



Transcript

BBC Recording: Has the Taliban Won the War in Afghanistan?

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Lt General Sir Graeme Lamb, former advisor to General Stanley McChrystal

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Tuesday 7 September 2010

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Eddie Mair:

Hello from the Royal Institute of International Affairs, Chatham House, in London. For several years we've used this setting and the expertise of the Institute to examine in detail the War in Afghanistan. Two years ago we asked, 'Should we bring home the troops?' Last year, 'Afghanistan: Is it Mission Impossible?'

This year, our debate is about this provocative proposition— the Taliban have won the war in Afghanistan. It's a way of thinking out what a win or lose might mean in the country. Since we were here last year, a good deal has changed. There are many more American troops on the ground thanks to President Obama's surge. It's also been the bloodiest year so far for US troops.

Politically, the President has already set his sights on troop withdrawal, with American forces starting to leave in June next year. David Cameron says there should be no British troops in Afghanistan by 2015, the time of the next General Election.

Many of our previous debates have had calls for an active engagement with the Taliban, and now President Karzai has formed a committee—The High Peace Council—which he says will organise the most comprehensive engagement with militants since the US-led invasion nine years ago.

Do all these factors point to a victory for the Taliban? Let's say hello first to our panellists.

Mariam Abou Zahab:

I am Mariam Abou Zahab. I am a Researcher based in Paris.

Peter Galbraith:

I'm Peter Galbraith. I'm an author who lives in Vermont and was the former UN Deputy Envoy in Afghanistan.

Lt General Sir Graeme Lamb:

I'm Graeme Lamb. I'm neither an academic nor a politician, but was a career soldier for 38 years.

Abubakar Siddique:

My name is Abubakar Siddique. I'm the Afghanistan-Pakistan correspondent for Radio Free Europe, Radio Liberty in Prague, Czech Republic.

Eddie Mair:

We'll hear the formal presentations from all four panellists in just a second. As you listen to BBC Radio 4 tonight, you can take part online by going to the Radio 4 blogs page.

Here with us in Chatham House, though, as usual a great deal of expertise in the audience and we want to feature as much of it as possible. So, a straw poll of these businesspeople, academics, diplomats, and of course Afghans who are in our audience.

I'm going to put three options to you, which range from 'Yes, the Taliban have won', to 'No, they haven't and they won't'. When you hear the view which is closest to your own, please raise your hand.

First, 'Yes, the Taliban have won because sooner or later the coalition will leave and the country will be no better for all the effort.' If that's closest to your view, please raise your hand. I'd say about a dozen hands have gone up.

The second, 'Neither the Taliban nor the coalition can win the war in Afghanistan.' There are rather more hands going up. I'd say about 20.

And the third proposition, 'Given time, the coalition will, more or less, achieve its goal to establish a functioning state and growing economy in Afghanistan.' That chimes with whom? That's the lowest number of all, I'd say. We're struggling to meet double figures there.

So, the second proposition—'Neither the Taliban nor the coalition can win the war in Afghanistan'—is the most popular view.

Members of our audience, I should say, are encouraged to take part in the debate as it goes along. So to everyone here at Chatham House, please if you hear something you want to question, do raise your hand and we'll try to get to your view.

Now to the formal presentation of the arguments. Each debater has about 90 seconds to make their case.

Mariam Abou Zahab:

Thank you. I would argue that the Taliban have won in Afghanistan because they are a national movement, they are coherent, and they're now the dominant political force that extended the conflict throughout Afghanistan and they have made in-roads in the north and in the west parts of the country, which were considered as pretty secure so far.

So the insurgency has become national and the coalition cannot reverse it. It's because they have been there longer than the US. They are not going anywhere. They will outlast the US. And they are trying to exhaust the political will of the international community. It seems that the support for the presence of foreign troops there is at an all-time low.

The problem is the lack of understanding by the West of the nature of the movement, of the motivations, of the root causes of the insurgency. And then I will say that it has to do with perceptions. The perceptions of the Afghans are very important because they shape the reality.

The war has been framed as a jihad, and they are perceived as fighting for values which they perceive as threatened, and those values are shared by part of the Pashtun conservative rural population.

Eddie Mair:

Thank you for those opening remarks. Lt General Sir Graeme Lamb was ex-Head of the SAS. He was a Special Advisor to US General Petraeus in Iraq, and helped to devise the strategy of the Awakening there. He retired from the British army and then moved to help General McChrystal do similar work in Afghanistan.

Graeme, the Taliban have won the war in Afghanistan, yes or no?

Graeme Lamb:

Eddie, no. Does it look like I'm getting any younger? Are they financially and politically stronger than they were a year ago? Do they control greater respect? Do they enjoy widespread support? Is their organisation more resilient, more coherent? Do they hold the initiative? Have they gained more ground? Do they enjoy greater sanctuary in Pakistan? Are they winning more engagements? Are they finding the going easier?

To all of the above: no. Simply no. So in my judgement, not doing too well. But let me temper that view. I think it was Kipling who suggested that triumph and disaster were two impostors, one the same. And I sense the title that we have this evening of this debate is an equally ridiculous absolute. Winning or losing.

These conflicts are extraordinarily complex. They take time. To borrow a line from George Harrison, 'give peace a chance'. It does take a little bit of time here. And I sense that we're rushing in here into trying to see something of a

conclusion, a win or a lose, in a time that doesn't actually bear any resemblance.

