



# The Future of U.S.-Afghanistan Relations: A View from Afghanistan

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Hudson Institute, Washington D.C. Headquarters  
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## TRANSCRIPT

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**HUSAIN HAQQANI:** Good afternoon. I'm Husain Haqqani. I'm director for South and Central Asia here at the Hudson Institute, and on behalf of the Hudson Institute, a warm welcome to all of you. It's a pleasure today for us to host Dr. Hamdullah Mohib, the national security adviser of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. Our other guest, former Interior Minister Amrullah Saleh, could not make it to the United States because of travel difficulties, which many of us are sort of very well aware of the circumstances that prove - that result in those difficulties.

But I think that Afghanistan will be well-represented here by Dr. Mohib, who served as Afghanistan's ambassador to the United States not long ago. He served here as ambassador from September 2015 until last year. He also served as non-represent - non-resident ambassador to Mexico, the Dominican Republic, Argentina and Colombia. Before being appointed ambassador to the United States, Dr. Mohib served as the first deputy chief of staff to the president of Afghanistan, President Ashraf Ghani. He has a Ph.D. and a bachelor's degree with honors from the United Kingdom. The university where he attended honored him with an award for social and cultural contributions to the campus and also gave him a research scholarship to pursue a doctorate of philosophy, which, of course, is probably coming in very handy these days because Afghanistan often requires a philosophical approach as much as anything else. Before joining the government, Dr. Mohib worked for the American University of Afghanistan and Intel Corporation. He is fluent in English, Pashto and Dari, with a proficiency in Urdu and Hindi, and he has published extensively on Afghan politics, as well as offered considerable academic research.

Mr. Amrullah Saleh, who was also going to join us for the discussion, is a vice presidential candidate, served as head of Afghanistan's intelligence service and served as interior minister. He also served as state minister for security reforms. Since he could not make it, I persuaded him to send me a written statement, which I'll read out after Dr. Mohib has given his presentation. So, Ambassador Mohib, will you please go ahead?

**HAMDULLAH MOHIB:** Absentee first and have him read.

**HAQQANI:** If you want to.

**MOHIB:** Since he's not here, at least we'll give him that.

**HAQQANI:** OK, fair enough. So this is - this is Minister Amrullah Saleh's written statement that I am reading on his behalf. (Reading) Greetings from Afghanistan. I want to extend my sincere thanks and gratitude to Ambassador Husain Haqqani for inviting me to speak at Hudson Institute. I wish I could have made it and utilize this chance to have more interactive discussion with all of you. Today, the burning issue in Afghanistan is the endurance and survival of a pluralist Afghanistan and the survival of Afghan democracy and governance without the shadow of terrorism and violence, the violence waged and unleashed by Taliban with the backing of a neighboring country, a neighboring country and its army, terrorist outfits from the region, drug smugglers and transnational criminals. Can the issue be resolved through talks and in what format and mechanism? President Ashraf Ghani has offered unconditional talks with the Taliban, which they have rejected to this date, partly because they find their status elevated and emboldened by direct talks with foreign allies of Afghanistan. The offer of talks to the Taliban was made on behalf of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, an entity built by massive Afghan and foreign sacrifices, blood and treasure in the last 18 years. The republic is not a title but an icon embodying the wishes and aspirations of the Afghan people, and it has come into existence through exercise of democracy. It is an inclusive system as every other form of governance failed to unify the nation and be sufficiently accommodative.

I served as minister of interior of Afghanistan until January, and during my short tenure there, I found out that today's Taliban are no less dangerous in their ideology and conduct than those

who co-sponsored the 9/11 terror attacks. It will be naive of us collectively to say al-Qaida was the sophisticated guest of a naive Afghan host. And thus, the Taliban were not responsible for actions of terror groups they harbored then and are harboring and supporting now. Today, the Taliban are a multilayered and sophisticated group with dozens of foreign terrorist groups and global violent jihadis supporting them. We understand that the United States has initiated direct talks with the Taliban and Ambassador Khalilzad tweeted after 16 days of secret talks in Doha that he has reached an agreement with the Taliban on a draft agreement. Did the Taliban also represent global terrorism in the talks? We don't know. In our view, there is no substitute in alternative to direct talks between the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and the Taliban. Every other format for talks may lead to misconceptions, misperceptions and unnecessary elevation of the Taliban while they are reluctant to show any concession in flexibility on fundamental matters such as human rights, verifiable delinking process with drug networks and international terrorists, denunciation of terrorism and terrorists, not only those who target Western countries but also those who target other regional states and acknowledging the pluralist fabric of Afghan society. We understand and appreciate the rhetoric behind U.S.-Taliban talks. But such efforts without direct participation of the Afghan state will not only be counterproductive, but also be in violation of United Nations Security Council resolutions. It is also a violation of the Strategic Partnership Agreement and Bilateral Security Agreement that the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan has signed with the United States of America.

I am sure the United States delegation will connect with the Afghan presidential palace to provide the necessary briefing and clarifications. We look forward to an end of ambiguity and confusion. The people of Afghanistan have paid, and continue to pay, a high human and material price in the fight against terrorism. We acknowledge and honor the sacrifices of our allies, both in blood and treasure. But the biggest victim of terrorism and the largest troops contributor to this effort has been Afghanistan. A nation that is ready to give such massive sacrifice for its dignity and integrity is also capable of representing itself. We hear there is Afghan war fatigue in most donor capitals and that the Doha talks are thus portrayed as a mechanism to mitigate this fatigue, create a breakthrough and invest in peace. We appreciate that. Unfortunately, the matter very important and dear to the Afghan people hasn't been part of the agenda. There is a Pan-Afghan demand that the issue of the sanctuaries across the Durand Line and the support by our neighbors for the Taliban and other terrorist groups who fight alongside the Taliban should also be included in the agenda for any talks leading to a meaningful peace. We believe only clarity and negotiating for a - from a position of principles and values will lead to understanding and lasting peace. Afghanistan and its hard-earned achievements and progress must not become victim of a rush - rushed process. The resilience of terrorism in our region stems from the unhindered backing they get from across the Durand Line, an issue we insist that it - that must be included in any talks between the United States and the Taliban. Afghanistan is a changed country and has built functioning institutions far more mature than what we had in the dark decade of the 1990s. These institutions will play a significant and central role in the enforcement of any possible deal or cease-fire, or otherwise deterring terrorists from gaining vital territory or space in the country.

