

**Center for Conflict and Humanitarian Studies
Event Report**

**A Conversation between Mawlawi Amir Khan Muttaqi, Acting Foreign
Minister of Afghanistan, and Professor Sultan Barakat, Founding Director of
CHS**

14 October 2021



1.0. Synopsis

On the 11th October 2021, the Center for Conflict and Humanitarian Studies (CHS) hosted a public conversation between Mawlawi Amir Khan Muttaqi, the acting Foreign Minister of Afghanistan, and Professor Sultan Barakat, the Founding Director of CHS. The timing of the event was important as it comes in the context of gridlock in communication between Afghanistan and the rest of the world, a situation which has potentially devastating humanitarian consequences.

A central pillar of the vision and mission of CHS is to serve as a convening platform to build bridges and facilitate dialogue between all concerned parties in conflict-affected societies. To this end, the public event brought together a range of academics, diplomats, students, journalists, and other interested individuals – providing an opportunity for the live audience to enter into a dialogue with one of the most senior officials in the interim Taliban-led government. The event was also livestreamed across CHS' social media platforms and garnered over 26,000 views.¹

The evening commenced with opening remarks from Professor Barakat in which he introduced the Center and elucidated on the motivations behind hosting a public conversation with Minister Muttaqi. Professor Barakat affirmed that the event's purposed was not about diplomatic recognition, rather it was a continuation of years-old dialogue between Afghanistan and the international community – in fact, a year prior to the event, CHS hosted former President Ashraf Ghani in a similar public event. Despite beliefs that the Afghan peace process has effectively ended, Professor Barakat emphasized that a political settlement today is as necessary as it was on August 14th, and that it is important to engage with all sides in the conflict.

2.0. Public Address by Minister Muttaqi

Following Professor Barakat's opening remarks, Minister Muttaqi delivered a public address to the live audience. He believes that the chapter of war has come to an end and that Afghanistan has entered a new chapter of peace. Furthermore, the Taliban adhered to the Doha Accords that were reached with the United States in 2020. Muttaqi explained that upon former President Ashraf Ghani fleeing Kabul and subsequent security gap, the Taliban were requested to enter the city and were able to protect the city and its civilians with no casualties. According to Minister Muttaqi, Taliban forces arrived in Kabul with a message of peace, fraternity, acceptance, and national unity. Because of their political sovereignty, they have finally reached a state of peace. The Doha Agreement is an indication of a solid collaboration, according to the minister, and any problems that may arise can be handled as a result of this cooperation. He underlined the importance of both sides' commitment to the agreement.

¹ The event also received widespread international coverage from various media outlets, including [Reuters](#), [TRT World](#), [the Guardian](#), and [TOLONews](#).

From a historical standpoint, Afghanistan has been subjected to several wars and periods of insecurity. Afghanistan has long been a target of both domestic and external forces. The first stage in this process of stability is to engage in a balance of power in international affairs. Minister Muttaqi highlighted the government's desire to have good ties with its neighbors. In light of this, the Islamic Emirate has no hidden motivation to meddle in the internal affairs of any country, nor does it seek to disrupt the peace and stability of its South Asian neighbors. Therefore, it seems only right for the Islamic Emirate to request that foreign nations refrain from interfering in Afghanistan's domestic affairs and endangering its sovereignty.

Afghanistan is a multi-ethnic country with several ethnic, linguistic, and tribal groupings. Minister Muttaqi recognized and embraced political diversity on a worldwide scale, along with diversity in ethnicities and languages. He expressed that the interim government understands other nations' differences, and simply requests that other nations recognize theirs as well. He noted that various reforms are being implemented at the cabinet and ministerial levels. 500,000 civil servants (some of whom worked under the previous administration) have resumed working for the government, and their overdue salaries are beginning to be repaid. The Minister stated that this is a gesture of goodwill and an attempt to restore harmony in Afghanistan. He also noted the importance of youth's political involvement in peacebuilding in the country.