General McChrystal took 60 days to do his assessment. That was only signed off about a week or so ago of a year ago. And in that year, what has happened? We've seen restructuring of ISAF, re-engagement of NATO, re-establishing a working relationship with the government of Afghanistan. Resetting the campaign, reorganising the military effort.

Eddie Mair:

All right, that's a good 90 seconds and you've already quoted Kipling and George Harrison, so looking forward to getting more from you later. Peter Galbraith is next with his opening remarks. A US diplomat, he was the number two at the United Nations in Afghanistan at the time of the 2009 presidential election. He fell out spectacularly in a row with his boss over whether the UN should accept that the elections were fraudulent. Peter, the Taliban have won the war in Afghanistan, yes or no?

Peter Galbraith:

Afghanistan is a quagmire where the Taliban have won the south but cannot conquer the north, and where the coalition has lost because it has no plausible strategy for defeating the Taliban.

After nine years of coalition military effort, the Taliban is stronger today than it has been at any time since 2001. It controls the countryside in the Pashtun south, and most of Kandahar, Afghanistan's second largest city most of the time. They cannot take the north as they are an entirely Pashtun movement strongly opposed by the Tajik Hazaras and Uzbeks who dominate there.

The coalition cannot defeat the Taliban because it lacks the central element for success in a counter-insurgency campaign, which is to say it has no credible local partner. President Hamid Karzai has compiled an eight year record for ineffectiveness and for presiding over what Transparency International ranks as the world's second-most corrupt country.

Since his fraudulent election in 2009, many Afghans now see Karzai as illegitimate.

Eddie Mair:

So have the Taliban won, yes or no?

Peter Galbraith:

Well, they cannot conquer the north, but the coalition cannot win. And for General Lamb's case to be valid, he must explain that contrary to established

counter-insurgency doctrine, the coalition does not need a credible partner, or he has to explain that Karzai is a credible partner. And if he can't do that, then you must reject his case.

Eddie Mair:

All right, plenty of time for cross-questioning of each other in just a second but before that, our financial initial remarks from Abubakar Siddique from Radio Free Europe, Radio Liberty's Afghanistan correspondent. The network is funded by the US Congress but is editorially independent and is broadcast in more than 20 countries, including Iran, Russia, and Pakistan.

Have the Taliban won the war in Afghanistan, yes or no?

Abubakar Siddique:

No, and the reason that they have not won the war in Afghanistan is that the Taliban in 2010 today has become a generic term. It is applied to a broad coalition of Islamists, militants, Islamic militant networks who have very different agendas.

It is not an Afghan movement. It was never an Afghan specific movement. It's a transnational movement. In Afghanistan, the public views are against Taliban. If you do a public opinion survey today, and there have been many, they are the most unpopular folks in the country today.

The other big reason is that the Taliban are increasingly unpopular in Pakistan, where their main leadership is still based, where their main leadership has always been getting strategic guidance from. In Pakistan we have seen two successful military efforts against the Taliban and sooner or later, we will see Pakistan deciding for good to start to stop backing Afghan Taliban.

Eddie Mair:

All right, thank you all for your opening remarks. Listening to some of you, it sounds like you're all talking about different countries. But I'll let you cross-question each other. Who wants to go first?

Peter Galbraith:

I'd like to question General Lamb. Does the counter-insurgency campaign require a credible partner?

Graeme Lamb:

Yes.

Peter Galbraith:

Is Hamid Karzai's government, with an eight-year record of corruption, ineffectiveness, having stolen the last election, is that a credible partner?

Graeme Lamb:

I would question whether one person constitutes a credible partner. I know I've worked with a number of ministers, say for instance [inaudible]. I was working with Minister [inaudible], who struck me as a decent, reasonable and straightforward...

Peter Galbraith:

I know [inaudible]. What does he actually control? He looks after the programme of DDR, and how many weapons were removed under DDR?

Graeme Lamb:

From re-integration. 9,000 people supposedly came across in that programme. But the reality is, you're defining the partnership as being to an individual.

Peter Galbraith:

I'm saying the whole government.

Graeme Lamb:

Right now we have a good partnership with the ANA and the ANP.

Mariam Abou Zahab:

I will say first that this government is seen as illegitimate by the majority of the population and it's the most irrelevant in the countryside. It's not there; it's nowhere there. When you see the district officials, most of them, they cannot go to the head of the district and most of them are sitting outside. Even in the province, because they are afraid.

Eddie Mair:

So Graeme Lamb, is that a credible partner?

Mariam Abou Zahab:

It's corrupt, it's weak, it's illegitimate. It's completely relying on external support. So the same can be said for the parliament.

Graeme Lamb:

My view is that this is nine years since we went in there in 2001. Less than a decade, which if I look at my own country, I look at the United States, we've enjoyed over 200 years of our democracy. It took you a hundred years to

abolish slavery, and your constitution is very clear about the inalienable right of the individual.

So I just say that we are looking for a high expectation, but I believe that if you look towards what is occurring in the countryside... the CDC programme. 22,000 to 34,000 villages have schools which are representative- have women, have teachers.

Eddie Mair:

What's the CDC part?

Graeme Lamb:

Community development, sits within Afghanistan.

Eddie Mair:

22,000 that are receiving?

