BEYOND BOUNDARIES

5TH PAK-AFGHAN RELIGIOUS SCHOLARS DIALOGUE

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Introduction

The 5th Pak-Afghan Religious Stakeholders Dialogue, organized by the Center for Research and Security Studies (CRSS), brought together 25 participants, including religious scholars, academicians, and political analysts from Pakistan and Afghanistan. The conference also saw notable participation from the representatives of the British High Commission (BHC) Islamabad and the former Chairman of the Council of Islamic Ideology (CII), Dr. Qibla Ayaz.

Critical Analysis

Both countries face significant challenges related to the **TTP** (**Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan**) and other militant groups like **ISKP** (**Islamic State-Khorasan Province**). The discussions emphasized how these groups exploit the lack of clear counterterrorism measures and effective border control between the two nations. Pakistani participants voiced their concerns over Afghanistan's role in containing the TTP, urging Afghan officials to take a proactive stance against the group's acitivities. Afghan participants, while mostly acknowledging the concerns of Pakistan, expressed frustration with the widespread perception that Afghanistan is merely a sanctuary for militancy, emphasizing the constraints faced by a nation still seeking international legitimacy. They conveyed a desire to normalize ties globally while meeting security obligations, which they argued can only be achieved if they receive more structured support from neighboring countries like Pakistan and key international actors.

While Afghan participants view the **non-recognition of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan** (**IEA**) **as an impediment** to any assistance from the Taliban on counterterrorism or shifting their stance on human rights, the majority of Pakistani scholars and the representative from the British High Commission maintained that recognition remains contingent upon the de facto rulers demonstrating progress on the international demands for recognition. These demands include dissociating from all terrorist groups and preventing them from operating on Afghan

soil, establishing an inclusive government representative of all sociopolitical and ethnic groups, and making concessions in girls' and women's education and employment..

While security concerns dominated much of the discourse, the economic ties between the two nations present both a challenge and an opportunity. Afghan scholars highlighted Afghanistan's recent economic developments, including road infrastructure projects and trade initiatives with Central Asian neighbors, which promise improved connectivity and growth. They lamented the lack of similar agreements with Pakistan, which could provide much-needed economic relief to struggling border communities. Some participants pointed to corruption and bureaucratic hurdles, such as delays at Karachi ports, as barriers to effective trade, while others emphasized the need for genuine collaboration to foster mutual economic resilience. Pakistani scholars stressed that economic cooperation should align with security interests. They implied that addressing cross-border terrorism is a prerequisite for smoother economic relations, underscoring a conditional approach that ties trade facilitation to Afghanistan's commitment to regional security.

Both sides also expressed concern over the **issue of frozen Afghan assets**, urging the international community release the funds in the interest of the Afghan population, especially girls, women, and children who have suffered most under such wretch socioeconomic conditions. The Afghan scholars repeatedly emphasized that aid mechanisms should be restructured to reach the Afghan population more effectively, noting that current systems fail to impact the most vulnerable communities.

The **plight of Afghan women** under the Taliban's rule was another central point in the discussions. Afghan female religious scholars shed light on the restrictive environment where basic rights and freedoms are curtailed, yet they also urged the international community to avoid falling prey to media exaggerations. They stressed that some sectors, like healthcare and private education, continue to offer limited employment opportunities for women. However, with public education shuttered and the Women's Ministry and other relevant institutions dismantled, they acknowledged that any hope for meaningful female participation in Afghan society is diminishing rapidly. The restrictions on Afghan women are a humanitarian crisis that cannot be sidelined. The forum maintained that women's rights should be central to discourse with the Taliban and urged the de facto rulers to consider lifting bans on education and economic opportunities for women and accept offers from countries willing to support in these areas.

Afghan women, as conveyed by the participating female scholars from Afghanistan, only want the Taliban to resume girls' education and women's employment under whichever Shariah guidelines of modesty and public conduct that the de facto rulers want to maintain.

Scholars emphasized the potential for dialogue **to counteract divisive narratives**, and that the two nations could achieve more through bilateral solutions, reducing reliance on external powers, economically and geopolitically.

Our analysis indicates that priorities differ on both sides of the border. Pakistan remains primarily concerned about the TTP, while for the majority of Afghans—both men and women—socioeconomic and educational empowerment are essential. In this regard, they look to countries like Pakistan, other regional nations, and the broader international community to play a role in convincing the de facto Afghan rulers to meet these fundamental demands of their own people.

