequences of insecure Afghanistan is not only for us Afghans, but it's also for the world.

And history repeats itself. We remember from 2001, when your own territories were attacked. So I think Afghanistan is different from the other Arab world. I know in important capitals of the world, like in London and Washington, you have priorities like the Arab Spring. But let me make it clear that Afghanistan is absolutely different from other parts of the world. The security in Afghanistan is a security to the world.

So we need to make sure that we remain engaged in Afghanistan because we certainly don't want to repeat the mistakes of the past. I remember in 1989, when the Russians wanted to withdraw from Afghanistan, they were in a hurry. Of course there are so many similarities and differences from now and then, but one of the similarities is that the world... by then the Russians wanted to withdraw from Afghanistan. So they had peace talks and a ceasefire with mujahedeen in Geneva. And as a result, [the] mujahedeen got

to power and civil war began. And then this paved the way for Talibanisation of Afghanistan.

By then, even there was no US or UK presence in Afghanistan. The world took everything for granted that, you know, once the Soviet Union collapsed, there was no threat. So everybody stood back and relaxed and, there you go, Afghanistan emerged as a country where it was a safe haven for terrorism.

So once again, if we abandon Afghanistan, and if we take everything for granted – say that the problems of Afghanistan are Afghan problems, it's not a winnable war – we actually put our own security, you put your own security at risk. Because Afghanistan could once again change to a battlefield between the terrorist networks.

And let me tell you, today's Taliban and terrorist groups are not the Taliban of 1996 or 2001, because they have become stronger, their networks become stronger, their sources of support become stronger. Especially with the establishing of an office in Qatar, we gave Taliban a political identity first, which they were not regarded as a political group in Afghanistan and I think in many parts of the world.

And second, we gave them an opportunity to access resources in the Gulf states, financial and political resources. So they will come stronger, comparing to where they were throughout the country. And I think that the negative impact of that is in all of us, especially on Afghans. I know you will think that Afghanistan always suffered from this kind of problem. I think we shouldn't go for double standards here.

Double standards means you certainly want that your daughters and the women here deserve to go to school, to go to work or enjoy the basic freedoms. I think the same with the minimum requirement, we need to at least pave the opportunity for Afghan women to deserve that. We cannot say that women in the UK are different from women in Afghanistan. Or people in the United States are different.

We have a global responsibility. And that global responsibility is to ensure that we at least protect the minimum requirement for a human life in the other part of the world. Because if that is not there, then sooner or later this fire will come and take us, anywhere we are, no matter if we're in the UK, or in the US.

I will speak briefly about the role of our neighbouring countries. You know that recently, yesterday and today, President Karzai was in Islamabad to attend a conference on counterterrorism. It's interesting, because our neighbouring

countries host and conduct so many conferences on counterterrorism, but we need some kind of action from them. Their words and their statements need to come to practice when it comes to terrorism, because certainly the belief in Afghanistan I think with the killing of Osama Bin Laden, this comes to prove that neighbouring countries of Afghanistan try to reshape themselves for a strong involvement in Afghanistan after 2014 when the international community withdraws from Afghanistan.

Many people think that this is a political process, that when [the] international community withdraws... and the question, even today, is that what's going to happen politically? I don't see this as a political process. I basically see this as a political deal. Because different countries are under pressure, they just want to bring Taliban.

As I said before, the resistance this time is different against Taliban. In 1996, not many people knew who Taliban were. Some people saw them as agents of peace, as somebody who rescued Afghanistan from civil war. So there was a lot of welcome. But now I think the awareness, the resistance, the mobilisation of civil society and human rights network... and women like myself, who are ready to put their lives at risk.

It's not only me. Hundreds and thousands of Afghan women, they're ready to put their lives at risk for their values and not go back to the Taliban period. I put in my book, the life I have had under Taliban civil war, I don't think many of us and our daughters and our sons would actually like to go back to that dark period.

Because now my daughters have come to this stage that they make a choice of which school is the best in Kabul to go. While for me, the struggle was to go to school. But now for my daughters, the struggle is to go to the best school. And I think for that, we need our friends, our strategic partners, to continue to support us. Thank you very much.