

Report: Roundtable on “New Dimensions of Pak-Afghan Relations” with Prof. Amin Saikal, Professor of Political Science and Director of the Center for Arab and Islamic Studies, Australian National University on August 28, 2012

## **Afghanistan Problem Needs a Regional Solution**

**Aarish U. Khan**

ISLAMABAD: “A stable Afghanistan is in the interest of all its neighboring countries. This is why I have long advocated a regional consensus on Afghanistan,” said Prof. Amin Saikal at a roundtable organized by the Institute of Regional Studies (IRS) here on Tuesday. Prof. Saikal, Director at the Center for Arab and Islamic Studies at the Australian National University, elucidated upon the interests of regional countries like Central Asian Republics, China, India, Iran, Pakistan, and Russia in the long-term stability of Afghanistan ranging from trade and energy corridors and exploration of natural resources to concerns about drug production and smuggling from Afghanistan.

Prof. Saikal stressed the utilization of Afghanistan’s potential to integrate with its neighbors through regional arrangements like South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO), and Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO).

Prof. Saikal concurred that there was some negativity between the governments of Afghanistan and Pakistan. He cited the recent instances of harsh criticism of Pakistan by elements within the Karzai administration and the criticism of Afghan government by Pakistani authorities. Prof. Saikal said that Pakistan has understandable national interests concerning its western neighbors, but that those interests do not necessarily coincide with the interests of Afghanistan. Prof. Saikal added, however, that the intensity of that negativity was far less at the people-to-people level.

Dr. Samina Yasmeen, Director of Center for Muslim States and Societies, University of Western Australia, urged all actors to view Pak-Afghan relations in the context of the regional dynamic rather than in isolation from it. This, she argued, would broaden the focus from Afghanistan to the region. Amb. Bashir Malik argued that domestic consensus among regional countries was essential before evolving a regional consensus on Afghanistan.

Mr. Ashraf Ashraf Azim, President IRS, said that the UN seemed to have abdicated its responsibilities to the NATO and the U.S. in Afghanistan that, in his view, was not in the best interest of Afghanistan. In the context of Pak-Afghan relations, Mr. Azim added that borders needed to be viewed as connectors between states rather than dividers. Dr. Shaheen Akhtar, Senior Research Analyst at IRS, also called for shifting the focus from traditional security to comprehensive human security in all the regional countries. Dr. Shaheen also added that Afghanistan needed to give assurances to Pakistan that its territory would not be used for activities against the latter.

Other participants of the roundtable were: Ms. Farhat Parveen, Senior Research Analyst at IRS; Mr. Khalid Malik, Senior Research Analyst at IRS; Mr. Aarish U. Khan, Research Analyst at IRS; Mr. Imran Sardar, Research Scholar at IRS; Ms. Humera Iqbal, Research Scholar at IRS; and Ms. Sidra Tariq, Research Scholar at IRS.