Graeme Lamb:

They have in fact delegated authority to have a local security programme, which Karzai has signed off. He has reintegration, which he signed a decree on.

Abubakar Siddique:

Well, I will not reduce the argument to an individual or an administration that was basically put together by the international community. We have to go back in recent Afghan history and look at how Afghan society was socially engineered in the 1980s with some of the same Western texts.

There's money that is now trying to fight off some of the same people. Who is Hekmatyar? We shouldn't forget that Hekmatyar was the blue-eyed boy in the 1980s. I will argue that like any stable country, Afghanistan needs time to establish institutions, but in Afghanistan one thing is very clear.

There is a nation called Afghan nation. And the Afghan nation still believes in peaceful co-existence within and peaceful co-existence with its immediate neighbours and the world community at large. They have basically proved it by going through peaceful elections, by going through consultative democratic processes. Hamid Karzai is one person. You can't hold him accountable for the working of the entire administration. He obviously doesn't control a district leader in Kandahar or somewhere.

Eddie Mair:

I'm just going to ask Peter Galbraith to hold your obvious desire to come in, particularly on that point about the President. I want to try in the course of the

programme to break down our provocative question into some key components and I guess the next thing we need to ask is, is the state of the US-led military campaign... does the fact that that's, in many peoples' eyes, going badly indicate that the Taliban have won?

Mariam Abou Zahab:

I would say it's a self-defeating strategy, because you see in Afghanistan the more troops you send, the more Afghan people are determined to fight and to resist occupation. Because now troops are seen as occupation troops. And the people perceive them as responsible for insecurity. They say, 'We're just living quietly in a valley. There was Taliban, no government, nobody.'

And then as soon as foreign troops come in, it brings the Taliban in and we are caught in between. The Afghan people are suffering. There are more civilian casualties. So the more troops you send, the more you're fuelling the insurgency.

This is not a solution, I think now everybody agrees on that. So why are you sending more troops? If you're an Afghan, how do you feel about that?

Eddie Mair:

Sir Graeme Lamb, do you accept the idea that the military campaign is not going well?

Graeme Lamb:

Well, I would completely refute that. I think the campaign up until 2009 was suspect.

Eddie Mair:

So just the first eight years then?

Graeme Lamb:

Well, I think in many ways, the way we approached the problem, we came in, we removed the Taliban... What is interesting, I was in Kandahar in 2001, and the Northern Alliance never got down south to Kabul. The Taliban had gone, because they had lost their authority with the people. The tribes, the individuals, the elders, had said, 'Enough. You are no longer fit to govern. You brought this upon us.' So they removed them and pushed them to one side in many ways, as that authority which they had taken and then abused as they'd gone through in power.

Anyway, what I saw was a campaign that has been moved towards Iraq, a focus whereby the energy went down that way, and in many ways we had an

economy of force campaign. Which ran a number of years, which was principally looking at high value targets, and therefore if we could remove these, the answer is that Afghanistan will get well.

We did nothing on the ANP, we did nothing really with the Afghan National Army, out until about 2005-2006, by which time intimidation had taken a hand across the country and we have now been trying to play catch up.

General McChrystal went in, redefined counter-insurgency. That combination, the issue of partnership, the idea of engaging with the community, and has started that campaign. General Petraeus can deliver that. My view is that we are only a year into the paper having been presented back to the United States of America on the shift change in that campaign.

To do that, I as a soldier can turn around and say, 'That was a phenomenal effort.' To make that shift, I sense changed the culture, which General McChrystal did, and General Petraeus is now beginning to deliver on.

Peter Galbraith:

Well, you can understand why General Lamb does not want to talk about Hamid Karzai, although in his first answer he talked about decrease.

Eddie Mair:

Neither do I at this point, I want to talk about the US military campaign.

Peter Galbraith:

I'm getting to this. Be patient. Because this is key. The strategy depends on having a partner. And General Lamb was just making that point. And what is the partner on the local level? He's talking about officials who have lost the authority to govern. It is the officials appointed by Karzai.

It is the local power brokers in the Pashtun areas who are predatory, and meanwhile the coalition believes it's black and white. You're on the government's side or the Taliban's side. The fact is that the local officials and these power brokers, including the President's half brother, actually collude with the Taliban.

It is a mafia state. And that is why the strategy cannot work. Because what the strategy requires is that you go in, you provide security to the population, the less committed insurgents give up or come over to our side, the population rats out the more extreme insurgents. It can't happen because if they rat out the more extreme insurgents, they're going to be reported to the Taliban and end up dead.

Eddie Mair:

Thank you. Abubakar Siddique: this question of the military campaign, does that indicate the Taliban, if not have won, are certainly making great progress?

Abubakar Siddique:

Well, frankly the Afghan people as a whole are absolutely against dividing the Afghan people among the ethnic groups. We shouldn't apply 19th century models on 21st century Afghanistan, and introduce it as Pashtun versus non Pashtun.

But the Afghan people are sick of all violence. They are a people tired of foreign countries interfering in their affairs. And I think that the Taliban have tactically gone into the north and they have expanded. But on the popular opinion front, they have lost because they're killing a lot more Afghans than the coalition.

Eddie Mair:

I want to bring in some of our audience members here on the question of military campaign. If you could introduce yourself please and then taken on the panel.

