

Roundtable Discussion on Role of USIP in Afghanistan: Impartiality or Partisanship?

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Roundtable Discussion on

Role of USIP in Afghanistan: Impartiality or Partisanship?

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The Afghan Institute for Strategic Studies (AISS) held an online roundtable discussion on "The Role of USIP in Afghanistan: Impartiality or Partisanship?" Shahm Mahmood Miakhel, Governor of Nangarhar and Former Country Director of USIP in Afghanistan, Dr. Nazif Shahrani, Professor, Indiana University, Eng. Rahmatullah Nabil, Former Director of National Directorate of Security (NDS); and Dr. C. Christine Fair, Professor, Georgetown University, were the speakers of the program. The event was moderated by Sami Mahdi, Bureau Chief of Radio Azadi. He moderated the program in his individual capacity.



Shahmahmood Miakhel, Governor of Nangarhar was the first speaker of the roundtable, he said that the United States Institute of Peace's (USIP) mandate is bipartisan, having support from both Democrats and Republicans in the USA. He said that the USIP is involved in the Afghan Peace Process by providing analysis, research and briefings, in addition to, peace education and trainings. He said that the USIP only advises the U.S. government, it does not make policies. He said that policy making is the work of the government, not the U.S. think tanks. He mentioned that the peace issue is one part of the USIP's activity. They are working on other aspects of peace such as good governance, economy and etc. He said that the US government, the Afghan and the regional government made mistake in Afghanistan and the important question is how to learn from these mistakes for making a better future. He said that the government has no obligation to implement a proposed policy and it can choose which policy can be more useful and suitable.

Eng. Rahmatullah Nabil, Former Director of National Directorate of Security (NDS); said that after twenty years of investments, both in blood and in treasure, and the sacrifices that were made for Afghanistan, no one can claim the country is a success story. We had some progress, but we will have so many problems. Everyone knows that what happened to the result of the election and what is going on with the economy and security situation of the country. There is no doubt that some of the blame goes to Afghanistan and also the regional countries, but the main problem was Washington's policy.



People of Afghanistan however appreciate investment of the United State and are thankful of Americans. Mr. Nabil mentioned that we have three ambiguous issues, 1) lack of clarity about war in Afghanistan because we do not know if we are winning or losing it, 2) lack of commitment: we have been receiving different messages from Washington and its institutions, and 3) lack of vision for Afghanistan, which has led to the current, hopeless situation.

Eng. Nabil added that institutions and think tanks have had serious impacts on Washington`s policies towards Afghanistan. Despite all good work that USIP have done for Afghanistan, there are some critical observation about activities of this organization, which the latest example is the creation of peace group, he added. USIP has been working for seventeen years. They were involved in different national projects and they received millions of dollars from congress and the US government for these projects to turn Afghanistan a success story. Mr. Nabil said that he could not blame USIP for all of these problems but in some areas they are the ones to be blamed.

If American institutions such as USIP wants to engage to a sensitive national project that involve Afghanistan`s future, such as the peace process, they need to build trust. USIP has received millions of dollars for key issues and institutions, like election commissions, advising the UN, training staff of election commission. Over the years USIP staff observing election and providing testimony to the US congress and have conducted and published papers dealing with afghan elections, have been key members and advisers to the UN and election commission. Mr. Nabil said that there were evidences that some USIP staff in Kabul, and also in Washington, push the agenda of some specific team. There are members of USIP lobbying for a certain group in Washington. Some of USIP members have close relationships with Pakistan. He concluded that based on these issues, how can afghan trust USIP`s involvement to such crucial and nationally important issues like peace.

Eng. Nabil explained that some of the USIP members are part of advisory board in Washington and they have advised policy makers in the United States, and now they are going to be involved in the peace process. It is very important to have different views, views based on lessons learned in Afghanistan, and their perspectives should be based on ethnic diversity in Afghanistan, he added, saying that we should come with new solutions because now we have a new generation. He said that USIP is paying 1.5 million dollars for just one guest house in Kabul and that unfortunately

Afghans were excluded from most of decision making. This is a huge mistake repeated during the past four decades.