Reflecting on the progress in discourse and discussions held so far under the Beyond Boundaries VI, the participants emphasized that dialogue is essential, even if progress seems incremental at times. They noted **that diminishing international attention** toward Afghanistan has already led to severe consequences for the country. Amidst such crises, it is crucial to keep channels of dialogue open with both governmental and non-governmental stakeholders.

Recommendations

The following recommendations were extrapolated for the consideration of the policymakers and governments of Pakistan and Afghanistan, and the international community

1. Diplomatic Engagement

- Resume formal dialogue between Pakistan and Afghanistan on terrorism, border security, and economic cooperation.
- Serve as a bridge between international communities and Afghanistan, advocating for women's representation in governance and education.
- Engage more regularly and constructively with Afghan leadership to advocate for human rights, and regional peace and security.

2. Economic Cooperation and Development

- Establish cross-border economic zones to create employment opportunities.
- Reassess border restrictions at key crossings to improve trade and transit.
- Develop infrastructure for cottage industries and home-based work to provide economic opportunities for Afghan women.

3. Humanitarian and Social Needs

- Prioritize international aid for healthcare, infrastructure, and direct relief to those most in need.
- Advocate for women's rights to work and education through engagement with Afghan leaders.
- Support community-based and home-based educational centers/madrassahs to provide learning opportunities for women in the absence of formal schooling.

4. Counter-Terrorism and Security

- Increase intelligence sharing and joint counter-terrorism efforts targeting TTP and Daesh.
- Engage religious scholars to counter extremist narratives on women's rights and promote moderate interpretations.
- Strengthen regional security collaborations to address cross-border terrorism.

5. Recognition and Conditional Cooperation

• Push for international actors to engage with the Taliban in a way that encourages policy changes, particularly in peace and security, and human rights, in exchange for interim recognition and cooperation in sectors such as economy, trade, and agriculture.

6. Women's Rights and Representation

- Resume girls' education above 6 in Afghanistan.
- Send a letter on behalf of Pakistani female religious scholars to the Supreme Leader urging the reopening of girls' schools.
- Empower Afghan women through vocational training and educational initiatives.
- Provide funding and support for initiatives that empower Afghan women, encouraging them to raise their voices through organized and sustained activism.

Day 1

On Day 1, discussions zeroed in on regional security, economic cooperation, social challenges, human rights in Afghanistan, and complex bilateral concerns. CRSS Executive Director Imtiaz Gul underscored the dialogue's urgency, given rising tensions between Pakistan and Afghanistan over terrorism concerns, calling for direct, solution-focused engagement rather than blame. Moderator Dr. Aamer Raza framed the forum as an opportunity to build practical pathways toward shared stability and growth, urging participants to engage openly and confront on-the-ground realities with a spirit of constructive exchange.

SESSION 1- RECENT DEVELOPMENTS

Last Three Months in Afghanistan

Abdul Hafeez Amin provided an update on Afghanistan's recent political and economic developments. He highlighted positive diplomatic outcomes from the Moscow summit, including Kazakhstan's decision to remove Afghanistan from its terrorist list, and referenced Afghanistan's expanding diplomatic engagements with the UAE and Qatar. Economically, Amin pointed to infrastructure projects, such as the Kabul-Kandahar highway and solar parks, which were expected to promote regional trade, especially with Pakistan. He also mentioned that remittances from Afghans abroad had strengthened the Afghani currency, though he voiced skepticism about economic growth figures, suggesting they might be inflated. Amin criticized the aid distribution in Afghanistan, noting that NGOs often mismanaged funds and failed to share accurate survey results with authorities.

Molana Sarwari spoke about further infrastructural advancements, such as a new road connecting Afghanistan with China, which he believed would ease trade and reduce travel time. He also mentioned Afghanistan's wheat import agreement with Iran, marking an improvement in regional cooperation.

Afghanistan-Pakistan Relations Over the Last Three Months

Muzilfa Kakar woman raised concerns about Pakistan's deportation of undocumented Afghan refugees, stating that these actions disrupted Afghan families and economic stability. She also

mentioned that Pakistan's frequent border closures negatively impacted Afghan citizens' access to critical services and resources.

Dr. Tahir Sarfaraz voiced concerns over Afghan citizens' limited access to healthcare in Pakistan due to visa rejections, creating significant hardships for those needing medical treatment.

Molana Abdul Mateen Akhunzada emphasized the importance of Pakistan and Afghanistan directly addressing shared security and terrorism-related issues.

