



Displacement in Afghanistan

How Should the International
Community Respond?

Event Report

World Refugee & Migration Council



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Cover image credit: Internally displaced Afghan woman (IOM)

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► Introduction

On September 14, 2021 the the World Refugee & Migration Council , along with the US Institute of Peace and the University of Ottawa’s Centre for International Policy Studies, held the event [“Displacement in Afghanistan: How should the international community respond”](#).

During the event, panelists discussed the situation in Afghanistan, how the international community can negotiate with the Taliban to provide assistance to Afghans, the situation facing internally displaced Afghans, migration pathways or other options may available to those fleeing Afghanistan, and the actions of the international community in the wake of signing The Global Compact on Refugees.

The discussion was moderated by WRMC President and Chancellor’s Professor, Norman Paterson School of International Affairs, Carleton University **Fen Hampson**, and included the following panelists: **Belquis Ahmadi**, Senior Program Officer, Afghanistan Program, USIP; **Nipa Banerjee**, Senior Fellow and Adjunct Professor, School of International Development and Global Studies, University of Ottawa; **Fawzia Koofi**, Former Deputy Speaker of the Afghan Parliament and Head of the Women’s Affairs Commission; **Eileen McCarthy**, Advocacy Manager, Norwegian Refugee Council, Afghanistan; **Aplasan Özerdem**, Dean of the Jimmy and Rosalynn Carter School for Peace and Conflict Resolution; **Sima Samar**, UN Secretary-General’s High-Level Panel on Internal Displacement, former Afghanistan State Minister for Human Rights and International Affairs; and **Najeeba Wazefadost**, Afghan refugee, Co-founder Asia Pacific Network of Refugees and Global Independent Refugee Women Leaders.

► The Situation in Afghanistan

There is fear of day-to-day life under the Taliban. Afghans are subjected to arbitrary instances of house searches or arrest as well as cases of extrajudicial killings. The Taliban has intensified attacks on civilians, private and public properties as well as security establishments. Further, the Taliban has clamped down on human rights including denying women access to work or equal education, and the freedoms of movement and expression – including targeting activists, protestors, and journalists. Afghans have an uncertain future leading many people to make attempts to, or already leave the country taking dangerous routes, which will result in a migration crisis in the region.

“[Afghans’] economic opportunities are being undermined, so again we come to a situation where we are dependent on foreign aid.”

– Fawzia Koofi

The uncertain future Afghans face is compounded by its weak institutions. Despite it traditionally being a rich county, with a young and dynamic population that has great economic potential, there is little opportunity for them. The lack of a strong private sector has resulted in most of the population relying on the government’s administration of foreign aid as a source of income. With the Taliban’s resurgence, humanitarian organisations providing aid have left, leaving large portions of the population without a salary. As a result, there is a need to find a way to toe the very narrow line between working with the government of the Taliban and supporting them to help provide some sort of income and livelihood to the Afghan population. The international community has an obligation to assist civilians in Afghanistan as well as those who are fleeing, the Afghan people should not be punished for who is their leader.

“There will be more human rights violations if the international community doesn't intervene”

– Belquis Ahmadi

There are massive humanitarian needs for Afghans that remain in the country. About half of the population needs humanitarian assistance, and that number is expected to rise. As conflict dies down, drought, COVID-19 and high unemployment have led to economic free-fall in the country with Afghans taking on high levels of debt just to pay for food, healthcare, and education. As a result, the poverty rate is likely to rise in the coming years meaning that there is a need for the mobilisation of humanitarian and other forms of aid to support Afghans through the ongoing crisis as well as to address the humanitarian needs that pre-existed the current situation.

► Diplomatic Action and International Aid

Different kinds of diplomatic leverage are available to Western governments to prevent the human rights abuses that are taking place in Afghanistan. An opportunity was missed in 2002 when, at the Bonn Conference, Western powers gave up an opportunity to talk to a defeated and broken Taliban where they could have negotiated from a leveraged position. Instead, the Taliban used the following 19 years to regroup and strengthen its insurgency in Afghanistan to the point it could retake territorial central as what was witnessed.

“We must look at how the international community can support Afghans regardless of where they are and make sure that there are those safe spaces across the region for migration.”

-Eileen McCarthy

If Western powers forgo the opportunity to negotiate with the Taliban now, they will isolate the Taliban and innocent Afghan civilians opening the door to the Taliban returning to the draconian regime that presided in the mid 1990s. Notably, negotiating with the Taliban does not imply the recognition of the regime as the legitimate government but to have consultations to put pressure on the Taliban for provision of safe passage for Afghans seeking to flee the country and human rights for those who stay, in addition to the provision of aid.