Question 1:

I lived in Afghanistan for four years in the 1970s. It seems that Western public opinion is turning, and particularly NATO opinion, very strongly against the campaign in Afghanistan. Not just the military side, but also the financial contribution, the finance that we pour into the country to pay Afghan government officials.

What do the panel think will happen if in two or three years the coalition forces are withdrawn and the subsidy to the Afghan government is withdrawn?

Eddie Mair:

We probably don't have time to take a question to the whole panel, but is there somebody in particular you want to fire that question at?

Question 1:

I think it's a general question and I'd like to fire it at them all.

Eddie Mair:

All right. I'm afraid we don't have time...

Peter Galbraith:

I'll give the short answer to it, which is that I don't think the situation would be very different to what it is now. That is to say that the Taliban will control the south, they will control Kandahar. They can't take Kabul and the north, which is non-Pashtun, will remain out of the hands of the Taliban.

Eddie Mair:

Thank you for that. On the question of the military campaign, let's have another question please.

Question 2:

My question is for General Lamb. I'd like to know how he sees the potential effectiveness of the Afghan forces once coalition troops start to dribble down.

Graeme Lamb:

It's interesting, I was across... I'm now back out of Afghanistan. I gave General McChrystal a calendar year, that was the deal, and then I would move on. The work I'd done on re-integration was broadly said, it's now the hard part of delivering.

I remember going down, and [inaudible] who's an old friend of mine, and a fine soldier with incredible experiences in counter-insurgency. I remember talking to Kurt, and his comment was, I said, 'Kurt, as old friends, how do you see this?' He said, 'You're against some of the Pakistani brigadiers and generals across here to look at these people and how good they fight.'

Question 3:

I'm looking for a really clarification from Graeme Lamb. Mariam is saying that the Taliban are the dominant political force. They've made wide inroads in the north and west, and they have national reach within the country. That doesn't sit with his statement, that the war is being won. I'd like clarification on that question for Mariam, please.

Graeme Lamb:

Bernard Fall went to Indo-China in 1952 and made an interesting observation. He looked at what he was being presented, and said, 'Actually there's a problem here, I think most of Indo-China has gone the wrong way. They've lost administrative control.' He was teaching and he looked at leadership in the villages.

In this case, when I got to Afghanistan back in August last year, my view was in fact that what I was seeing was both real and perceived intimidation. In a

survival society which a lot of Afghanistan is, perceived intimidation... How will this end? Will the Taliban take over? In which case, you cover your beds. It's how many people may their observation.

But to go back, the reality is that most people have no time or remember with great pain that time that the Taliban were in charge. I would disagree and say that they're not. I would also clarify, that Taliban leadership, systematically being incarcerated or killed. And in numbers that are also in fact quite breathtaking, for even an assemblage to be able to sustain.

Eddie Mair:

Mariam, do you recognise this picture?

Mariam Abou Zahab:

No, no, I don't. Yes it's true that mainly Taliban have been killed. But the network is still there. It's very resilient. You cannot divide them. They are there. This has been tried many times. You cannot.

Graeme Lamb:

But this is not dissimilar to the circumstances I found in 2006 in Iraq, which then transferred to 2007. The answer is the network begins to react badly. And the population begin to react against it. We are beginning to see that in parts of Afghanistan.

Mariam Abou Zahab:

No, you cannot compare Iraq and Afghanistan. Not at all.

Graeme Lamb:

I'm just talking about the people part of it, and you can.

Mariam Abou Zahab:

The people turned against the fighters in Iraq because they were foreigners. The Sunni fighters were not Iraqis, but it's completely different in Afghanistan because the fighters are Afghans, they are locals. And what the people do remember is the civil war of the early 90s. It's before the Taliban. That's what they're afraid of.

Abubakar Siddique:

Well, I will disagree with the assumption that Taliban is this wonderful popular movement that people are going and praising them and backing them. It's not like that. What keeps them alive in rural Afghanistan is the threat of intimidation. Of the systemic killing of tribal elders, they have killed more than

thousands of Pashtun leaders in both Pakistan and Afghanistan in the past seven or eight years.

That has caused a social change which nobody is talking about, which nobody is reporting about. Because in the Western public opinion, the debate has not really got what the Afghan people think, what is good for the Afghan people. It's about our national interests. It's about how our money will spend.

And people are undermining Afghans. If you go back to 1989, when the Soviets left, there was a Communist government in Afghanistan. But President Mohammad Najibullah served on his own, and there was this big offensive in Jalalabad. This was because the Afghans stood for their freedom. The Afghans stood up and said no to foreign interference. They're not going to live in a Jihadist state.

Eddie Mair:

Well as we wrestle with this question of whether the Taliban have won or not, let's look at the political announcements there have been. As I said at the beginning, President Obama, Prime Minister Cameron, setting a debate for beginning the withdrawal of the military from Afghanistan, the US June next year, the UK within five years.

Peter Galbraith, aren't those political decisions a sign that the Taliban has triumphed?

Peter Galbraith:

No. I don't think that it's a sign. It's a sign that public opinion is increasingly fed up with this war. The reason that the Taliban are winning is not that the coalition is going to withdraw, it is that the government is not a credible partner. It isn't just Taliban intimidation.