SESSION 2 - TALIBAN, AFGHANISTAN, AND THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY

Remarks by Zoe Atwal (British High Commission)

Zoe Atwal laid out the UK's current approach to Afghanistan, centered on humanitarian aid, human rights, and inclusive governance. She highlighted the UK's commitment to Afghanistan, noting it had provided £600 million in aid since April, making Afghanistan the UK's largest bilateral aid program. Atwal stressed the need for continued international support and expressed concerns over human rights abuses, especially restrictions on women's rights and education. She warned that denying education to women risked the country's future, particularly in sectors like healthcare, where a literate female population would be essential.

Atwal addressed perceptions that the UK's involvement in Afghanistan was part of a "Great Game" for regional influence, clarifying that the UK's goal was to support stability and prosperity in Afghanistan, not exert control.

Participants' Perspectives

Scholars discussed the role of Islamic countries in supporting Afghanistan's development. Dr. Qibla Ayaz noted efforts by countries like Turkey and Indonesia to engage the Taliban on issues of women's education and public life. He mentioned that proposals had been made to the Taliban for segregated educational facilities and transportation for women, however, the offers have not yet been accepted.

Molana Fazalulhaq Maghfoori emphasized that Afghanistan could not afford to remain isolated from the world and that efforts were underway to normalize relations, but the international community needs to demonstrate the an honest will to engage constructively with Afghanistan. This should happen while being mindful of Afghan culture and values, he added.

Abdul Hafeez Amin and other Afghan scholars criticized the current aid mechanisms, calling them ineffective in reaching ordinary Afghans. Molana Abdul Rub Salafi observed that aid was often distributed unfairly due to favoritism within NGOs, where as Sarwar Sarwari countered this narrative, asserting that aid had reached people and was being used for essential and critical services. However, he acknowledged that mismanagement existed within the NGO sector, where aid was not always fairly distributed. The scholars hence emphasized a fair and rightly monitored aid distribution mechanism.

SESSION 3 – REGIONAL PEACE, STABILITY, AND BILATERAL TIES

Perspectives on Regional Peace and Security

Grave concerns were raised on threats posed by ISKP (Daesh) and the TTP (Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan). Abdul Hafeez Amin noted the seeming contradiction in Afghanistan's pursuit of international recognition while facing accusations of harboring TTP members, which complicated Afghanistan's diplomatic efforts.

Dr. Qibla Ayaz raised concerns about Daesh, suggesting that it had emerged as a counterforce against growing regional powers like China. He described Daesh as a common threat to both Pakistan and Afghanistan and suggested that defeating groups like Daesh and TTP would require ideological counter-narratives alongside military efforts.

Scholars' Views on TTP

Abdul Hafeez Amin highlighted a significant contradiction facing Afghanistan, which seeks international recognition while simultaneously facing accusations of harboring terrorist groups like TTP. He noted that these accusations complicated Afghanistan's global standing, especially as it attempts to build diplomatic ties with Central Asian countries and other neighbors.

Dr. Qibla Ayaz expressed concerns about Daesh, suggesting that the group might have emerged as a counterforce to rising regional influences like China. He identified Daesh as a shared threat for both Pakistan and Afghanistan, advocating for ideological counter-narratives alongside military measures to combat such extremist groups.

Dr. Aamer Raza stressed that TTP's activities affected both countries, and that Pakistan firm believes that the IEA has the potential work alongside Pakistan in order to eliminate the militant group from the region. He added that ideological and structural solutions, led by religious scholars (Ulema), were essential for countering TTP's influence.

Molana Tayyab Qureshi elaborated on TTP's criminal nature, pointing out that it included elements motivated by financial gain rather than ideology. He suggested that tackling TTP required a strong ideological response, proposing that Ulema-led dialogues could help address extremist narratives that fuel terrorism.

Similarly, other participants emphasized the role of religious leaders and community figures in ensuring regional peace. Mufti Muslim Aajiz commended Pakistan's longstanding support for Afghanistan, calling on both countries to work together to dispel negative perceptions.

Dr. Tariq Sarfaraz argued that addressing terrorism required not only military action but also ideological engagement, as well as a commitment to law and governance from both nations.

Dr. Qibla Ayaz concluded the session by reiterating that continuous dialogue was essential. He highlighted that Pakistan and Afghanistan shared historical and cultural ties and therefore must support each other to work toward regional peace. He acknowledged the constructive role that allies, like the UK, have played in promoting and ensuring stability in the region.