The consensus within the strategic community, in and out, is that a governed Afghanistan with functioning institutions is far less costly to assist than to contain an ungoverned dark Afghanistan. The era of the Taliban regime was an era of ungoverned Afghanistan, dark and inaccessible. The territory they control today is nothing different from the 1990s, and the harsh rules they enforce there have not changed. We, therefore, appeal to the world community not to undermine our collective achievements, and thus, not give unneeded and unnecessary elevation to a terrorist group which has done nothing to prove itself otherwise. The statement of Mr. Amrullah Saleh will be available on the Hudson South Asia website. And for members of the press, a printed copy

will be available from my colleagues. So I think that he has made his position rather unambiguously clear. And now we want to hear your more diplomatic version.

(LAUGHTER)

**MOHIB:** Should I do it from here?

**HAQQANI:** Please.

**MOHIB:** OK. Ambassador Haqqani, Ambassador Roya Rahmani here, and I see your friend Ambassador Farhad from Tajikistan here and many friends, it's an honor to be back here at Hudson. Thank you, Ambassador Haqqani, for hosting here today and for your, you know, frequent contribution and analysis on the situation of Afghanistan and what's happening in the region. I must - I'm sorry that my friend Amrullah Saleh could not be here. As you hear from his speech, quite an eloquent and a strong voice for Afghanistan that has also been a good friend of the United States. And Ambassador Haqqani, I have known you for a long time, so I can forgive you for almost calling Afghanistan Pakistan.

(LAUGHTER)

**MOHIB:** Our topic of discussion today couldn't be timelier. We are fighting a brutal, multilayered war while simultaneously talking peace, building a self-reliant state, preparing for the presidential elections, all amid dealing with shifting regional and international uncertainty. So what's the future of Afghanistan look like? It is a serious question for all of us, particularly as we approach peace. It's not only a concern that defines the future of Afghanistan, but we - but also the future of our relationship with the United States, our foundational partner. Let me first speak about - a little bit about what Afghanistan brings to this partnership, lay out some policy lines of the Afghan government, what we expect of our partner and then say a few words about peace before opening up for a discussion. It's no secret that today's Afghanistan is a changed country. We no longer pose a security threat to the world. And by relentlessly pursuing a reform agenda geared toward self-reliance over the past five years, we are gradually becoming less of a financial burden. Afghanistan has also undergone a social transformation over the past 18 years. We firmly believe in our constitution and democratic institutions. We see our future in the global community of democratic nations. We have become a leader in regional connectivity and hope to see this new regional platform utilized for stability and security.

Our brave National Defense and Security Forces are fighting not only for our sovereignty, but we are on the front lines of global war on terror, for which we have sacrificed dearly to keep at bay. We are a strategic partner for our allies in the international community, foremost, the United States. We - Afghans and Americans - have come this far through great sacrifice, for which we, as a nation, will forever be grateful. We're indebted to those who made the ultimate sacrifice for gains as a nation and our increased security as an international community. And I thank all members of the Afghan and U.S. military, the veterans and families of the fallen who served in Afghanistan and who are still serving today. In 2017, with the announcement of the Trump administration's South Asia strategy, Afghanistan and the U.S. entered a new phase of our partnership. The South Asia strategy was a game-changer for the region because it was based on conditions, not artificial timelines. It put serious pressure on spoilers in our neighborhood. And it refocused the U.S. role on training, advising and assisting Afghan troops and pursuing counterterrorism objectives in partnership with our security sector. We still believe this is the correct approach to our partnership. I would argue that this is no longer America's war in Afghanistan. Afghans are fighting their own war. The support provided by the United States is reciprocated in our coordinated - and in our cooperation on shared counterterrorism and intelligence objectives.

We are making staggering sacrifices in human life to defend not only our country, but also to hold at bay those forces which threaten global security.

This is how we understand the partnership. And there are many reasons why we believe the partnership remains critical. Our part of the world is still a hotbed of global threats with over a dozen terrorist groups active in the region. We believe global terrorism is a global problem, and that requires long-term global response. And Afghanistan is providing its location as a base in the region from which to counter this threat and its soldiers to fight this threat. As NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg said last year, the cost of leaving is far greater than the cost of staying. But it's not a fixed partnership. It's open to review and should be reviewed as contexts change. The Afghan government has, indeed, been preparing for possible changes to the partnership. Our security forces are defending our nation on their own. And we have been working hard over the past five years to gradually absorb more financial responsibility for our armed forces and overall operating costs of our state. There are mechanisms within our agreement - the BSA and the U.S.-Afghanistan Compact - that allow us to discuss and reconfigure our assistance. A responsible, gradual reduction in U.S. troops and assistance and the complete conversion of all assistance to conditions-based, on-budget assistance would allow us to gradually cover more and more costs as we continue to increase democratic - domestic revenues and develop further human and military capacities and capabilities.

To that end, in January, President Ashraf Ghani sent a letter to President Donald Trump requesting that we engage in a coordinated effort to re-evaluate our partnership. This is the understanding of our long-term partnership. Now, we would ask the United States to provide clarification on what its long-term strategy and interests are in our country. I think what no one is prepared for is a sudden change to our partnership that fall outside of the boundaries of our guiding documents or that betray all that both our countries have invested to build over the past two decades. Afghans have serious concerns and fears about a process in pursuit of peace that to-date has not including any Afghan representation. Let me also say a few words about the ongoing peace talks with the Taliban. The Afghan people deserve an end to the war. And there, we want to establish peace while protecting our countless gains of the past 18 years. Two or three years ago, talking of peace with the Taliban was not part of the day-to-day vocabulary or our priority. However, President Ghani changed that narrative. His efforts, including ones ranging from reaching out to the region with an open offer of unconditional peace talks at the Kabul Process Conference, to the successful execution of a cease-fire in June, 2018, to sharing a comprehensive road map for peace and introducing a negotiating team in Geneva Conference. Peace has become more real now than ever before. The reality of peace, however, has created uncertainties that still looms large. Uncertainties exist because peace is not the equivalent of a cease-fire.