Aid should be delivered to Afghans as soon as possible, but not through the Taliban. Instead, it should be delivered through NGOs with clear mechanisms in place to reduce corruption to avoid creating another set of warlords or billionaires such as has occurred in the past 20 years. The international

community should condition their aid – not humanitarian aid – to human, specifically women’s, rights in the country. Further the international community should pressure countries aiding the Taliban to weaken the Taliban’s position when negotiating with the rest of the international community.

“Not taking the opportunity to talk to the Taliban now will isolate the Taliban regime and possibly harm innocent Afghans...It should be clearly understood that talking to the Taliban does not imply recognition or legitimization of the Taliban government.”

-Nipa Banerjee

▶ Women's Rights

Women's rights have been particularly curtailed under the Taliban. The women leaders and feminist activist who helped move Afghanistan into the 21st century are now fighting for their lives. These leaders are no longer talking about preserving the progress of the rights that they have gained. The discussion is now about their conservation and survival as individuals. Women are excluded from public spheres, education has become gender segregated, and their labour rights have all but vanished. The international community has a responsibility to intervene to protect women's rights, not by recognizing the Taliban as a legitimate government, but by looking at ways –such as leveraging foreign aid – they can pressure the Taliban to respect the rights of women.

“The women leaders and feminist activist who helped move Afghanistan into the 21st century are now fighting for their lives...The discussion is now about their conservation and survival as individuals.”

- Najeeba Wazefadost

► Responsibility Sharing: The Global Compact on Refugees

As the number of displaced Afghans continues to rise, Afghans looking to leave the country face a limited range of bad options. Many are forced to shelter in place, waiting for an opportunity to leave while the Taliban goes knocking door to door. Others make the perilous overland journey to Iran, Pakistan, or Tajikistan. But this is not an option for all at risk and the Taliban has established checkpoints to curtail the routes taken by those fleeing. Further, those who do make it into neighbouring countries are faced with bureaucratic roadblocks to them trying to find safety and in some cases even face deportation due to arrival through illegal border crossings. Instead of welcoming fleeing Afghans, countries in the region and further abroad have been closing their borders.

“The Global Compact on Refugees and the international community have been failing quite miserably.”

- Aplaslan Özerdem

Countries, despite having signed up to the Global Compact on Refugees to commit to coordinated and equitable means of responsibility sharing to providing support to refugees, have engaged in buck-passing. The international community has been failing to rise to the commitments to which it signed on to, and the case of Afghanistan has been no different. Instead of opening its doors, the international community has been focused on containing the crisis within Afghanistan and its neighbours such as Iran and Pakistan. There has been little interest from Western countries to assist in the relocation of fleeing Afghans.

The international community should instead be assisting fleeing Afghans by establishing infrastructure to track where people are going, making sure Afghans have safe countries to land in, and helping Afghans with their paperwork. Further, the international community needs to act quickly and assertively to provide pathways for Afghans – particularly those at high risk such as women, minorities, journalists, judges, lecturers, and members of civil society – to come to places of safe refuge.

For a full recap of this event, you can watch the event in full on [YouTube](#) or on the [event page](#). To stay up to date with more news and events from the WRMC, [subscribe](#) to our monthly newsletter and be sure to visit our [webpage](#) on a regular basis.

▶ Panelists & Moderator

MODERATOR



Dr. Fen Osler Hampson, WRMC President and Chancellor's Professor at the Norman Paterson School of International Affairs, Carleton University.

Professor Hampson served as Director of the Norman Paterson School of International Affairs (NPSIA) (2000-2012) as well as the Director of the Global Commission on Internet Governance (GCIG). He holds a Ph.D. from Harvard University where he also received his A.M. degree (both with distinction). He also holds an MSc. (Econ.) degree (with distinction) from the London School of Economics and a B.A. (Hon.) from the University of Toronto. A Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada, he is the author or co-author of 15 books and editor or co-editor of 30 other volumes. In addition, he has written more than 100 articles and book chapters on international affairs.

PANELISTS



Belquis Ahmadi, Senior Program Officer, Afghanistan Program, USIP

Belquis Ahmadi has over 20 years of experience working in Afghanistan on issues related to gender, human rights, civil society development, rule of law, governance and democracy. Ahmadi's extensive experience includes senior management positions under large USAID programs in Afghanistan, evaluation of USAID gender and democracy and governance programming, and analysis and design of gender and human rights programming, and training and mentoring Afghan civil society and government candidates. She has also published extensively on democracy, governance and women's rights in Afghanistan.