On its website it states that it has worked on Afghanistan projects funded by US Congress for the last 17 years, which means they have received many millions in funding from US Gov on Afghanistan Project.

USIP is not transparent about how much they received and what are the details of their expenditure while they want transparency and accountability from others, but they are not willing to extend the same rule to themselves. Moreover, they have given grants, salary, fellowship, money for research papers and doing research to many Afghans over the years.

They should publish a full list of all the Afghans they have provided funding to or any forms of reimbursements, specially to any current or former Afghan Government officials, so Afghans are free to determine whether someone who may praise or supports USIP has any biases or not, or what is motivating factor for their praise of USIP, if there has been any financial relationship in the past that clearly needs to be disclosed. Specially when USIP states on its website that one of the values they adhere to is “Act with honesty, integrity, authenticity, and humility.” Moreover, they also state on their website that another key value for them is to “Take responsibility for our actions.”

If a US based organization such as USIP wants to engage in a such a sensitive national project that involves Afghanistan’s future they need to earn the trust of the Afghans. Let’s examine USIP’s role with respect one key issue and institution and see how successful they have been, and that is their role in the Afghan elections, Election Commissions and promotion of democratic norms.

Over the years USIP staff have been election observers, provided testimony to Congress, have conducted research and published papers dealing with Afghan elections, have been members and key advisors to the UN and the election commissions during several elections.

They have also conducted many seminars and training session for elections and democratic norms for which they have received millions of dollars, yet let’s look at the result. Hundreds of millions have been spent on afghan elections and each election has been more fraudulent than the previous one, so their record of building capacity on this issue has been a failure.

We all witnessed the industrial size level of fraud in the recent presidential elections and recent parliament elections, not only the USIP not have the courage to speak out for democratic norms and upholding the rule of law as a matter of principle but they unfortunately became involved directly in internal Afghan matters.

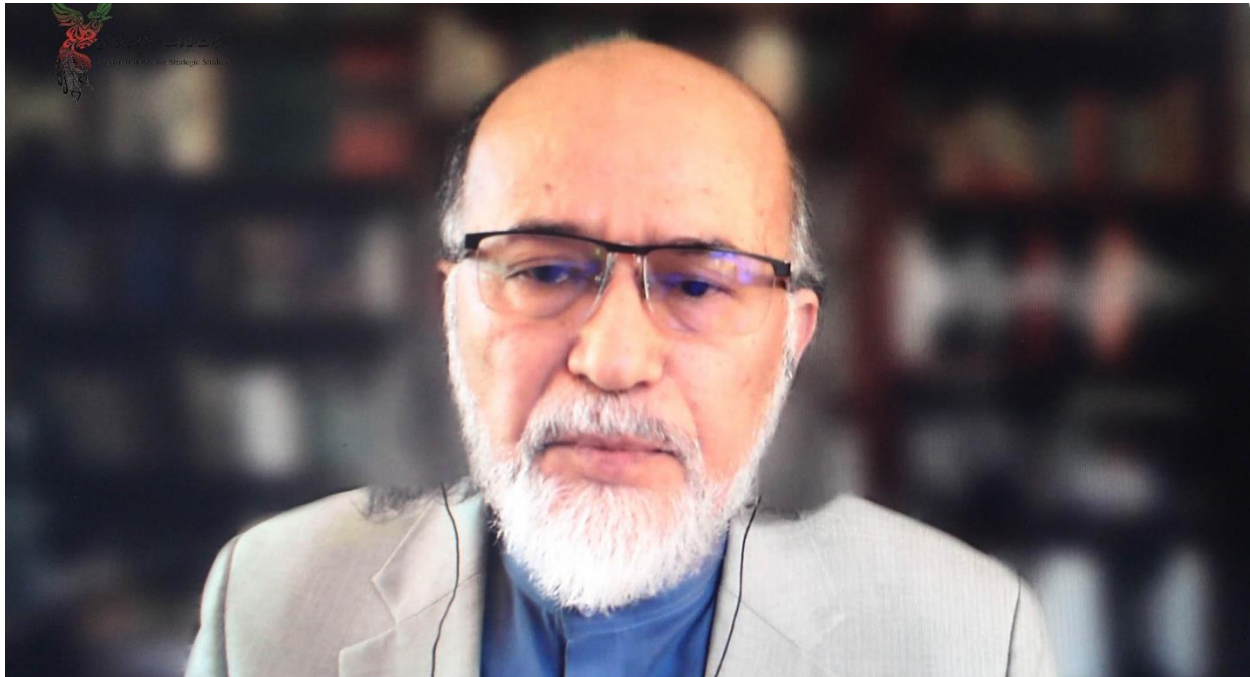
USIP's lack of neutrality is very alarming. The fact that they have taken sides in recent internal Afghan matters and election disputes via their staff that worked with UN, and also via their staff and lobbying networks in DC, we have evidence of this, makes them a very compromised organization on a national afghan issue. Their advisors to the UN not only did not have the courage to speak up on election fraud, they even tried to convince others to sweep the election fraud under the rug.

