

CONFERENCE REPORT

Envisioning Afghanistan's Future

Building Bridges for a Shared Narrative

Prepared on behalf of the

Ottawa Consultative Process (OCP)

in collaboration with the

Centre for International Policy Studies (CIPS)

University of Ottawa

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Executive Summary

On April 22, 2026, the Ottawa Consultative Process (OCP) and the Centre for International Policy Studies (CIPS) at the University of Ottawa co-hosted a conference examining Afghanistan's ongoing crisis and the prospects for a shared national narrative, with dedicated attention to youth empowerment and civic engagement. The conference convened scholars, diplomats, former government officials, civil society leaders, and diaspora advocates across three thematic panels.

Discussion across the day converged on several central conclusions. The deepening crisis in Afghanistan is multidimensional in nature, encompassing a humanitarian emergency, a severe human rights crisis, a prolonged political deadlock, and growing security threats. Addressing this complex and multifaceted situation requires a renewed and unified international approach, as well as a shared narrative among Afghans both inside and outside the country. Existing international accountability mechanisms remain insufficient to address the scale of human rights violations in Afghanistan. The exclusion of Afghan women and girls from education and public life was identified as a structural threat to the country's long-term development, even as an Afghan-led alternative education sector has emerged as a significant, if fragile, achievement.

A shared national narrative for Afghanistan, panellists agreed, cannot be externally imposed. It must be built through inclusive dialogue grounded in human rights, social justice, and socio-political pluralism, broad enough to represent the country's ethnic, linguistic, and religious diversity. This process requires sustained support from the international community, a credible platform for dialogue, and a religious discourse.

Finally, the conference affirmed the central role of youth, both in the diaspora and within Afghanistan, in shaping the country's future. Diaspora communities were encouraged to strengthen their cohesion, engage meaningfully in their countries of residence, and actively contribute to the societies that have welcomed them, while amplifying the agency and voices of young people who continue to navigate crises on the ground.

Introduction

Nearly five years after the Taliban's return to power, Afghanistan continues to occupy a paradoxical position in international affairs: simultaneously the subject of sustained scholarly and humanitarian attention and a country increasingly absent from the priorities of governments preoccupied with other crises. It was against this backdrop that the Ottawa Consultative Process and the Centre for International Policy Studies convened the present conference, deliberately structured to move beyond diagnosis toward the harder question of what a shared path forward might look like and who is responsible for building it.

The conference was organized around three sequential panels, each building on the questions raised by the one before it. The first panel established the empirical and structural baseline: what is the present situation in Afghanistan, and what has the past two decades taught the international community and Afghans themselves about the limits of prior approaches. The second panel moved from diagnosis to prescription, asking what conditions would need to hold for a genuinely shared narrative, as opposed to a narrative imposed by any single actor, to take root. The third panel completed this progression by turning to agency: who, in practice, is positioned to carry this work forward, and what does meaningful engagement look like for a generation of Afghans, including youth, in the diaspora and inside the country alike, who will inherit whatever narrative is or is not built.

This report follows the same structure. Each section below summarizes the panel's discussion and distills the principal ideas raised, to preserve both the analytical content of the conference and the logical progression from situation to narrative, to agency, that organized it.

Conference Report

A. Opening Session

The opening session brought together speakers from the organizing institutions, members of Parliament, civil society representatives, and members of the diplomatic community. In their remarks, the speakers outlined the most pressing and complex challenges facing Afghanistan under Taliban rule, highlighting the deteriorating human rights situation, political uncertainty, and the ongoing humanitarian crisis.

They underscored the need for a recalibrated international approach that is more coherent, coordinated, and responsive to developments on the ground. At the same time, they emphasized the importance of fostering a shared narrative among Afghan political and civic forces as a critical step toward strengthening cohesion and enhancing collective effectiveness in addressing the country's multifaceted crisis.

Attention was given to the need for sustained and coordinated advocacy efforts, grounded in credible, evidence-based research. Speakers also highlighted the importance of maintaining consistent diplomatic engagement and making effective use of relevant international mechanisms to ensure that the situation in Afghanistan remains a priority on the global agenda and that the voices of affected communities, particularly women and girls, continue to be heard.

B. The Current Situation: Challenges and Lessons Learned

Summary

The conference's first panel established the baseline from which the subsequent discussions proceeded, examining the humanitarian, political, and structural dimensions of the Afghanistan crisis. A key point shared in this panel was that the crisis in Afghanistan is complex and multidimensional in nature. It encompasses a humanitarian emergency affecting millions of people, a profound human rights crisis particularly for women and girls, a prolonged political impasse, and evolving security challenges with implications that extend well beyond Afghanistan's borders. Given the gravity of the humanitarian situation, sustained international assistance remains essential to address basic humanitarian needs, ensure access to essential services, and support the most vulnerable populations affected by the ongoing crisis.