It is that when the population sees local officials, it sees predatory behaviour. When it looks at the national government, it sees corrupt and predatory behaviour. This week the Kabul Bank has now been rescued by an amount from the Central Bank that is equal to half the annual government revenues of Afghanistan.

And who is the seven per cent owner of the Kabul Bank? The brother of President Karzai. And how did he get his ownership share? On a loan that the bank gave him to buy the stock. That is discrediting it.

Eddie Mair:

Your arguments about the President are well made. And repeatedly made. I'd like, if I may, to get you to address the political issue that is being made in

London and Washington. And whether you think that that's an indication that the Taliban have succeeded.

Peter Galbraith:

The coalition has embarked on a strategy that cannot succeed. And therefore committing 100,000 US troops, 40,000 NATO troops, more than 100 billion dollars a year is a waste of resources. It is a waste and it's morally wrong to commit men and women to battle with a strategy that cannot work.

Eddie Mair:

So just get them out now?

Peter Galbraith:

Well, what I would do is reduce the number to 10 or 15 thousand and focus on missions that can be accomplished, namely protecting the north and protecting Kabul, striking at terrorists where you might see them. The problem in the north, incidentally, comes from Pashtun pockets in the north. It's not that the Taliban have had any success among the Hazaras or the Tajiks.

Mariam Abou Zahab:

Yes, definitely they won't get an Hazaras or Tajiks, but they are getting some non-Pashtuns. I never mean to say that it's all very nice to live under the Taliban. That's not the case. It's not only intimidation, this is a Western narrative, intimidation.

Eddie Mair:

But the political decisions that have been made, are they an indication that the Taliban has won?

Mariam Abou Zahab:

It's not a question, you cannot in Afghanistan win or lose. It's not like that. You cannot win, you can just not lose. But now we've come to a point...

Eddie Mair:

Forgive me, you started the programme by saying that the Taliban have won.

Mariam Abou Zahab:

Yeah, well it's not a question of whether they've won, it's in a perception of the people in Afghanistan. And the perception of the Kandaharis since 2006, Taliban have won. And they never saw the US and Karzai as potential winners. Never.

So now you have to bring them back into the political mainstream. They are Afghans, they are part of society, they represent the values and aspirations of part of the conservative wall of society. You just cannot put, like Brahimi said, was 'the original sin'. They were just not included in the Bonn Process in 2001.

And so this mistake, you have to live with it. But you cannot just exclude them all the time. They are there, they are Afghans. If you want to bring democracy, you have to bring them in.

Eddie Mair:

Abubakar Siddique, there's the question of the political institutions.

Abubakar Siddique:

I think that what Peter Galbraith said, he's essentially equating Taliban with the Pashtun, which is absolutely wrong. Taliban, maybe the majority of their foot soldiers are Pashtuns, but they are not a Pashtun nationalist movement. They have no nationalist goals. They are an Islamist movement. They are fighting for what they believe will be the Sharia state.

For the ordinary Afghans, I'd say that like every society on Earth, there is a diversity of opinion. There is a diversity of ethnic groups in Afghanistan. And the diversity also applies to Pashtuns. They are not a monolith. We have created this monolith narrative of who the Taliban are, what they want.

Eddie Mair:

Sure, but all those diverse communities in Afghanistan, won't they be glad that the American President is setting a date?

Abubakar Siddique:

Yes, but the British and the Americans have, I think, a moral responsibility to help the Afghans. Afghanistan was a victim of global conflicts. There was a communist coup and aftermath of that coup. But it was the global politics—the Cold War which turned into hot water in Afghanistan. And then the Jihadist wars of the 90s and how Al Qaeda was based there.

So it is in the West's interests to help Afghans. They have done some good things, but there have been failures and we need to correct those failures. One of the failures, as Mariam rightly pointed out, is that there has to be a political mechanism to reach out to the Taliban.

Eddie Mair:

All right. I know we've got some Afghans in our audience tonight, and if you'd raise your hands we'll come to you in just a second. But obviously, Sir Graeme, I'm particularly keen to hear your answer on what the politicians are up to.

Graeme Lamb:

I expect there's one observation. Shortly after President Obama gave his speech I went up to Kunar, and I sat down and talked to a number of the elders there. And there was much debate at the time, shouldn't have said this, 2001, setting a timeline, conditions-based, all that. It's inappropriate.

What's fascinating, as I sat down with all these elders, they said, 'Great speech. Really liked it. Crystal clear, you're not a force of occupation. You'll leave.' Actually, conditions-based, 2011, that was always part of the campaign. As you increase the size of the NSF, the ANP—and they can do more and are—the truth is actually you don't need to be there.

So the idea that this goes up and then goes out is actually not the case. Actually, in many ways the timelines have also been set by our own Prime Minister, and by President Karzai who said, 'We will be running this.' My view is that is a very realistic timeline. We can do it.

Eddie Mair:

Let me go to some of the Afghans who are in our audience. On this question of the political decisions that have been made on troop withdrawal.

Question 4:

Before, to answer that question, they say that Afghan nation, actually we are not a nation. We are a divided nation. I would look at the simple point of how we define a nation itself. If you ask me, 'You're from Afghanistan?' I say, 'Yes.' You ask for a bank note, I give it to you, you say, 'What's written on it? I cannot read it.' So I'm not part of that nation.

If somewhere they try to sing the national anthem, I do not understand it. What are they saying? This is the basic principle of the nation. When I do not understand, how can we be a nation? We are a divided nation.