Peace is a much deeper concept and has a price tag attached to it. While peace has dividends, the cost of it demand national and regional consensus. For the internal part of the peace process, we are organizing a national consultative Loya Jirga, currently scheduled for April 29, which is expected to define the scope and limits of any future direct talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban. This will be followed by the third round of Kabul Process Conference to discuss the regional aspects of a post-peace Afghanistan. The Afghan government has demonstrated our will for peace in action, and it is up to the Taliban now to show courage, to engage in a broader and comprehensive face-to-face engagement with us. Let me also caution that peace in Afghanistan will not emerge out of any backdoor deal between the Taliban and any entity that is not the Afghan government. The Afghan government is the only legitimately elected representative of the Afghan people, and there is no substitute for that. In closing, let me reiterate that as long-term - as a long-term strategic ally of the United States and the global community of democratic nations, Afghanistan now brings much to the table. We are an Islamic democracy

earnestly allied with the United States, strategically placed as a land bridge between Central and South Asia and in the heart of a region from which many of the world's threats of terrorist groups are emanating, but which is also ripe with economic opportunities.

Our state-to-state agreements, particularly the Bilateral Security Agreement, define our current and future relationship. We have already created joint working groups to assist and examine the exact level of U.S. military presence in Afghanistan that is efficient, effective and sustainable. We also have concrete proposals to substantially reduce U.S. expenditure in Afghanistan without impacting the security situation on the ground. Finally, our fight is for justice, freedom in our constitutional and human rights. We will continue to defend our democratic gains, whether the U.S. forces stay or withdraw from Afghanistan. And we will not seek a replacement should the United States choose to withdraw. We believe that as long as the threat of terrorism remains a global one, Afghanistan will remain an important ally. And that is not bound to change, even if peace with the Taliban is achieved. With that, I'll stop here and we'll take up to the discussion.

(APPLAUSE)

**HAQQANI:** Thank you very much for your opening remarks, Ambassador Mohib. You do know that there are tremendous advantages in being an ex-government official rather than being a current government official, one of the biggest of which is that one can afford a level of candor that you cannot while you are serving in government.

**MOHIB:** You obviously don't know me (laughter).

**HAQQANI:** Actually, I know you well, and I'm baiting you into opening up. So let me begin by - as the nonofficial here - say what I see happening. Quite clearly, some people are confusing peace with American withdrawal, just like the Soviets at the end of the sort of Geneva Accords way back in the 19 - late 1980s. Sort of - they were so eager to get out that the Geneva Accords basically did not lay the foundation of peace for Afghanistan. In fact, if anything, they laid the foundation for the further destruction of Afghanistan. And as I was seeing the tweets by the presidential - the special envoy for Afghanistan peace reconciliation - my dear friend Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad's tweets - which said, well, there are four elements to this peace process. One is getting the withdrawal right. Then there is getting the Taliban to agree to not host international terrorists. The third of them - intra-Afghan dialogue, and the fourth is cease-fire. And we accomplished the first two, and now we'll work on the other two. And until everything is agreed, nothing is agreed. And I thought, hasn't he got the sequence wrong, because the withdrawal should be the end and the cease-fire should be the first thing to be negotiated, whereas he is negotiating the withdrawal, which is exactly what the Soviets did - that we are withdrawing. We are going. Do you feel the same way as I do on this particular aspect?

**MOHIB:** Well, thank you, ambassador. And again, you know, our lives are at stake. We are fighting a war of - you know, for our survival. So - and since the United States is a democracy like we are and freedom of speech will not give us punitive measures to a country between two states, I'm going to be candid for the sake of our partnership and relationship in case there is any confusion. You cannot get a cat to guard your milk. The Taliban and terrorism - it's one DNA. You can withdraw. If the United States wishes to withdraw, we are absolutely fine with that. And like I said in my statement, we will not be seeking a replacement for the US. We will do with what we can. We have a reason for where we are and what we are fighting for. We're not fighting because someone else is telling us to. We're protecting our values, our freedoms. And we will not allow someone - an individual's rushed agreement to put that in jeopardy. We will protect those values whether we have our allies standing with us or not. It would be better for them, for everybody and

for us - it would be easier if they were with us. And this can be done as it's convenient and affordable to those who would like and see shared value in this.

But you are right. If there is any peace talks, there has to be compromises that are made, both on the part of the Afghan people - remember; the Afghan people are not separate from the Afghan state. This is a democratically elected government of the Afghan people. So to drive divisions between the Afghan people and the Afghan state is trying to undermine our institutions and to weaken us and to embolden our enemy. I don't think it's helpful for peace. The first thing should be direct negotiations between the Afghan government and the insurgents who have caused us many deaths. And we would like to see justice. Thousands of Afghans have died as a result of senseless violence in Afghanistan. Why was that violence there? What reason? Of course, there will be answers sought by those who are also - who have also died in airstrikes, who've been put in prison - private prisons run by individuals, rogue elements. We want justice for our people wherever that is. And as a representative, as a government of the Afghan people, we seek just that. And I think our people deserve nothing less.

**HAQQANI:** Why has the Afghan government not yet become part of the much-wanted peace process?

**MOHIB:** Look. The Taliban has always had two requests. I would say their patrons had two requests. But hey, let's call them...

**HAQQANI:** (Unintelligible).

**MOHIB:** OK. Their request was they want to negotiate directly with the U.S. government because they said that the U.S. is the one that took them out of power, and they want to negotiate with them to settle their score - one. Second was the total withdrawal of the U.S. troops. Their position has not changed. Over the years, as pressure mounted on them, their patrons said one meeting with the United States so the Taliban get assurances, and then there will be talks with the government. Unfortunately, through wrong and, perhaps, hurried negotiations, you know, everything was put on the table on - in the first instance. There is no reason for the Taliban to want to do anything more than that. And they keep getting more and more milk. Why would they want to choose another option? And like you said, the sequencing was absolutely wrong. As a partner in this, we haven't had enough consultation on how this should be handled. The sequences must have been right. For us, peace is important. If the issue was to reduce costs, one doesn't need to go to the Taliban to reduce costs of the engagement in Afghanistan. If the issue was withdrawal, once again, you don't need to go to the Taliban to request that. Those provisions are within the Afghan - you know, in the Bilateral Security Agreement. So the exercise that is - has been taken without due consultation with the proper representatives of the Afghan people has been futile. And I think we've got to correct the course and pursue real reconciliation because there are elements that are reconcilable. And we must pursue those reconciliation. But we must not forget where the threat actually emanates from. And will reconciliation end that threat? So it has to be comprehensive. It has to be thoughtful. And it has to be substantial.