Discussion also centred on the inadequacy of existing accountability mechanisms, the need for an honest reckoning with the legacy of the past two decades, and the structural drivers of the country's continued fragmentation. The exclusion of women from public and educational life was characterized as one of the most consequential concerns, and panellists highlighted the emergence of an Afghan-led alternative education ecosystem as a significant, if fragile, achievement meriting urgent international support. Taken together, the panel's contributions suggested that any future approach to Afghanistan must

begin from an honest accounting of both the failures and the achievements of the past, rather than a selective reading of either.

These themes gave rise to several specific ideas that recurred throughout the panel's discussion:

- Addressing the multifaceted crisis in Afghanistan requires a holistic and integrated strategy, one that recognizes the deep connections between humanitarian needs, human rights, political legitimacy, economic stability, and security.
- Canada, together with other like-minded partners, is well-positioned to help advance a more unified and principled international approach, one that is urgently needed and firmly grounded in human rights, gender equality, and multilateral cooperation.
- Existing international accountability mechanisms for human rights violations in Afghanistan remain inadequate, time-bound, and inconsistently applied across cases.
- A more honest accounting of the 2001–2021 period is required, recognizing genuine developmental progress alongside the structural shortcomings and challenges.
- Four decades of conflict in Afghanistan have undermined social cohesion. Addressing the entrenched fractures requires sustained, inclusive, and long-term efforts to foster dialogue and trust rather than short-term political fixes.
- The exclusion of women from education and public life constitutes a structural threat to Afghanistan's social and economic development, not merely a human rights violation in isolation.
- An Afghan-led, borderless alternative education sector has emerged in response to the ban on women's education and merits sustained international investment and coordination.
- A genuine political process and sustained international support are essential to addressing the current political deadlock. In this context, a shared narrative is needed to strengthen cohesion among all non-Taliban political and civic actors.

C. Collective Responsibility and a Common Narrative

Summary

Building directly on the first panel's diagnosis of fragmentation and institutional failure, the second panel turned to the question of what might hold a common narrative together where prior efforts had not. Discussion emphasized that such a narrative cannot be externally imposed but must be grounded in human rights, social justice, inclusion, and socio-political pluralism, sufficient to equitably encompass Afghanistan's diverse communities. Panelists situated Afghanistan's narrative crisis within a broader global retreat from democratic norms, and stressed the necessity of religious reinterpretation, sustained diplomatic principle,

and a credible international platform for dialogue. The panel's underlying argument was that the absence of a shared narrative is not merely Afghanistan's failure but a reflection of a wider international drift away from the principled commitments that might otherwise anchor one.

From this discussion, several ideas emerged as central to any future narrative-building process:

- A common narrative must emerge through genuine, inclusive dialogue rather than external imposition, and must be broad enough to represent Afghanistan's ethnic, linguistic, and religious diversity.
- Civic space, independent media, and an active civil society are essential infrastructure for the development of any legitimate shared narrative.
- International actors, including Western governments and the United Nations, must avoid incremental normalization of the Taliban's position and maintain firm, consistent principles despite diplomatic fatigue.
- A formally facilitated, UN-led platform for dialogue among Afghan political forces, regional actors, and the international community is necessary to advance national and regional reconciliation.

D. Civic Engagement, Youth Empowerment, and the Shaping of Future

Summary

Where the first two panels addressed the conditions for change at the level of institutions and narrative, the conference's final panel asked who would carry that work forward in practice. The discussion shifted to youth, both in the diaspora and inside Afghanistan, addressing the meaning and responsibilities of engagement for a generation experiencing starkly divergent realities. Panellists addressed the lived challenges of diaspora transition alongside concrete pathways for impact, while candidly acknowledging the fragmentation that continues to limit the diaspora's collective influence. Emphasis was placed on civic participation in Canada, intergenerational collaboration, and the responsibility of newcomers to engage actively in their new communities. In this sense, the panel returned the conference to ground level, translating the structural and narrative questions raised earlier into a question of individual and collective responsibility.

The panel converged on the following ideas regarding the path toward meaningful youth engagement:

- Diaspora youth engagement should be pursued through academic and professional excellence, civic and political participation in Canada, intergenerational collaboration with community elders, and the use of storytelling and media as advocacy tools.
- Internal fragmentation within the Afghan diaspora, reflecting some fractures within the broader Afghan society, must be addressed honestly as a precondition for coordinated collective action.