Day 2

SESSION 4 A: MEN-ONLY- ADVOCACY SO FAR, ACHIEVEMENTS, AND CHALLENGES

Engagement with Communities

Abdul Hafeez Amin shared how he has been actively involved in advocating for women's rights, particularly their right to work and receive education, amidst the ongoing instability. He highlighted the difficult situation in the 26 districts of Shinwari tribe, where the Daesh stronghold continues to impact the local population. Despite the tragic loss of 10 elders in the

area, Amin emphasized the community's commitment to ridding the region of extremist influence. He also mentioned the establishment of a group of elders working towards ensuring

that no terrorist from Pakistan or Afghanistan crosses the border.

He further discussed his advocacy for women's education with a close ally of the Supreme Leader, using persuasive arguments to explain the long-term consequences of denying women education. Amin noted that although some private educational centers have been set up by

certain Taliban factions, the cost is prohibitive for ordinary Afghans.

Mufti Qasim Haqqani spoke about the positive response from Afghan stakeholders regarding issues such as women's education and the TTP. He noted that several delegations, including those led by prominent figures such as Taqi Usmani and Fazal ur Rehman, had visited Afghanistan to engage with the Taliban leadership. He pointed out that while the Taliban have shown a more favorable outlook towards resolving these issues, the lack of support from the Pakistani government has hindered further progress on the TTP front.

Challenges: Extremism, Education Ban, and Divisive Narratives

TTP and Daesh

Molana Abdul Rab and Dr. Aamer Raza discussed the role of the TTP and Daesh in exacerbating tensions between Pakistan and Afghanistan. Aamir pointed out that while there was consensus on the need for both countries to prevent their territories from being used by terrorist groups, the ideological and operational differences between TTP, Daesh, and the Taliban make it difficult to address these issues effectively. Abdul Hafeez Amin added that although Daesh's ideology differs from that of the Taliban, the group thrives on the poverty and lack of education in Afghanistan, and it is essential to address these root causes to prevent their spread.

Sarwar Sarwari echoed similar sentiments, stressing the importance of dialogue in resolving conflicts. He argued that Pakistan must negotiate with the TTP, or else external forces might exploit the situation and use the group as proxies against Pakistan. Abdul Haq Magfoori spoke about the need for more direct engagement with the Taliban leadership, noting that their views on issues like women's education and the presence of extremist groups have evolved over time.

Dr. Qibla Ayaz highlighted the difficulty both countries face in dealing with groups like TTP and Daesh, given the ideological and operational challenges they pose. He pointed out that the TTP's presence in Afghanistan is a reality, but emphasized that it is crucial to work together to address these issues and promote stability in the region.

Counter Narrative

Raza Khan Seerat emphasized the role of media in shaping public perceptions of Afghanistan and Pakistan, particularly in relation to the TTP. He noted that broadcasting videos of atrocities could unintentionally strengthen extremist groups by fueling anger and resentment. Abdul Mateen Akhundzada and Saleem Alozai discussed the role of social media in spreading divisive narratives, stressing the need for influential personalities to challenge these narratives and work towards fostering mutual understanding.

Women's Education

Tahir Sarfaraz expressed frustration over the lack of progress in Afghanistan, particularly in relation to the curriculum. He noted that revising the curriculum to make it Sharia-compliant was a major hurdle, as it involved rewriting hundreds of textbooks. Dr. Qibla Ayaz suggested that Afghanistan could adopt international models of education, such as those from Indonesia, to quickly implement changes without reinventing the wheel.

SESSION 4 B: WOMEN-ONLY: LIFE UNDER TALIBAN RULE, SOCIOECONOMIC NEEDS, AGENCY, AND HOPES FOR FUTURE

The session offered a candid platform for Afghan women to share their personal experiences, challenges, and hopes for the future in the context of the current socio-political climate in Afghanistan. The discussion aimed to learn from the lived realities of women facing systemic obstacles under Taliban rule, as well as the efforts to navigate these challenges through resilience, education, and local and international community's support.

Najeeba Haqmal offered a detailed view of women's conditions in Afghanistan. She acknowledged that the media's portrayal of Afghan women's circumstances was partially accurate but often exaggerated. She pointed out that while certain restrictions remained, particularly on public education for girls, there were still pockets of opportunity. She explained, "Private schools with a Sharia-compliant curriculum are open, though not accessible to all."

Najeeba also noted the Taliban's prohibition of early marriage, which, though a cultural practice predating their rule, had gained increased attention under their leadership. She cited positive examples of women still working in specific sectors like healthcare, hospitals, airports, and some schools, though public schooling remained off-limits. She remarked that life for Afghan women was challenging but not entirely as bleak as sometimes portrayed.