Secondly, for General Lamb, they say that we are succeeding. I don't know how he tried to define succeeding, while the Taliban is coming to power. The others have released them from prison and the number of casualties is increasing. This is a kind of success I don't understand.

Question 5:

I'm also an Afghan. I've recently graduated from University of London. I've just been on a trip to Afghanistan. I've done some research and first of all, to respond to the assertion that we're not one nation, and I don't understand the bank notes and the national anthem, I think it's a very minority view in Afghanistan. Afghans do feel like a nation. They have a memory of the pre-war era. I am 24 years old, but I can relate to the period when there was peace in my country.

Eddie Mair:

On this question of a timeline for removal of American troops.

Question 5:

Yes, on that question, I believe that Afghans are faced with a dilemma. There is intimidation of the Taliban, but on a local level we also feel intimidated by the troops. All you have to do is just take your car and drive through the airport in Jalalabad city. You would understand what I'm saying.

People feel intimidated by the foreign troops. They're also scared that once the American or NATO forces leave, who are they left to? The rattled box that Afghanistan was after 1992. That's the predominant view that people have.

Eddie Mair:

Can you just expand on that journey you were just talking about?

Question 5:

Well basically, if there are American or foreign troops having their convoy passing through these roads, you're not allowed to go near them. You're asked to stop. And that's very similar to how the Russians used to treat Afghans. In the minds of those people who are post-30s, they remember that. They remember the 1980s.

For a lot of people it's insulting that they say, 'It's my road, it's my country, you're not letting me drive through it?' That's perception again, there is some realities of course that there have been attacks, but it's a war of hearts and minds. And unfortunately, not the Taliban, nor the Karzai government, nor the international community has won this, because the Afghans are not happy.

Peter Galbraith:

I want to comment on this exchange, because I think it says a lot about Afghanistan. Ali here is not Pashtun, because the national anthem is written in Pashtun. And he actually expresses the view that it's quite common among

Hazara, Tajiks, maybe some of the others, that they have their own distinct nation. Are you Pashtun?

Question 5:

Half Pashtun, half Tajik.

Peter Galbraith:

Well, what typically happens is that Pashtuns say that Pashtuns are the majority, 'We're all Afghans'. So you have that kind of contrast. Now this raises the issue of the looming danger, the way in which the situation in the next month is likely to get much worse. On the 17th of September, there will be parliamentary elections. They are likely to be as fraudulent as the presidential elections last year.

And if Karzai removes the parliament, which has good representation by Tajiks and Hazaras, basically steals those elections, what you could have a situation evolve from what is essentially a civil war among the Pashtuns—the government side versus the Taliban. It could become an ethnic civil war involving also the Tajiks and the Hazaras.

Question 5:

Peter, I'm sorry but it's a very Western-centric view of the ethnicity of Afghanistan.

Question 4:

But even look at them in London, look at this community in London. They are all of them by name Afghanistan. If you go inside them, for example Afghan society in Ealing, who controls them? Most of them Pashtun. Go in Harrow, they are controlled by Tajik and others, and so on.

Question 5:

The ethnic divisions in Afghanistan post '92, the main source of concern within the ethnic groups was distribution of resources. There was a perception during the Taliban era, 1992-1996, that Pashtuns are controlling the country and they're not giving anything to other ethnic groups. This perception led to what we have now, where you have the President who's Pashtun, you have the Vice President Hazara, you have the Vice President Tajik.

Now again there's a perception among Pashtuns who say, General Fahim has, some people call him 'land grabber of Kabul', because whenever you see better apartments, better properties, it belongs to Fahim's family. So there is a perception, but come to grassroots people who are educated, the ordinary Afghan people, they understand that we have no problem with each other. The problem is from externally, asserted over them.

Eddie Mair:

Thank you very much for that debate on the floor taking place. You are very much welcome to join as you listen to this debate by going to the Radio 4 blog page and follow the links.

I want to turn to another aspect of this question of whether the Taliban have won. Does the fact that in nine years the West has failed to build a stable and credible state, isn't that an indication that the Taliban have succeeded?

Abubakar Siddique:

I think historically if you look at Afghan nation and state-building, anywhere in post conflict situations, it usually takes a very long time. And Afghans, in some aspects, have been better at some post-conflict situations. In some they have done worse. But the basic problem is the vision for Afghanistan.

What kind of Afghanistan do Afghans want? And what kind of Afghanistan does Afghanistan's immediate neighbours want and countries that interfere in Afghanistan? What kind of vision does the Western alliance now that has 150,000 soldiers in Afghanistan want?

In my opinion, the Afghans have a very good moral of governance, but the institution-building will take time. And of course there has to be accountability. There needed to be accountability from Day 1. There has to be an inclusive political process. We basically need now a round 2, where the Taliban or all the insurgents, that includes all the disgruntled Afghans.

And Afghanistan is a society that has been through invasions and wars and these divisions. We have seen examples of it here. That will take time to heal. It will not be a country without problems. Ethnicity and ethno-nationalism is a problem in every society.

But at least Afghans have proved one thing after 9/11. By all means that a majority of Afghans are willing to live in modern times. They would like to live in a state where there is rule of law, where there is a government that serves the people.