During the 2009 election USIP and its staff was very vocal about election fraud but since then despite several very fraudulent elections they are quit and some of their staff has even gone further by taking sides. Their lack of neutrality shows that for USIP it is not about building institutions nor advocacy based on principle but rather it is based on personalities. Therefore, they are not neutral nor objective in conducting their work on Afghanistan.

USIP have staffers that have significant links to Pakistani military and others in DC have accused of having close ties to Pakistani military, this is another factor that creates a trust deficit for the Afghans and their involvement on a sensitive national project. Several of the key people on the list have a long history of interfering in internal Afghan matters, several are known to have ties to neighboring countries, and have other agendas.

In August of 2019 USIP published a glowing report about the Afghan economy and work of the Afghan government on increasing revenues and how the economy had improved, at the same time the World Bank said that poverty rate in Afghanistan had increased under the current afghan Gov. Moreover, we are all aware and see it every week how the Afghan economy has been going in the wrong direction even before the Corona virus crisis hit the world.

Dr. M. Nazif Shahrani, Professor of Anthropology, Middle Eastern and Central Asian Studies at Indiana University, USA) said, we cannot expect anything better from the people who made all the mistakes, in providing policy advice, over the last nineteen years in Afghanistan. There is no reason to be optimistic about yet another “Peace Process Study Group” at the USIP, for providing better policy recommendations.



The government of Afghanistan, he noted, from the beginning to the end, has failed to respond to the needs of the people. The USIP and all the other similar institutions in Washington, are working on peripheral issues, concerned primarily with the interest of small groups of the ruling elites in Afghanistan, rather than helping the masses of Afghans. They have not also represented the interests of the peoples of the United States, the American tax payers, including myself, very well. The budgeted funds were wasted, instead of proper investment in Afghanistan. Research papers, briefings and policy papers produced shows that the USIP has consistently supported the policies and practices of particular regimes over the past twenty years in Afghanistan, without critical analysis or questioning of the results.

Dr. Shahrani expressed that both the Afghan government and the US government have not been honest with their people. Last year, the *Washington Post*, using the SIGAR’s “Lessons Learned in Afghanistan” project, reported in a six-part expository essays about how the US government

misled the American citizens about how the war has been going on in Afghanistan. That is, the *Washington Post* argued government deceived the American public by claiming they were winning America's longest war in Afghanistan and would finish the job by bringing peace to Afghanistan, and the US troops home, soon. A USIP staff member, claiming that he had worked in Afghanistan since the mid-1990s, published a paper in defense of the government's position, entitled "What the 'Afghanistan Papers' [in the *Washington Post*] Got Wrong".

Dr. Nazif Shahrani said that the USIP has been biased in supporting & strengthening the corrupt and inept regimes in Kabul, without ever questioning the outcome of their policies and practices for the country. Therefore, "Our taxpayer's money, especially mine & Dr Fair's, is wasted on major USIP projects." On the organization of a new peace study group by the USIP, Prof. Shahrani said that some of the people involved in the USIP peace study group have been involved in the Afghanistan affairs for the past two decades doing the same thing over & over again. "I am not optimistic that the people involved in the study group will offer anything different or new."