- Afghan youth inside the country, despite facing poverty, insecurity, and displacement, continue to demonstrate agency through self-organization and self-education, and must be meaningfully included in international policy discussions concerning Afghanistan.
- The panel was unequivocal that newcomers must actively engage in social and community services, volunteering, and meaningfully contributing to Canadian society as a fundamental aspect of the settlement process.
- Diaspora youth were encouraged to take practical steps through advocacy and the building of stronger interpersonal and institutional networks.

Conclusion

Read together, the conference's three panels traced a deliberate arc: from an honest reckoning with Afghanistan's present situation, to the conditions under which a shared narrative might be built, to the question of who is responsible for building it. This progression was not incidental. It reflects a shared conviction among the day's speakers that diagnosis without prescription is inert, and that prescription without identified agents of change is merely aspirational. Accountability, education, and inclusive dialogue emerged as the threads connecting every panel's discussion, regardless of whether the focus was political, humanitarian, or generational.

The conference affirmed that the work of building a shared narrative does not rest with governments and institutions alone. It rests equally with the diaspora communities present in the room, across Canada and beyond, with the youth navigating both crisis and opportunity, and with the scholars and civil society actors committed to honest reckoning with the past. Building bridges, as the conference's title suggests, is not a singular act but an ongoing discipline, one that requires patience, coordination, and an unwavering commitment to the dignity and rights of the people of Afghanistan)

This report is offered as a record of that day's discussion and as an invitation to continue the dialogue it began.

For the full list of opening speakers and panellists across the three panels, please refer to Annex 1.

Report prepared by Madina Mashkooi, on behalf of OCP and CIPS | April 2026

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CONFERENCE SPEAKERS & PARTICIPANTS

Envisioning Afghanistan's Future: Building Bridges for a Shared Narrative

EVENT ORGANIZERS & OPENING REMARKS

OPENING REMARKS

Sharif Ghalib

Executive Director
Ottawa Consultative Process (OCP)

WELCOMING REMARKS

Nisha Shah

Professor & Associate Director, CIPS
University of Ottawa

KEYNOTE SPEAKERS

Opening Session

KEYNOTE SPEAKER

Senator Marilou McPhedran

Senator, Parliament of Canada

KEYNOTE SPEAKER

Dr. Sima Samar

Former Chairperson, AIHRC
Nobel Peace Prize Nominee

KEYNOTE SPEAKER

Dr. Nipa Banerjee

CIPS Senior Fellow
University of Ottawa

KEYNOTE SPEAKER

H.E. Hassan Soroosh

Ambassador of Afghanistan to Canada

PANEL A*The Current Situation: Challenges and Lessons Learned***MODERATOR****Arezou Nooristani**

Researcher & Former Diplomat

PANELLIST**Shabnam Salehi**Former Commissioner, AIHRC
PhD Scholar, Carleton University**PANELLIST****Aziz Rafiee**Executive Director
Afghanistan Civil Society Forum Organization**PANELLIST****Arian Sharifi**Lecturer & Co-Chair, MPP Program
Princeton University**PANELLIST****Jawan Shir Rasikh**

Independent Scholar

PANELLIST**Lauryn Oates**Executive Director
Right to Learn Afghanistan**PANEL B***Collective Responsibility and a Common Narrative***MODERATOR****Dr. Naser Taimori**

PhD Candidate, Carleton University

PANELLIST**David Sproule**Former Special Envoy of Canada to
Afghanistan**PANELLIST****Mohammad Moheq**Religious Studies Scholar
Former Professor, Herat University**PANELLIST****Dr. Joan Tyler**Member, University Women
Helping Afghan Women (UWHAW)**PANELLIST****Ahmad Fahim Hakim**

Former Human Rights Commissioner, AIHRC

PANELLIST**Dawood Qayomi**Lecturer, University of Toronto
Former Senior Diplomat**PANEL C***Civic Engagement, Youth Empowerment, and the Shaping of Future***MODERATOR****Nilab Akbari**President, Afghan Students' Association
Carleton University**PANELLIST****Olasupo Fagbemi**Founder, The Rostrum Global Initiative,
Canada**PANELLIST****Yalda Sarwar**

Journalist & Poet, Carleton University

PANELLIST**Eman Noori**

Journalist, Toronto Metropolitan University

PANELLIST**Basir Mohammadi**

MA Student, University of Ottawa

PANELLIST**Abdul Hakim Azizi**

Director, Afghan–Canadian Youth Council

CLOSING SESSION**CLOSING REMARKS****Baher Formuli**

Community Leader & Human Rights Activist

CONCLUSION**Dr. Faramarz Tamanna**Researcher, CIPS, University of Ottawa
Professor, Saint Paul University