Eddie Mair:

All right, but we're obviously not there yet. I'd like to get Sir Graeme Lamb's view on it. You talked about a questionable suspect in the first years of this conflict. In Afghanistan, often people don't have electricity, don't get Peter Galbraith started on the corruption. The political process is flawed and women's role in society is 'suspect'. The fact that the state is not seen as credible, isn't that evidence that the Taliban have made huge progress?

Graeme Lamb:

No, take something like the Kabul conference which was recently held. There was a rocket attack the day before, I think the delegates turned up and there was nothing during the whole conference. We couldn't guarantee that sort of security here as we look towards the Olympics in 2012. We're going to look to see how we can try to, and make sure there are some of those safeguards. But actually that worked rather well.

There was 25 percent, I think, representation of females at that. And engaged with the mullahs and the clerics and the like, at the Kabul conference. I think there's only something like 17 percent representation of women in the Senate back in the United States of America.

The interesting one, though, is sovereignty. In many ways, I don't think that we actually embraced or have allowed the Afghans, of which they are hugely I would agree in the Taliban, I sense this nationalism. What it is to be an Afghan. That border is mainly, in fact, set themselves because no one else was brave enough to come in. And we should know, we lost three wars there.

When I went in 2001 I remember going up to Bamiyan and meeting up with one of the Hazara elders, who gripped me and said, 'Thank you for giving us back our country.'

Eddie Mair:

Do you think the country has been given back to the Afghans?

Mariam Abou Zahab:

No, that was 2001. There were so many opportunities which were lost because the people were not against the West in 2001. This showed that the US and NATO will send many troops everywhere in Afghanistan and they will get rid of the warlords. What happened? They were co-opted and they were strengthened. NATO is still working through those structures.

What are the people afraid of? It's not the days of the Taliban; it's not 2001. People are afraid of a civil war. This so-called tribal solution, again social engineering, the militias whether you call them self-defence or whatever, this is a recipe for disaster. This is again a way of starting a civil war under the name of Afghanistan or whatever you call it.

Eddie Mair:

Does day to day life in the country not give you hope for Afghanistan or its future as a credible state?

Mariam Abou Zahab:

Hope is not a policy.

Peter Galbraith:

I want to second the thought that hope is not a policy. Not facing up to the hard reality doesn't work. If you argue that women have a better status in Afghanistan than the United States Senate because there were more women at the Kabul conference than in the Senate, that to me is evading the reality that exists on the ground.

Eddie Mair:

Is it not a pertinent point?

Peter Galbraith:

It's self-evident that the status of women in Afghanistan is appalling. It's appalling. It's not just a ways to go, but these kind of arguments that are tossed out that Karzai made some commitment or that there are women represented doesn't actually change the reality on the ground.

What you have is a state in which you can't fight corruption because the institutions, including the Attorney General, who are there to fight corruption are themselves corrupt. There's no backing for the war on corruption on top. You have a system that is a constitutional arrangement. It creates a highly centralised state in a country which is one of the most diverse in the world, and therefore it doesn't work. It's not as if the central government controls anything.

Mariam Abou Zahab:

There's one word which we haven't heard so far: justice. Justice and accountability, that's what the Afghans want. And why do they turn to the Taliban? Because the Taliban do deliver in matters of justice and security. But the government is non-existent.

Question 6:

First of all, I just want to go back to the question...

Eddie Mair:

If you don't mind, I don't want to keep going back to bits we've done, if you don't mind.

Question 6:

OK. I just want to say that I'm the chairperson of Afghans in Harrow. I am half Pashtun. There is no Tajik in Pashtun. And I hate to say that, to raise that question that Peter raised, that raising the Pashtun and northern or south and east, that's another dangerous game.

The question is now, which sort of Afghanistan will leave the coalition forces after they are leaving? I was in Afghanistan in 2002 with a great hope to finally leave Afghanistan which I did. I visited more than eight cities, including Panjshir, Parwan, and all the other cities, without the bodyguard or without any tension or anxiety. But now, when I'm visiting Kabul, I can't visit my relatives outside Kabul. That sort of Afghanistan you're going to leave.

Question 7:

At the beginning of the programme, we were offered three questions or three options. I think there might usefully have been a fourth, which I'd like to pose to Mariam and Peter. Mariam, earlier on you said that the military are mistaken if they think they can produce a political solution. I think you're absolutely right. But by the same token, I don't think there are many military people who would make that argument.

I think they would make the argument that counter-insurgency is about political staying power. It is now about political staying power and has always been about it. That's what counter-insurgency is; some people call it strategic patience.

My fourth question, if you like, for you and Peter, is whether we— and by we I mean the Afghans, the Pakistanis, the coalition, the West, whatever you like— whether we can afford to let the Taliban win, because that's usually the way counter-insurgencies fail.

Mariam Abou Zahab:

It's not a question that you can afford them to win or not. I think the West doesn't care whether the Taliban are sharing power in Kabul. It's not the problem. As long as their interests are not threatened. And the Taliban have a local agenda. That agenda is Afghan. They are not pan-Islamists. They are not going to threaten Western interests and put bombs in the Tube in London and metro in Paris. No, not at all.

Also, this women question we were talking about, the West still doesn't care. The Americans don't give a damn about the status of Afghan women. It has to be clear, they're just using that as an agenda key, nothing else.