The minister said that Afghanistan's geostrategic position contributes to its geopolitical importance. He expressed his vision for Afghanistan's economic development and prosperity, given its geographical location at the crossroads of South Asia and Central Asia, and ability to fully utilise this capacity for economic transformation. The new administration does not want Afghans to migrate to Europe, according to Minister Muttaqi, because it is in neither the host countries' nor Afghanistan's best interests. Minister Muttaqi revealed that he has spoken with representatives from the United States and other countries and expects that they will be able to reach a positive outcome.

3.0. Conversation between Minister Muttaqi and Professor Barakat

Following the public address, Minister Muttaqi engaged in an extended conversation with Professor Barakat on the transition of power. He began by saying that the Taliban did not wish to enter Kabul under these circumstances, but Ghani and his associates fled, leaving a political vacuum in Kabul. It would have been preferable if the negotiations had resulted in a smooth transition in power and produced positive outcomes, however, the Kabul administration was unable to maintain security and order.

Both Professor Barakat and Minister Muttaqi discussed various topics in detail. Professor Barakat raised questions on the following topics: the economic collapse in Afghanistan; the question of

inclusivity in governance; demobilisation of the Afghan national army; closure of schools and girls' access to education; regional security and the threat of terrorism, particularly from ISIS; and the regional role that Kabul wishes to play.

Afghanistan's Weak Economy

Afghanistan's economic challenges are taking place in the context of a looming humanitarian crisis. There is a clear opportunity for the international community to contribute to the country's economic development. Minister Muttaqi referred to the fact that Afghanistan is in the grip of an economic crisis caused by the US freezing \$9 billion of Afghan assets, which has exacerbated existing humanitarian challenges. The Minister was disappointed with the US's financial squeeze on Afghanistan and expressed that he would have preferred if the US assisted in the restoration of peace and security and in the reconstruction process. He noted that humanitarian issues should not be used as bargaining chips to try to exert political pressure.

Professor Barakat inquired about the collapse of the banking system, what the Islamic Emirate's primary source of revenue is, and how salaries are distributed. Minister Muttaqi answered that municipalities and the agricultural sector generate revenue. He also stated that the government has been able to pay half of the civil servants. The other half are projected to also receive their salaries upon further review of the government's finances.

Political Inclusivity and Demobilization of Armed Forces

Professor Barakat voiced concern about the lack of ethnic inclusion in the new government, as well as the absence of women in political representation. Professor Barakat asked about diversity and inclusion in Afghanistan's political landscape when Kabul fell to the Taliban. Minister Muttaqi's stipulated that the inclusivity of his government is evidenced by the fact that none of the 500,000 male and female civil servants from Ghani's government were fired after power transition. Instead, the Taliban has concerted its efforts towards paying their salaries. On the matter of tribal representation, Muttaqi states that all tribes are being represented in the government.

Professor Barakat inquired as to whether there are plans to integrate the national army with the Taliban forces or if there is a demobilisation plan now that the Taliban has gained sovereignty over Afghanistan. Minister Muttaqi conveyed that the former national army has been requested to step aside for the time being. If they do not resist the new government, their skills will be utilised in the future, and there is a possibility that they may be integrated with the Taliban forces. The Minister's key message was that the core notion of sacrifice is for the sake of Afghanistan's interests and security.

Closure of Schools and Girls' Access to Education

Nearly every major Western media outlet is accusing the Taliban of banning girls from secondary education. Professor Barakat addressed these accusations and inquired about the school closures. It was revealed that schools for both girls and boys were closed before the Taliban took over, due to COVID-19. With the coming of the Taliban, they slowly began re-opening schools. The Minister claimed that boys' schools are now 100% operational and girls' schools are 70% operational - which is expected to continue increasing. These figures were challenged in the open question-and-answer session.