Muzilfa Kakar emphasized that the Sharia-based restrictions imposed by the Taliban had profoundly impacted Afghan women, restricting their employment options mainly to healthcare and education. She noted, "The Taliban initially promised to prevent violence against women, but in practice, it continues." Highlighting the dire situation for widows and women without familial support, she pointed out the at economic hardship compounded these issues. Muzilfa urged for a comprehensive, all-encompassing education for women, noting that this would help them understand their rights, participate in the workforce, and contribute positively to society. She recognized that the Taliban had permitted some admissions to midwifery programs, but argued that women's healthcare needs went beyond this niche.

Aisha Syed, a former MNA from Swat, discussed the economic crisis in some parts of Afghanistan, explaining that even boys' schools remain closed due to lack of funding. She observed that the negative perceptions of Afghan asylum seekers had complicated international support efforts. Reflecting on her region's past under TTP influence, she highlighted how Swati women had actively advocated for girls' education during those challenging times.

Haya Hareem suggested that the Taliban's ban on women's education had a political purpose. She noted, "The Taliban are not openly disclosing their intentions regarding women's rights, possibly to avoid international backlash while formulating a future strategy." She expressed hope that international pressure and internal reform could eventually lead to a reopening of educational opportunities for girls.

Naila Syed of JUI called on the Taliban to consider the detrimental effects of their policies on Afghan women and children. She urged the Taliban to release Afghan financial assets, a move that would alleviate Afghanistan's economic crisis, benefiting families and allowing society to rebuild. Naila warned that the school ban would create a generational gap if not reversed, emphasizing the critical role of education for women.

Senator Sana Jan Jamali advocated for empowering women through vocational training and educational opportunities, stressing that women's rights should be aligned with broader societal development. She encouraged the international community to prioritize educational and vocational funding specifically for Afghan women, suggesting this could help stabilize communities over time.

Sameena Saeed, former MNA from Balochistan, proposed that Pakistan should expand educational opportunities for Afghan girls and women, including scholarships and cross-border education programs. She encouraged the establishment of structured channels for communication and exchange to support Afghan women's access to higher education and vocational skills in Pakistan.

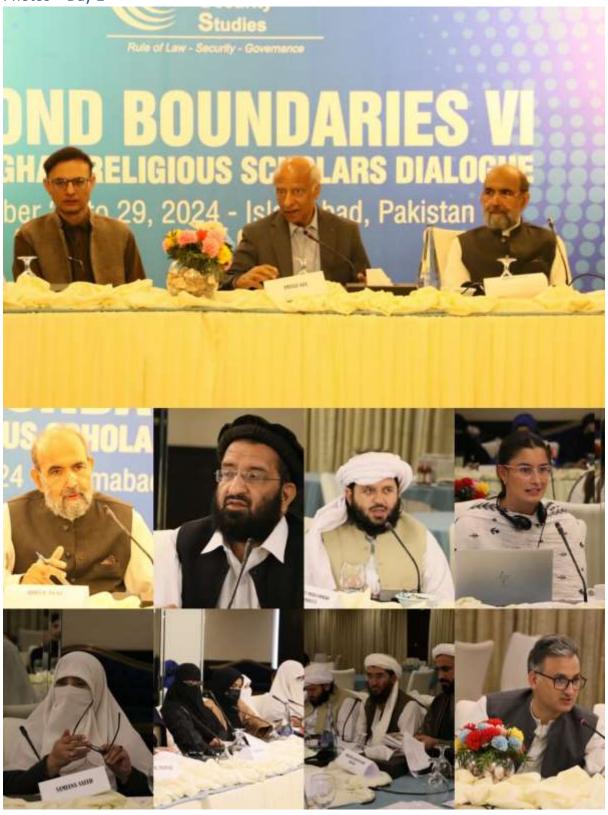
Faryal Umbreen urged the Taliban to accept offers of educational support from countries like Turkey, Indonesia, Qatar, and Japan. She called on the international community to view Afghanistan through a lens of cultural respect and empathy rather than enforcing rigid policies or sanctions.

Conclusion

The future of Pakistan and Afghanistan lies not in sporadic dialogue but in practical collaboration that bridges their shared interests. While Pakistan's focus on counterterrorism is crucial, it cannot succeed in isolation; it must be complemented by Afghanistan's pursuit of socioeconomic stability. Progress is stymied not just by political discord, but by an urgent need for both nations to transcend rhetoric and embrace practical cooperation. For the international community, this means pairing pressure with purpose: any engagement with the Taliban should catalyze tangible reforms that prioritize Afghanistan's most vulnerable and contribute to enduring regional stability.

Annexure

Photos – Day 1



Photos – Day 2