Peter Galbraith:

You cannot confuse something which may be important from something which is possible. We do not have a counter-insurgency strategy that can in fact defeat the Taliban. So whether it's important or not is irrelevant. Even if it was very important, and I would argue it isn't that important, but even if it were, it isn't going to work. And therefore is not worth committing those resources to.

Eddie Mair:

I just want to ask you, Abubakar, what sort of Afghanistan do you think will be left, our questioner wanted to know, once everyone is gone?

Abubakar Siddique:

I think in the debate today we have not touched on a very important issue, which is what kind of Afghanistan the regional countries want, and what kind of interests they define. Since 2001, we have seen a de facto war going on between India and Pakistan inside Afghanistan, which is one of the big destabilising factors inside Afghanistan today.

Then there is of course Iran, China, Russia, central Asians, the Arabs. Everybody has huge stakes in Afghanistan. And it depends on the Western will and the direction they take. If we have to listen to people like Peter

Galbraith who still thinks that Afghanistan is a bunch of tribes and all they have done in their history is fighting each other...

Peter Galbraith:

I never said any of that. I haven't said that.

Abubakar Siddique:

Maybe in other words.

Eddie Mair:

That's what he heard.

Peter Galbraith:

I haven't at all. I've talked about national groups, not about tribes. And I haven't said they've been fighting each other.

Eddie Mair:

We're almost at the end of our time, and I want to give everyone on the panel a final chance... we had the straw poll at the beginning of the programme. We'll take another one in just a second. This is, you on the panel, your final opportunity in 90 seconds or so to convince the audience here. Have the Taliban won the war in Afghanistan?

Abubakar Siddique:

I think they have not won and they shouldn't win. If we allow Afghanistan to go back to Taliban's hand, we will have a worse rerun of the 1990s, where there will be massacres. Afghanistan will once again turn into a base for global terrorism. Mariam said that Taliban are not involved. The Afghan Taliban regime was not per say involved, but they provided the ground, they enabled Al Qaeda to operate out of Afghanistan. And look what happened.

This whole infrastructure is right there, it just has to move for federally administrated tribal areas back into Kandahar and Helmand and hosts. In my opinion, the Taliban... the people in Afghanistan and Pakistan both, they understand they have no future with Afghanistan with Taliban.

But they also understand that there is a need for accommodation. We need to reach out to Taliban, accommodate them in the political mainstream. And they can, if they ever have the backing of the people through ballot, they can win and they can have power.

Eddie Mair:

I thank you for that. Lieutenant General Sir Graeme Lamb, your last chance.

Graeme Lamb:

We talk about the Taliban in justice, in a reasonable light. Since the 10th of May to the 13th of August this year, they injured 789 Afghans. They killed 380. They cut off the nose, they actually are in many ways in no way, these are just harsh facts. You can roll your head and say whatever you like.

Peter Galbraith talks about, 'Oh this can't possibly work.' I remember exactly the same worthless argument when I sat in Iraq in 2006, 'The surge is a complete and utter waste of time.' The answer is Iraq today has choice. However they take it forward, it is their choice.

My view is that we are set on a course now which has a reasonable chance of an outcome which will provide the Afghan people with choice.

Peter Galbraith:

General Lamb has argued about might be true in 100 years in Afghanistan. And he's argued about Iraq, but he hasn't actually argued about Afghanistan. We can start with the proposition that the Taliban are evil, ran a very brutal regime, and every fact that he's said about them is true.

But the fact that they're evil doesn't mean that we have a strategy that can defeat them. And we do not, because the counter-insurgency strategy requires an Afghan partner, which in Hamid Karzai and in the local officials, so obviously does not exist.

Now, as to the consequences of failure? It is that the Taliban take half the country. They may be a pan-Islamic movement, but they have support only in the Pashtun areas. It can be eliminated.

With regard to the war on terror, Afghanistan is a relatively minor part these days. It's true that the September 11th attacks originated from Afghan soil. But Al Qaeda is largely elsewhere. This is a war, and I will make the last point, all you have to do is look at the cost. We are spending 140 billion dollars a year,

140,000 troops to fight an enemy that has 35,000 part-time fighters on a budget of 60 million dollars a year. If that is how we fight the wars of the future, it does not auger well for the NATO alliance.

Mariam Abou Zahab:

I would just say that the coalition is running out of money and of time, while the Taliban have plenty of manpower and men have time, they have potential recruits. The policy of the coalition now is fragmenting Afghanistan, accelerating political fragmentation and weakening Afghan institutions.

It might not be the ideal solution to share power with the Taliban, but you have to bring them into the political mainstream. And if you want to bring long-term stability to the country, you just cannot exclude them. It's the most realistic option.

Eddie Mair:

Thank you very much for all of your contributions tonight. Let's end, as promised, with another show of hands. I wonder if anyone's mind has been changed.

Who thinks the Taliban have not won? All right, I think that's about 10 to a dozen hands.

Who thinks neither win? Which was the most popular, and it seems to be again.

And who thinks the Taliban have won? I think the panel have convinced nobody unless there's been a huge change, there's just the same numbers but different people.

Perhaps we weren't going to change views, but it's been a fascinating debate. Thanks to our panellists Graeme Lamb, Peter Galbraith, Abubakar Siddique and Mariam Abou Zahab. Thanks to our audience of course here at Chatham House and to you for listening.