**HAQQANI:** Well, I mean, there are a lot of people who keep citing - and I've been a particular critic of this argument because I think that military missions should be - or the success of military missions should be judged not on the basis of how long they've been kept going through somebody's mistake or somebody else's but in terms of what has been accomplished in terms of what the mission originally was. But in this town, at least, there's just too many people who go around saying, oh, gosh - 17 years, 17 years, 17 years. That's a long time. That's a long time. That's a long time. But from that one people's point of view, you've been at war for almost 40 years because 1917 - it starts with the arrival of the Soviets in Afghanistan. There's the war against

the Soviets. Then there is the war that comes after the Soviets. And in all of that, of course, there is a - you mentioned the patrons of the Taliban. Since I'm in a particularly, shall we say, delicate position talking about the patrons of the Taliban, I will actually bounce the ball back to you. How far are the patrons of the Taliban cooperating? - because all indications from Ambassador Khalilzad seem to be that they have facilitated my being able to talk to people who, for 30 years, they said weren't in Pakistan - weren't in the patron place. And they have been great accommodators and facilitators. President Ghani (ph) started the process of talking to the leaders of Pakistan's military directly - the patron's military directly. And why did that track not succeed? And where do things stand there in terms of direct communication between Kabul and the capital of your neighboring country, where I once lived?

**MOHIB:** I don't know if I can keep that code, but I'll try to.

**HAQQANI:** No, no. You don't have to. There are codes you have to keep, and there are codes I have to keep, you know?

**MOHIB:** Well, here is a dilemma. Peace and the discussions are with the Taliban, who, supposedly, are an Afghan insurgency. And as a result of that, there will be peace in our country. We don't know what went on in those discussions - you know, not to the details. The patron's foreign minister tweets and says there was progress in Doha. Were they there? What is the relationship of the Taliban with Pakistan? I have to spell it out. What is the relationship? Has anybody asked? And what does it mean? Where will it end? What will be the end of that relationship? Will peace in Afghanistan mean Pakistan no longer using proxies for their political objectives and terrorists? Will the U.N. raise that question of, what is the policy on nonstate actors? Everybody took attention - paid attention to one jet falling, you know, when one - when there was the tension between - conventional war between Pakistan and India. But every day, we are dying. Every day, there are terrorists coming our way. Every day, we are capturing explosives in the tons. You cannot buy 20 tons of explosives in a supermarket and tell us that that's how the procurement happened, that these are done by (foreign language spoken), students who managed to arrange all of that. These attacks and the sophistication of it is obviously a state behind. There is no question about any of that. And until we resolve that, what peace are we talking about? Imagine these discussions were successful. What would be Pakistan's objectives? What would be - for the Pakistani military, what would be the incentives for them? The incentive for them is they've just defeated the United States and all of its coalition partners. Why wouldn't it bring havoc on India with the same elements, with the same nonstate actors? And nobody will lift a finger. Why wouldn't it destabilize Central Asia? Why wouldn't it destabilize anywhere else, including Europe? Why wouldn't it? It has the incentive to continue to sponsor and support its policy, you know, of Islamic extremists. That is the best weapon they have, and they will continue to use it at the cost of all Muslims. We, as Muslims, as I said, as an Islamic republic, first of all, deem it our responsibility to stand against this, against the use of our religion for a country's political objectives - one. The other is this is where the buck stops. If we don't hold Pakistan responsible for the use of their nonstate actors and terrorists here, you will not be able to hold them back anywhere else.

**HAQQANI:** So I mean, that will get us - and I'm sure that there will be questions from the audience, including people who will point out to you that Pakistan totally denies having had anything to do with terrorism in the region and is actually a victim of circumstances for the last 30 years. Somehow, these people end up...

**MOHIB:** And how they manage to - you know, when they - they cannot find the terrorists when they - when we need them, when people need them. But when they want to, the chief of the ISI will fly them in his private plane to Abu Dhabi. And then there is no issue whatsoever.

**HAQQANI:** So what happened to the discussions that you were having bilaterally with Pakistan, which I believe that President Ashraf Ghani invested a lot of political capital at the beginning of his term and his tenure as president and put a lot of faith in it and came under criticism from some of his opponents in Islamistan that he is putting too much faith? Why did that process not work out? And why do you think that there is a tendency on the part of anybody who just wants a deal, irrespective of whether it's a good deal or a bad deal - just a deal - that they are willing to sort of totally ignore the happenings of the last 30 years?

**MOHIB:** Well, Ambassador, you've written books about all of this, and you know our frustration and the frustration of everyone else what state policies are. But let's come to a deal. There are good deals, and there are bad deals. If the deal is to withdraw, again, we'll put it out there. There is an easier deal. You don't need to negotiate with terrorists to get that deal. If it's to reduce the costs, we don't - there are three buckets of costs the United States has in Afghanistan. There is the cost of its own military operations and its own military there. There is the cost of what it spends on joint counterterrorism operations. And then there is the cost of the TAA, which is the Train, Advise and Assist operation which funds the Afghan security forces and provides support for it. We can - the bulk of that, you know, arguably comes around to around \$45 billion. It can be cut to about six plus whatever the United States want to send - to spend money on, right? The TAA...

**HAQQANI:** Forty-five billion to 6 billion.

**MOHIB:** Forty-five to six plus whatever the U.S. would like to maintain. So the 2 billion that is spent on counterterrorism, you know, the 4 billion plus the other - the - what the U.S. - sorry - the NATO makes up for to pay for the Afghan security forces. And there is, of course, some assistance that the U.S. pays in terms of technical capabilities. If we can keep that, you know, I think that's a pretty sweet deal. And if the U.S. would like to maintain troops, that would be its own cost.

**HAQQANI:** Have you discussed that with American officers during your stay here, and how do you feel they are responding?