Professor Barakat pointed out that girls' education is a religious duty, and that education and literacy are strongly valued in Islam. He expressed that banning girls from attending school is contrary to the tenets of Islam. Professor Barakat also inquired on the depth of the divisions among the Taliban on the question of girls' access to education. In Minister Muttaqi's response, he noted that effective methods of operation will take time to establish, and he called on the international community to recognize the progress that was made on the Taliban's part in the reopening of educational establishments.

Afghanistan is a large country with 47 provinces and a population of 38 million people that has long been engulfed in war and instability. According to Minister Muttaqi, there are different tribes and beliefs that have endured 45 years of war that are likely to resist change. He urged the international community to cooperate to ensure change, adding that it is unreasonable to place expectations on the Afghan government when they have only been ruling a failed state for two months. The Minister argues that despite considerable foreign support, the previous administration was unable to increase student enrolment in schools beyond 50% across the country during its 20-year rule.

U.S-Taliban Relations

Professor Barakat asked Minister Muttaqi if the threat posed by a common enemy of the United States and the Taliban will lead to them collaborating on operations to counter the threat of the Islamic State - Khorasan Province (ISKP). The Minister responded by stating that Afghanistan can control and offset the threat of ISKP alone, indicating that the US and the Taliban were still too far apart to form an alliance. He warned the international community that the absence of cooperation and pressure on the Afghan government provides the enemy with the motivation needed to carry out an attack.

Muttaqi noted that the US had held direct talks with the Taliban a few days earlier in Doha - the first since its full withdrawal. The future prospects of US-Afghanistan agreements are uncertain. However, one aspect remains certain: security agreements with the US ended when they withdrew their forces and personnel from Afghanistan. Minister Muttaqi pointed out that if the Afghan government were to come to an agreement with the US, they will only do so if the agreement is in their national interests. Agreements relating to the reconstruction and rehabilitation of Afghanistan are welcomed and sought.



The Minister also stated that the Taliban has not harmed the international community since the 2020 Doha Agreement with the Americans. He claimed that in the two-month period since the Taliban's acquisition of power, Afghanistan did not suffer the same number of casualties as it experienced every single day under Ghani and with the presence of the Americans. Minister Muttaqi criticized the former Kabul administration and the US government, insisting that both failed to listen and put the interest of the Afghans first.

Afghanistan's Neighbors and its Regional Approach

Professor Barakat asked about Afghanistan's role and position in the region, and whether Afghanistan will maintain neutrality when it comes to its foreign policy. Minister Muttaqi highlighted that Afghanistan's geographic location is strategic as it is able to connect Central Asia with South Asia. He also emphasized that Afghanistan has good relations with its regional neighbors: Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Iran, Tajikistan, and China. By partnering with its neighbors, Afghanistan aims to develop railway roads, power projects, electricity, and pipelines.

Minister Muttaqi pointed out that it is in its neighbors' best interests to develop a positive and constructive relationship with Afghanistan through cooperation and collaboration to better serve their mutual interests. He stated that Afghanistan has been cooperative in promoting regional peace, stability, and prosperity. The Minister reassured the audience that Afghanistan has not faced hostility from its neighbors, referring to the rising tensions between Tajikistan and Afghanistan and the security challenges in Dushanbe, in which the Taliban are stand accused of plotting ways to take over Tajikistan. He stressed that the interim government is working hard to maintain a positive relationship with the region as a whole, including Tajikistan and affirmed that Afghanistan poses no threat to its neighboring countries.

4.0. Question-and-Answer Session

Iran-Taliban Relations & Afghanistan's Shi'a Minority

The Q&A session began with a question on the Taliban's relations with Iran, particularly in light of Tehran's concerns over violence in the Panjshir Valley. Muttaqi responded by informing the audience that an Iranian delegation had visited various ministers in Kabul to discuss the possibility of projects and partnerships. This, in addition to the continuing operations of the Iranian consulate in Kabul, indicated to him that a cordial relationship exists between Iran and Afghanistan.