Nipa Banerjee, Senior Fellow and Adjunct Professor, School of International Development and Global Studies, University of Ottawa

Nipa Banerjee served 34 years in the Canadian International Development Agency, (CIDA) now amalgamated with Global Affairs Canada (GAC). She was a professor at University of Ottawa's School of International Development (2007–2017) and is currently a Senior Fellow, Principal Researcher, and Adjunct Professor at the university. She has worked in Canada's Afghanistan embassy as head of Canada's aid program and as a researcher tracking Canada's reconstruction and stabilization interventions in Afghanistan. She visits Afghanistan several times a year.

▶ Panelists & Moderator



Fawzia Koofi, Former Deputy Speaker of the Afghan Parliament and Head of the Women's Affairs Commission

Fawzia Koofi is an Afghan parliamentary lawmaker, accomplished author, and internationally known outspoken advocate for the rights of women and children, democracy, and moderate Islam. She was the first female in the Afghan parliament to be elected as Second Deputy Speaker, and she headed the parliament's Women Affairs Commission. Not only has Koofi humanized the otherwise faceless international discussion of the struggles and abuse of Afghan women, she is on the forefront of educating the international community as to the consequences for her, and other advocates of reform should the international community and their security forces be withdrawn..



Eileen McCarthy, Advocacy Manager, Norwegian Refugee Council, Afghanistan

Eileen McCarthy is the Advocacy Manager for the Norwegian Refugee Council in Afghanistan. In this role, she provides overall leadership, management and strategic direction to NRC's policy and advocacy, communications, and media work in Afghanistan. Previously with Save the Children in Myanmar and Iraq, Eileen led national and international advocacy on the Rohingya and Mosul responses and humanitarian crises in Myanmar and Iraq. She has co-authored two reports on the mental health and psychosocial impacts of conflict on children: *Picking up the Pieces: Rebuilding the lives of Mosul's Children after years of conflict and violence* and *An Unbearable Reality: The impact of war and displacement on children's mental health in Iraq*.



Dr. Alpaslan Özerdem, Dean of the Jimmy and Rosalynn Carter School for Peace and Conflict Resolution

Alpaslan Özerdem is Dean of the Jimmy and Rosalynn Carter School for Peace and Conflict Resolution (formerly known as the School for Conflict Analysis & Resolution) and professor of peace and conflict studies. Prior to his appointment as Dean in August 2019, Dr. Özerdem was Associate Pro-Vice-Chancellor for Research at Coventry University in the UK. Dr. Özerdem specializes in conflict resolution, peacebuilding and post-conflict reconstruction. With over 20 years of field research experience in Afghanistan, Bosnia-Herzegovina, El Salvador, Indonesia, Kosovo, Lebanon, Liberia, Nepal, Nigeria, Philippines, Sierra Leone, Solomon Islands, Somalia, Sri Lanka, Tajikistan and Turkey, Dr. Özerdem has undertaken numerous research projects that were funded by the UK's Economic & Social Research Council (ESRC) (faith-based conflict prevention); British Academy (youth and peacebuilding); US Institute of Peace (reintegration of ex-combatants); and various European Union funding schemes (conflict transformation and leadership).

▶ Panelists & Moderator



Najeeba Wazefadost, Afghan Refugee, Co-founder Asia Pacific Network of Refugees and Global Independent Refugee Women Leaders

At 10 years old, Najeeba Wazefadost fled Afghanistan with her parents. She sought asylum from Australia by sea in September 2000. She spent several months in mandatory immigration detention before being recognized as a refugee. Arriving with no knowledge of English, by the age of 14, Najeeba had mastered it well-enough to win a national essay-writing competition, and start the advocacy journey. She has graduated from a Bachelor of Medical Science. Najeeba has been actively involved in the development of refugee-led networks at both the regional and global level, which focuses on bringing together refugee-led organizations and refugee change-makers from around the world to gather to discuss their lived experiences and propose solutions for more effective and sustainable refugee policy.

Sima Samar, UN Secretary-General's High-Level Panel on Internal Displacement, former Afghanistan State Minister for Human Rights and International Affairs*

Sima Samar was appointed as a member of the United Nations Secretary-General's High-Level Panel on Internal Displacement in December 2019. In addition to her role as a Panel member, she is a member of the UN Secretary-General's High-Level Advisory Board on Mediation. Previously, Ms. Samar held the positions of Special Envoy of the President of Afghanistan and State Minister for Human Rights and International Affairs. She has also served as Chairperson of the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC), as Minister of Women's Affairs and as one of the only two women in the transition government at that time; Vice-Chair of the Emergency Loya Jirga and as UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights in Sudan.

*Sima Samar's comments are not included in the publicly available video



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Chaired by former Canadian Foreign Minister Lloyd Axworthy, the World Refugee & Migration Council offers bold thinking on how the international community can respond to refugees through cooperation & responsibility sharing.

This conference was made possible through a partnership with [Cuso International](#).

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