**MOHIB:** We will be talking to them.

**HAQQANI:** OK. OK.

**MOHIB:** But in principle, as I said in our - in my statement, we have. We haven't talked about figures, but we - the - President Ghani sent a letter to the President Trump in which he stated that we should review the U.S.' engagement in Afghanistan, if there is, so that we can have an assessment of what is required. So we started with what we call the joint threat assessment so that we are on the same page of what the real - the threats are because there are neighbors in our country, in - well, in our region that we may consider threat that they may not, and then - and vice versa. So there are issues around that we would want - we want to come to joint, you know, threats first and then work out what is needed to counter those threats. Those - the reason I say joint threats - because they are not just threats to us, and then what's necessary to counter those threats, what the Afghans can do on their own, on our own, to counter it and where we need assistance and what that assistance would look like. So we have started a process. We're doing extremely well in the beginning. The process is really - is pursuing in - to assess, to find the common threats. That would probably be the bulk of the exercise because, you know, once we have an agreement, the rest will fall into its place.

**HAQQANI:** OK. So you and I have discussed the peace process. And quite clearly, the Afghan government is not satisfied with it. And many of us who look at it from outside also find it wanting in many, many ways. What would provide for a more successful and genuine peace process instead of what's going on right now?

**MOHIB:** An Afghan-led, an Afghan-owned, an Afghan-controlled peace process. I mean, if it's going to be an Afghan peace, it has to be laid out by the Afghans what's acceptable to us. The - a few days - on the 8th of March, the first lady held an event. This is a result of...

**HAQQANI:** The first lady of the United...

**MOHIB:** The first lady of Afghanistan held an event.

**HAQQANI:** OK. Afghanistan.

**MOHIB:** She - her office consulted women across the country, 15,000 women, to ask them for their opinions on what their perception of peace was and what is it that they thought peace was. And it was very interesting to - personally to me. When I first started my job, I went to - and they briefed me on, you know - on the few provinces they had been. So it was very interesting, and I encouraged that they should continue throughout the country. And they fund - we had an event of 3,500 women that came from provinces. These are not the typical women that you would see that are funded by NGOs. And they - these are women from the provinces that are affected by the war and ask them what they think peace is. It was very interesting on the differences that you hear from these different women. Like those who have been affected by suicide bombings and by attacks by the Taliban and Daesh, they want to see justice. They want to see those people brought to justice and answer for those crimes that they have committed. There are also women in - who have lost their loved ones in airstrikes and who have lost, you know, their husbands and sons in - to some private militias and militaries that have arrested. And they want to see justice for their - for those crimes too. And then there are people who don't really see violence in their areas. To them, peace means - this is largely central Afghanistan, which hasn't - which luckily has been - stayed away from violence - to them, peace means services, better deliver of services so they don't have to walk for miles to go to school or a hospital - you know, built roads and others. So peace is very differently perceived in different parts, in different corners of the country. Now, how do you negotiate that peace without knowing what it is that you are negotiating? Peace is not a surrender. I think some have confused that, peace with surrender. And they're forgetting that there are millions of people that the U.S. has invested in in Afghanistan that would be completely sidelined and thrown under the bus if this current approach is pursued. Now, we understand - the policy we agree with, right? Peace must be - peace is our imperative, and we are glad to see that the U.S. is also making it a priority. But the approach is something that we must agree upon, and if it's - and must be done in full transparency, in full cooperation with the Afghan government.

**HAQQANI:** Two questions before I open it to the audience, and you can answer them in succession. First, what do you say to all these reports that keep coming every now and then - you know, this percentage of Afghanistan's territories, you know, has Taliban presence? Of course, the Taliban presence, I mean, you know, it's almost like sort of if there's a handful of Taliban, that's Taliban presence. So it's very dubious. But it does affect morale here in the United States. It helps those who make the argument we've been there too long, we'll never win, we need to get out, et cetera. What is the status of Taliban having effective control? Is there any part of Afghanistan that they fully control, or is it just a hit-and-run situation everywhere which they take advantage of? And the second, are you confident? Because you said in your statement that even if the United States leaves, we will be there because it's our country and we'll fight for it. And I fully support that sentiment. But how confident are you that that is going to be the effective reality if the United States makes an arbitrary decision at some point to just withdraw?

Now, just by way of a side comment, I was reading sort of the press on the recent announcements about the peace talks. And I was wondering, if somebody, quote-unquote, "announced" that they're going to negotiate with Boko Haram or al-Shabab in Somalia, and in return for their

promise for not engaging with international terrorists, withdraw America completely from the African continent, American troops from the African continent, nobody would countenance that. Nobody would say that that's a sensible approach. But here, withdrawing or announcing more or less a general schedule for withdrawal in return for Taliban's assurances is being accepted. So there has a lot to do with what you refer to as fatigue. But how confident do you feel that the Afghan National Army will be able to hold on, and Afghanistan's government and state will prevail after the Americans leave? And to what extent is the battle situation as bad as some people paint it here? Or much better than that?

**MOHIB:** First of all, I think it's important to understand what is the definition of Taliban. From what we understand, the Taliban is, broadly, an entity or a project that is to deny Afghanistan its freedoms. You know, freedoms of expression, freedoms of living, freedoms of - the basic freedoms that human beings have. And it's sovereignty. You know? By that definition, there is Taliban presence here. I see them. I wouldn't point to them right now. But I see Taliban here right now. So Hudson Institute has presence. If we are talking about...

**HAQQANI:** You mean this event has presence?

**MOHIB:** This event has...

**HAQQANI:** Not...

**MOHIB:** (Laughter).

**HAQQANI:** I can assure you, I can recognize Taliban, too, and there is no permanent presence.

**MOHIB:** (Laughter).

**HAQQANI:** It's the hit-and-run. They come to an event, and they leave. Go ahead.

**MOHIB:** Well, as for Taliban control of areas, we have a serious issue with the methodology of how that has worked. It's true that there are some districts in Afghanistan where we don't have full control. We don't provide services in those districts. They had fallen to the Taliban long ago. We had worked out that, militarily, maintaining or keeping them was not of strategic value because...