Dr. Nazif Shahrani added that the USIP claims it provides only information, but others in the US government make policy. Fair enough, but "The question is, if information and analysis provided is biased, then how you think the policies will be effective. If the information the provided is unbiased, then why the USIP, as a bipartisan independent think tank, did not criticize the US government policies? Policies which promoted the interests of the few elites. The Washington-based think tanks, also known as the "Beltway Bandits", involved in policy recommendations on Afghanistan, offer advice, for the most part, to promote the interests of certain people and companies who are milking taxpayer's for their money.

Dr. Sharani added that the USIP motto is "conflicts can be resolved without violence." But the literature produced by the USIP on Afghanistan claims nobody knew, until very recently, that peace in Afghanistan could not be won by war. The fact that terrorism is fundamentally a political problem, and not just a security problem; it should have been obvious to the USIP that political problem requires political solutions. The questions however remain; what political solutions has the USIP proposed for bringing peace to Afghanistan. Has, it ever asked what role the excessively centralized executive structure of the Afghan government plays in perpetuating instability and violence in the country? Or, whether the 2004 constitution enshrining all powers in the hands of the president, is responsible for breeding nepotism, cronyism and corruption in the country? Have

they ever spoken about these key issues related to state instability and terrorism? The answer is no.

Dr. Nazif Shahrani concluded that the USIP executives in Washington do not really know the country well, most of them do not understand the vernacular languages well. “All the information about the country is handed to them by their friends (playing both patrons & clients role in different contexts) running the government in Afghanistan. They rarely engage established Afghan scholars critical of the Kabul regimes in any policy discussions. Indeed, except for the cronies of the Kabul regime, other scholars of Afghanistan Studies are systematically marginalized. The Washington-based think tanks role in policy has become an art of manipulation of scientific knowledge to justify policies in pursuit of specific interests. A fact which is by no means unique to the USIP or Afghanistan.

Indeed, foreign policy generally is not informed by knowledge or objective analysis in the United States. Rather, the Beltway Bandit, the think tanks, advocate policies to promote the interest of those multinationals and their lobbying agents, or government agencies which funds their work. Sadly, Afghanistan has no organized advocacy or lobbying agents on behalf of the national interest of the country, so entities such as the USIP end up serving the interests of the few power elites who have been running the country.

Dr. C. Christine Fair, Professor, Georgetown University, was the last speaker, she said that the USIP is not non-partisan; rather bi-partisan because it engages individuals from both parties, Democrats & Republicans. What became apparent to her after Moeed Yusuf joined USIP about ten years ago, USIP embraced a decisively pro-Pakistan position and would issue op-eds that defended the country’s most outrageous behaviors, including ongoing support to the Taliban, the Haqqani Network which were killing American troops.

USIP, in continuance of its pro-Pakistan position even after Yusuf departed the organization to take a high-level position in Pakistan’s national security structure, supported appeasing the Taliban. For example, Dr. Fair said “USIP’s congressionally mandated [Afghanistan Peace Process Study Group](#) (ASG), is a collection of people grading their own homework without being held to account for prior mistakes. Several members of the ASG have been notorious defenders of Pakistan. Why should we believe them NOW? What makes them competent now to advise on a path forward when their previous plans were failures? There is not a single, vocal critic of Pakistan

on the ASG even though Pakistan’s consistent efforts to undermine the Afghan government and murders its citizenry—while being paid handsome emoluments to support the US-led effort—has been one of the principle reasons for the failure of peace to fructify.

She said, “this makes the organization the U.S. Institute of Pakistan.”



Based upon her prior employment with USIP and more recent involvement with the organization, she believes that USIP’s appeasing of Pakistan has to do with its funding. USIP can only take funding from U.S. government sources. In the past, it had a line-item in the US official budget. Now that USIP must secure funding from other agency sources, it must align with their priorities which come down in way or another from the administration. It is simply another arm of executing US policy under a more pleasant-sounding name. Over the last decade, the organization has received countless millions to execute in Pakistan itself. This has been a very lucrative position for the organization to take.

Note: It must be added the current USIP country director Mr. Ehsan Zia cancelled his participation on the panel, just on the eve of the program. Nevertheless, AISS welcomes USIP’ s right of response and clarification on some of the issues that were raised by the speakers.