Muttaqi also expressed that the pleasant reality of Panjshir is not reflected in media reports, to which he cited evidence that government aid was prioritized for the Panjshir Valley over other provinces in Afghanistan. Like other Afghans, Shi'as have been part of Afghanistan's history for hundreds of years.

Minister Muttaqi emphasized that, unlike ISIS, anti-Shiism is not a part of the Taliban’s ideology given the legacy of mutual respect between Sunnis and Shi’as in the country. He noted that Shi’a civil servants continue to work in the government, including “Shi’a brothers” in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and that the Taliban has been trying to attract talented Shi’a professionals, such as the Deputy Minister of Public Health, to high-level government positions.

Women & Inclusivity

Unsatisfied with a perceived lack of detail and precision in Minister Muttaqi’s remarks on women’s rights in Afghanistan, the audience pressed further on the measures the Taliban would be taking to ensure equitable gender representation and the full return of girls to education. Muttaqi attempted to assuage these concerns by claiming that there are no women currently in any of Afghanistan’s prisons, and since the Taliban’s takeover of Kabul, there has been no case of suicide or self-immolation amongst women unlike before. He also rejected the view that the Taliban-led government wanted to “first deal with the issues of liberation from a foreign power, then with women’s issues,” as other developing, post-independence states have done. Once more, Minister Muttaqi pushed back with the concerns about the full return of girls to education on two bases: that it should be eased in gradually in light of the conservative tendencies and “challenges” of Afghan society; and that such an issue had persisted under the previous government’s rule and cannot be expected to be resolved quickly.

Constitution

Upon being requested to offer clarification on Afghanistan’s constitution, Minister Muttaqi explained that the country’s Zahir-Shah era constitution was adopted during the Taliban’s rule from 1996 to 2001. During this time, the Taliban’s founder and first supreme commander, Mullah Omar, issued a decree to review its contents and remove any items contrary to Islamic law and implement the rest. Aside from this body of law, Muttaqi stated that the movement has formed its own laws over the last 25 years that could also be implemented. He added that the acting cabinet, religious scholars, and the council of the Islamic Emirate will work to address any gaps that exist in the legal corpus as it stands. Muttaqi affirmed that “no country can run without the law,” and that “law in Afghanistan has been Islamic law for centuries”.

International Response, Media, & Refugee Repatriation

In the session, Muttaqi relayed that he found the international community’s response to the Taliban-led government to be positive, citing “very good signs of understanding and agreement with the international community” that will, in time, lead Afghanistan to enjoy “normal relationships” with other countries.

Acknowledging the role of media as a soft power tool, Minister Muttaqi asserted that the media is free and well-functioning in Afghanistan.

Asked about the subject of refugee repatriation, Minister Muttaqi expressed that “the doors are open from our side” to Afghans seeking refuge abroad. He elaborated that the emigration of Afghans is neither in the interest of Afghanistan nor of the international community, the latter due to the refugee burden and the former due to brain drain. Challenging the security justifications often used by Afghans who flee their country, he stated that there have been no threats to their opponents, women, nor to individuals who worked with the previous government or Western governments and agencies. For the Minister, even the documents these individuals provide that offer evidence of threat are “fake” – a perspective that he mentioned he shared with European representatives. He said that those fleeing the country are instead leaving “because of the economic problems,” which can be resolved if economic assistance is given to Afghanistan. He added that had the US announced a plan for citizens of any of Afghanistan’s neighboring countries to leave, many would take up the opportunity.

Minister Muttaqi added that the Taliban are indebted to the Afghan people for risking their lives to host them in their homes during the times they were targeted by international forces, stating: “no matter how much we do, we will not be able to do enough for our people. It is these people who have kept this going, so it is on us to serve them”.