**HAQQANI:** Where are they located? Mostly along the border with the patron, or other places as well?

**MOHIB:** Some on the border with the - well, on the Durand Line. But there are others scattered around. And theirs are scarcely populated, of no strategic importance or value, but extremely difficult to keep military in their presence. So yes, they are there. But then there are areas that are threatened by terrorists. They're threatened by them. Those people are still under Afghan control and are still provided for by the government. We provide, we maintain the hospitals there. We maintain the clinics and the schools in those areas. All of the services, from road building, all of that is done by the Afghan government there, or even community councils that look and vote on what projects should be. But then can they - there are people who can threaten those areas, threaten the security of it. One man with a gun can definitely threaten 40 people in a village. That is not control. That is threaten. They do threaten areas. And we would want to get to a point where that threat is eliminated. And we are working on - currently, as we speak, we have made significant reforms in our military institutions to ensure that we address the threat the way it is as counterterrorism, not as conventional warfare. There was also issues with how we fought the war, but that's not the topic of our discussion here. And so I think we have that to deal with. The other is, can we defend ourselves? Yes. Would it be difficult? It would be extremely challenging. You

know, we will have it hard. But there is a will in the Afghan people to do so. We have been trying to increase our women participation in the ANDSF. With a lot of effort, we only managed to get 2,500 people so far.

**HAQQANI:** Twenty-five hundred women?

**MOHIB:** Twenty-five hundred women. And we want to get thousands, 25,000 or - that number. But we had a difficulty because we weren't able to get recruits. Since these, you know, surrender discussions have begun, people - in the last 2 1/2 weeks alone, we have had 1,200 recruits. This may - one - you know, one of our friends...

**HAQQANI:** We should ask our friends in the U.S. government to continue with the - what you call - the surrendered talks so that their recruitment goes up further.

**MOHIB:** It not in the interest of the United States to do that because it puts - it loses...

**HAQQANI:** Absolutely.

**MOHIB:** ...All of the interest, the assets, the friends that it has. So we would - but if it chooses to do so, you know, we have full respect for what our partners do. And you know, if we have to part ways, then...

**HAQQANI:** It's their sovereign decision, just as it's yours or my...

**MOHIB:** Just as it's ours.

**HAQQANI:** ...To continue...

**MOHIB:** Exactly.

**HAQQANI:** ...To fight the Taliban.

**MOHIB:** So we are prepared to protect our country, protect our values and our freedoms. We will not surrender to the neighbor who would like to push the Durand Line further to - you know, what their ambition was in the past, to Hindu Kush, and now is to Amu Darya. It will not happen. The Afghan people will never allow that. We would be, of course, in a better position if we have the support of our partners, who will also significantly benefit from continuing to maintain that.

**HAQQANI:** Thank you very much, Ambassador Mohib.

(APPLAUSE)

**HAQQANI:** And a good hand to Afghanistan's national security adviser, Dr. Hamdullah Mohib. Now we are open for questions. I will start identifying people, and then somebody will bring a mic to you. So the first right at the back. Yes. No, no, no, the gentleman there. Yeah.

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** Thank you very much. As you see, I'm older. My war as a Marine officer was serving in Southeast Asia for Vietnamization, and watched it happen, and watched - my war turned out pretty badly. With that said, I decided to publish a series of articles reflecting Erik Prince's plan for Afghanistan. And you can go to Defense.info and see it, even the video he made, 10 minutes. Do you have any comments on what Erik Prince is proposing? And if so, please, candor.

**HAQQANI:** Erik Prince's proposal.

**MOHIB:** One of the first thing I did as a national security adviser was to make Erik Prince persona non grata in Afghanistan.

(Laughter)

**MOHIB:** We will not allow anyone to turn our miseries and our sufferings into their private business. We partner with the United States because they respect our values and our freedoms. And there are rules and procedures of engagement. We will not allow people to come and turn our country into business for killing. Right here in the front.

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** My question may take a bit longer since it's on behalf of...

**MOHIB:** Skip this question. It's easy (laughter). Ah.

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** ...Since it's on behalf of every single women fearing surrendering their rights and liberties back to fundamentalists and the implementers of strict Sharia law - the Taliban - and anything that comes in the process of peace negotiations. So I would request for a longer period of time, so that I...

**HAQQANI:** Maybe we can discuss the question of the future of women in Afghanistan separately at a different time.

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** No, I have to read this question.

**HAQQANI:** Just say the question, and please do it.

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** If you talk about the post-2001 Afghanistan, women, the marginalized and the most exploited section of society, those who suffered the scourge of war since decades, and those who were assigned some specific rights and liberties by the international community and the United States, which were completely alien to the Afghan establishment, and now, at the peak of the peace talks, taking the statement from the Cheryl Benard - the spouse of U.S. special envoy for the mediation of the peace process talks, Zalmay Khalilzad - and the recent Moscow talks, taking all these two into account here, I raise my question that, how would the government of Afghanistan ensure the best possible representation of women in these talks? By best possible representation, what is meant is the women who seem to be the agent of rights and demands of millions of women of Afghanistan, not the back-seated, mere attendees of...

**HAQQANI:** Of international conferences.

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** Yes.

**HAQQANI:** OK, good.

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** Thank you.

(LAUGHTER)

**HAQQANI:** I made it quick for you. Of course, you are part of the Afghan government, since you are at the embassy of Afghanistan. So I'm sure that the answer to that will not be very long.

**MOHIB:** But I have...

**HAQQANI:** Yeah.

**MOHIB:** I have more of it.

**HAQQANI:** OK, OK, OK.

**MOHIB:** I would have an answer for that. Ambassador Roya Rahmani, can you please stand up? Sorry for ask you to. All right.

(APPLAUSE)

**MOHIB:** And I have just concluded a trip in New York, where also our permanent representative to the United Nations is another woman. There is no back-seat representation for the Afghan women. Those roles of gender departments are not a - not our agenda. Our agenda in the government here is to ensure that women have real opportunities to represent themselves and the Afghans. These women are not just representing the Afghan women in Afghanistan. They are not isolated from the Afghan society. Women in Afghanistan are also representing Afghan men, and they are on the front row of this diplomatic war.

**HAQQANI:** And Ambassador Mohib, if I may just add, the whole question of women's rights is an ongoing question. So those who say that, you know, it should be within the cultural context of - as defined by somebody specifically, the struggle is still ongoing even in the United States and in Western Europe and in Scandinavia, where it's said to be, you know, the women have much better protections and more rights. But the women of Afghanistan definitely deserve much better than what the Taliban are likely to offer and those who want to surrender to the Taliban in the name of peace are ever going to offer. So that, I think, is the real answer. Right at the back there.

