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## “Negotiating Afghanistan: The Future of Gender Equality”

Invitation to a Dialogue

Middle East Studies@AU

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### Background:

Recently, sensitive and secret talks have begun in earnest to negotiate the post-conflict period in Afghanistan. The Obama administration has promised to withdraw most troops by 2014 and troop reductions have already begun and will accelerate in 2013. As NATO and US forces withdraw from Afghanistan, these talks will try to integrate the Taliban and other forces into a new unity government. However, what role will Afghan women play at the negotiating table and in Afghanistan following the foreign withdrawal of troops and donor funding? Regardless of what led us to this current predicament, where do we go from here, understanding the growing desire from Afghan and international audiences for a quick exit of foreign actors from Afghanistan?

“Rescuing Afghan women” was a legitimating trope for the American and NATO intervention in 2001. Instrumentalizing gender in this way was criticized by many scholars, development practitioners, and activists inside and outside of Afghanistan. Nevertheless, whatever one’s position on the invasion of Afghanistan, the fall of the Taliban, or the Karzai government’s policies, over the past decade a series of policy interventions have improved the education, health, political representation, and status of Afghan women.

Whether or not these initiatives have been successful or widely effective in Afghanistan, many important constituencies in Afghanistan see them as externally driven and “tainted” due to their foreign funding or the way in which they emerged,

directly or indirectly as a consequence of the 2001 invasion. Thus, a backlash against the women's movement and initiatives which have supported gender equality may follow the negotiated withdrawal of foreign forces.

In other post-conflict negotiations and democratic transitions where gender issues had been politically sensitive for various reasons, compromises between nationalist, conservative, ethnic, religious, liberal, and secular forces were often enacted to the detriment of women and gender equality. What do other lessons in post-conflict situations tell us? What do we know about the 'fate' of gendered initiatives during transitions, when former enemies return to power? How can women strengthen coalitions, attract important allies domestically, regionally, and internationally and resist policy reversals?

#### Organizational Approach:

The purpose of this conversation on Monday, March 19<sup>th</sup>, at 11 AM in the School of International Service's Abrahamson Founder's Room at American University, is to bring together *diverse* voices from among academia, the media, the U.S. government, think tanks, diplomatic ranks, and NGOs, to discuss, theorize, debate, and conceptualize strategies in which Afghan women may be able to gain a stronger position at the negotiating table, that is not presumptuous, patronizing, irrelevant, or counter-productive. We hope that you can join us for this dialogue and meeting to contribute your expertise and ideas to it.

It will explore what is meant by demanding that "women" are fully represented the bargaining table, when Afghan women are diverse and represent varied interests and identities. It will consider how gender issues can be a priority when security and strategic issues seem to be the primary goals of nations involved in the negotiations. Even if there are skilled female leaders discussing policy recommendations at the negotiating table, who will enforce or implement these agreements in a post-conflict situation or as war breaks out again? Currently enveloped in secrecy, it is hoped that conversation and dialogue about this complex subject may inform public policy and provoke public debate.

This 'invitation-only' meeting will ask participants to engage in an 'off the record' dialogic discussion about scenarios, coalitions, platforms, or initiatives which might strengthen public concern about the participation of women at the bargaining table, while considering the pitfalls of global advocacy. Brainstorming, creative strategizing, and debate will be encouraged and facilitated by the organizers.

We hope very much that you can join us. If you cannot attend this program please recommend a colleague and we will contact them, but the success of this program depends on bringing together people from different institutional settings who are willing to engage each other and consider extremely tough questions with some optimism and creativity. Unfortunately, due to funding limitations, participants will largely be drawn from the Washington, DC metropolitan area. Lunch will be served and the seminar will conclude at 2:30 PM. Please RSVP as soon as possible to Tom Osann, Program Assistant at Middle East Studies @ AU, [tom.m.osann@gmail.com](mailto:tom.m.osann@gmail.com).

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