Taliban’s Economic Aspirations & Afghanistan’s Frozen Assets

An audience member posed a question to Minister Muttaqi on the Taliban’s aspirations for Afghanistan’s economy given its young population, vast minerals and resources, and prime location at the crossroads of South and Central Asia. Restating his earlier comments during the session with Professor Barakat, Muttaqi stated that various ministries are working on projects in energy, roads and railroads, reconstruction, mineral extractions, and electricity, taking into consideration their legality and assessing their returns for residents. Hopeful for their success and their potential to revolutionize Afghanistan’s economy, Minister Muttaqi noted that the realization of these projects “will certainly take some time”.

Following on from Minister Muttaqi's previous discussion with Professor Barakat, the audience returned to the topic of Afghanistan's weak economy. The Minister expressed hope that the restrictions on Afghanistan’s frozen assets will be lifted. He added that whilst many struggling Afghans, including women and civil servants, threatened to hold demonstrations against the US over this problem, Taliban officials urged them to wait for the issue to be resolved through formal negotiations. Muttaqi stated that if the funds “will not be released, we will keep using our other resources to whatever level possible”.

Position on Narcotics

The final question of the session was on the Taliban's history with - and their current policy position on - the production of narcotics. Opium production dropped during the Taliban's rule from 1996 to 2001 then increased with the US invasion of Afghanistan. From this time, the Taliban were accused of financing the production and trade of narcotics, for example through direct or indirect taxation. Minister Muttaqi rejected this view, affirming that the Taliban were continuously targeted and unable to maintain a permanent presence, a condition that would have hindered them from facilitating any sort of trade.

Speaking on the interim government's current position, Muttaqi asserted that there should be no provision of drugs in the country and that drug cultivation must be reduced, stating that "our policy is very clear in this regard". However, he argued that farmers should be offered crop alternatives – such as wheat, maize, cotton, saffron, almonds, grapes, apples, pomegranates, and medicinal plants – and access to markets. Muttaqi noted that plans to export pine nuts, whose prices have fallen in recent years, from Afghanistan to China are underway.

He also discussed ongoing state initiatives to curb the consumption and the production of opium, including through treating drug addicts and starting "a very strong campaign" against drug suppliers, who are often youth. He highlighted a golden opportunity for the international community to assist and cooperate with the Taliban in this regard by offering them the technical skills and know-how to manage drug addiction in the country that has reportedly afflicted four million Afghans, the minister said, citing international reports.

5.0. Key Messages

The event allowed for dialogue and cross-fertilisation of ideas between a leading Taliban figure and an international audience committed to a peaceful and prosperous Afghanistan. In his concluding remarks, Professor Barakat noted that this opportunity for open dialogue with Acting Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi allowed for the shedding of light on the Taliban's positions and issues in the country that were either misunderstood or underreported internationally.

Professor Barakat also expressed that some key shared messages and points of common understanding between the Taliban, the Afghan people, and the international community emerged from the discussions, which he summarized as:

- There is a need to build a peaceful, stable, and prosperous Afghanistan that is free from terrorism.
- Afghanistan needs a political structure that is responsive to its domestic needs but can also fulfill its responsibility on the international stage.



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- The emigration of Afghans comes at a cost for both the host countries and Afghanistan. A high concentration of those who fled Afghanistan are highly skilled and educated. The more that prosperous people are able to stay in the country, the better.
- Given the severity of the humanitarian crisis, there is a dire need for foreign investment in education, health, and economic development.
- The reproduction of narcotics and other drugs must be contained to ensure that Afghanistan does not become a breeding ground for narcotics and drug trafficking.

Lastly, Professor Barakat concluded by affirming that the onus is on both Afghanistan and the international community to reach a detailed agreement on clear steps that must be taken to improve relations between the two. He remarked that the contents of Minister Muttaqi's address and his engagement with the audience appear to indicate a self-awareness on the interim government's part of their shortcomings, and that it expressed willingness to work cordially with the international community. Crucially, Professor Barakat stated that this cooperation must be done in a way that respects the customs and laws of Afghanistan and its society; donors should not expect to just offer help without being accountable to the communities they work in and for.