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** Thank you, Ambassador Mohib, Ambassador Haqqani. Welcome back to Washington, D.C. Last summer, you hosted...

**HAQQANI:** Identify yourself quickly.

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** Oh, excuse me. Last summer, you hosted an extremely gracious memorial service to the Hindus and Sikhs who died in a terrorist attack at the hands of ISIS. In this peace process and - in that ceremony, you said that Hindus and Sikhs are the original inhabitants of this land. And in that - in this peace process, what assurances can you give to this now-microminority that their voices will be heard and their concerns will be taken into consideration so they don't have to flee their ancestral homeland?

**MOHIB:** Well, let me share with you some good news first. Daesh used to control and inhibit districts on the border - on the Durand Line. And they had their courts and administrative offices there. Just over a month ago, the president and I visited those same districts, completely cleared of Daesh.

**HAQQANI:** Daesh is the Islam - what goes around by the name of Islamic State, yeah?

**MOHIB:** Yeah, Daesh.

**HAQQANI:** Yeah, or ISIS. Yeah.

**MOHIB:** And it was cleared with the help of the Afghan people. Daesh, on its own, is no threat to Afghanistan. It's the enabling environment that the Taliban provide for Daesh that makes it a threat because we get scattered and busy with fighting and securing large parts of the country. On its own, Daesh has no place in Afghanistan, in the Afghan society. And you mentioned the Hindu minority in Afghanistan. In a - we are all united in this fight against terrorism. It doesn't recognize you or your religion, your caste. And, you know, the places of worship of Muslims have been targeted in Afghanistan by the very same people. So I think they are just enemies of humanity. And all Afghans are united in their fight against them. We look for, as Mr. Saleh said,

maintaining a pluralistic Afghanistan, which was part of our culture and is part of our culture, and nobody can change that. And, you know, to your comment earlier on women where people prescribe to us what our culture is, I think maybe it'd be better if they came and asked us what it was, instead of prescribing what is allowed and not allowed in our country.

**HAQQANI:** Fair enough. Right there in the middle. Yeah, the red jacket.

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** Thank you very much. Welcome back, Mr. Mohib. My question is, based off your opinion, Mr. Mohib, why the Taliban not able to negotiate it with Afghan government directly? And the second question, what is your expectation from the United State? Thank you.

**MOHIB:** Thank you. I think we talked pretty extensively on the first...

**HAQQANI:** I think we did - we did talk about that extensively. So we'll come here.

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** Good to see you, Mohibsibe (ph). A few short kind of...

**HAQQANI:** Identify yourself quickly.

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** So, first of all, it's good to see you, Ambassador. To be honest with you, when I came to this event, I was thinking that there's going to be some positive and happy news that you're going to give us. I'm very surprised by the picture that you have portrayed. So my questions are...

**HAQQANI:** One question, not questions.

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** It's just one question. So Ambassador Khalilzad is saying that the talks are going positive. You are saying that the patrons are not playing any good role. So can you explain it to me, what exactly is going on - especially keeping in view that the elections are coming, and there are reports that suggest that because President Ghani does not see a very good future for himself anymore, is that one of the reason why Khalilzad has a different - total different opinion than what you have said over here? Thank you. And on a lighter note, by the way, the Taliban are mostly Pashtuns. And in this room, I only see you and me being Pashtuns there. So I hope none of us are Taliban, you know?

**HAQQANI:** Actually, quite a few more Pashtuns are here.

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** Oh, there are?

**HAQQANI:** Yes.

**MOHIB:** First of all, terrorism...

**HAQQANI:** Never assume.

**MOHIB:** Terrorism has no ethnicity. Pashtuns in Afghanistan have a - very passionate and compassionate lives. And people, those who know them and have studied them, would understand that these people, despite living in rugged terrain, have been extremely kind and are known for their hospitality and kindness. I would not equate a group that murders civilians in cold blood, you know, conduct terrorist activities across the country and, you know, blows up schools and mosques - these are not acts of Pashtuns or Afghans or any other ethnicity. So let's not ethnicize this, for one. The second part is there is good news. I am the good news. Afghanistan has its own voice. Our patrons - patrons, I think are the correct pronunciations - of the Taliban no longer have to speak for us. What better news is that, then, for a country that has been isolated for 200 years and for the past four decades has been continuously and brutally pushed down by

this very same neighbor who, in many - in our discussions, always calls the Afghan people as brothers and culturally, you know, connected - and cultural and historical connections to it. So I think maybe our discussions are tough. These are hard, but it's the collective achievement of both the Afghan people and our resilience, plus our partners, that Afghanistan today has its own voice. We may not agree. We may not see eye to eye on everything, but it's an Afghanistan that's free. It's an Afghanistan that is able to represent itself. It's an Afghanistan that can plan its own future. So I think there is no bigger and better news than that for us. Others may disagree. And the other is about people's opinion of what peace is. I'll call any peace that is - that's an Afghan peace that's going to bring peace to Afghanistan progressive peace. I haven't seen that yet. So I think while there are maybe elements that are - you know, discussions may be important to some. It doesn't mean they're progress for us in this regard. So...

**HAQQANI:** And as I understand you, you're just expressing a policy difference with Pakistan, not necessarily saying that Afghanistan and Pakistan have to be adversarial forever.

**MOHIB:** Absolutely not. No.

**HAQQANI:** We have to have the kind of peace between Pakistan and Afghanistan that - the kind of friendship that you and I have. And I think that can be the template for our countries of...

**MOHIB:** We - for the record, we have tried on every occasion to be able to normalize relationship with Pakistan because - for the Pakistanis' sake, for the sake of our people and for the sake of the region. It is important that the - that we live in harmony with our neighbor.

**HAQQANI:** Now, here I would be remiss if I don't ask this question because friends of - from Pakistan always say that, you know, you have to ask questions that concern Pakistan. And Pakistan always expresses concern about Afghanistan and its relationship with India and how that might threaten Pakistan. So what is your response to that - that maybe Pakistan's interest in Afghanistan is not because Pakistan has an adversarial or antagonistic attitude towards Afghanistan and its leaders, but that it's actually genuinely concerned about its security and is worried about the Afghan leaders' closeness to India. What would you answer? How would you answer that question? So the six or seven people in the audience who wanted to ask that question, you can put your hands down. I've asked the question on your behalf. Please go ahead.

**MOHIB:** You know, we spent a lot of time with Pakistan, coming out with solutions to these issues that we may have - not just this, but other concerns that Pakistan have, and Afghanistan. And we worked on a comprehensive action plan with Pakistan. And I think it was a diplomatic achievement because we were able to put all of our grievances on paper and agree that we will work together to resolve them. Unfortunately, there - we are not seeing the commitment from Pakistan to seek a resolve in that. There is never any action taken, and that document continues to remain a piece of paper because it has not been actioned. We would be able to resolve many of these issues. A lot of it is misunderstanding. And if there needs to be, we have always, always insisted we are ready to be able to prove it. And there can be third-party verification for whatever we claim we can provide, and the same for Pakistan. We would like to request them that they provide third-party verification for what we say so that we are not sitting across, blaming each other and are actually constructively moving forward with an agenda that would normalize relationships so that we can both benefit from peace and harmony.

**HAQQANI:** So we are running out of time. What I'm going to do is ask three people to ask questions, and then the ambassador can answer them all collectively. So one - the young woman at the back, in the middle here and then right here.

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** Thank you, Ambassador Haqqani. And good to see you, Mr. Mohib, back in Washington. Listening to Ambassador Mohib and quoting that you said pieces will not merge from backdoor talks - what's your thoughts of Khalilzad role in this talks that after 15 days, we just hear that - from social media that this was successful and some issues are agreed? Do you think that this is the time we can say that Taliban are interested in direct talks with Afghan government? And what is your reaction? And also - I think that's fine.

**HAQQANI:** I think - I'll save you the answer to that one. I think you've already given that answer. And I think in diplomatic negotiations, you know, you can't blame somebody for not revealing everything.

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** I'm just curious if Afghan government is now interested in this talks, as he is saying that Afghanistan has to have a voice in the talks. But I want to make sure that I get a reaction when you have somebody who's talking for Afghan government here.

**MOHIB:** Should we take the other question?

**HAQQANI:** Yeah Let's take the questions. Go ahead.

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** And welcome back to Washington. And my question is, if Afghanistan's wayward ally that is in negotiations with the Taliban now is able to arrange some sort of ceasefire, is this something that the Afghan government would be willing to agree to, even not participating in the talks at this point?

**HAQQANI:** And the last question. Right here, in the front.

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** Yes. Sir, even before the most recent talks, the Afghan government was frequently described as being dysfunctional, a word that's also increasingly applied to the United States and the United Kingdom and their politics. How would a government, which is said to be dysfunctional, would it have the unity, the ability to cope with the results of these talks?

**MOHIB:** You know, I'll begin with that. It's fun. Look; democracies are messy. We wanted to create a democratic state where we can argue, where we can, you know, question the actions of state and individuals. And I think, you know, there is often a misunderstanding that perhaps an Afghan democracy should be more of a dictatorship than a democracy. We're asked if there is dysfunctionality. I think the fact that people in Afghanistan question their own government and that they have the freedom to do so means we have created a successful democracy that we are extremely proud of and are going to protect it with our lives. As for ceasefire, we have been working on ceasefire and we would always, of course, welcome and support any idea that does end violence in our country. Our people are tired. They deserve - they deserve to be able to walk around, just to enjoy the - what everybody else takes for granted. The little freedoms of everyday life. To be able to walk down the street and not be worried that you may be the unfortunate victim of a suicide attack, and may be kidnapped or shot, and all of these things that anybody else, any other citizen of the world, would take for granted. So a ceasefire is always welcome, and, you know, it's a human thing to do. We would encourage anybody who can play a role in this to make that happen and welcome it. And, you know, I would be - to answer the question, I think peace is an imperative for the Afghans, and we want to see it happen. But we want to see true peace that is going to bring lasting stability to Afghanistan. The Afghan conflict is not - it doesn't - it's not just the internal dynamics. We would like to deal with it sequentially so that we would like to first get an understanding of - and a consensus internally, which is what we're doing with the Loya Jirga, on what are the compromises we are prepared to make to have that peace. And then go in and get that discussion in the region and the stakeholders that have an interest in Afghan security to be able to have a comprehensive dialogue with them on what peace in Afghanistan means,

including the patrons of the Taliban. You know, they, of course, spend a lot of money and effort into bringing instability for the purpose. And we would like to be able to have honest and comprehensive discussions with them so that we create a state that lives in harmony internally, peacefully with itself, but also with the region.

And we will - we're thankful to the United States for all its support that it has provided Afghanistan in the last 18 years. We are where we are today because of that. And I think millions of Afghans have suffered - have benefited from those opportunities. We have constructed roads, and universities and schools - all of that as a result of the investment that the United States has made. And there are 40,000 fighters the Taliban have. There are millions, at least one million Afghans that are civil servants in the Afghan government, you know, serving in different capacities who have - who represent the Afghan state, and then the millions who work in other parts of, you know, the state institutions or private sector, all of whom are, you know, thankful to this international partnership. We would like to maintain it. I think it's in our interest. And it's also in the interest of the United States for us to have a constructive, mutually respectful partnership going forward, as is mandated and stated in the Bilateral Security Agreement and as - the Strategic Partnership Agreements. And however we define our future, it will be - the Afghan state is prepared to have - like I said, I would repeat, we don't owe the United States anything. If the U.S. would like to withdraw today...

**HAQQANI:** You mean the U.S. does not owe you anything?

**MOHIB:** We don't owe the U.S. We are not - we are not going to complain or issue with that. It's not an issue of that sort. If the U.S. would like to withdraw today, we will work with them. All we ask is that we do it in a manner that's responsible so that we maintain stability and security in Afghanistan, and in the region and in the interest of the United States so that we do not make vacuum or allow, create a vacuum for terrorists to operate out of. But we are thankful to the thousands of Americans who have served in Afghan - sorry. Laid their lives, made the ultimate sacrifice in Afghanistan, and also the millions of Americans who served with us to create the country that we have. And it would be a shame to let it go to waste.

**HAQQANI:** Thank you very much.

**MOHIB:** I know, it was a long answer. Thank you.

**HAQQANI:** Thanks. Thanks a lot. Thank you very much. Wonderful. Thank you all.

**MOHIB:** Thank you.

(APPLAUSE)