

# Opening Remarks at Farewell to Kabul: Afghanistan after the Withdrawal Conference

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Friday, March 04, 2022

## 1. WELCOME AND INTRODUCTION

Thank you, Ambassador Istrabadi, for that very kind introduction. Thank you, too, for your outstanding scholarship and leadership as the founding director of Indiana University's Center for the Study of the Middle East and for your diplomatic achievements as a former ambassador of Iraq to the United Nations.

Laurie and I are extremely pleased that our recent gift to endow the professorship in our names that you now hold will continue to advance the teaching and research of one of IU's most eminent scholars.

And let me thank your conference co-organizer, Distinguished Professor Sumit Ganguly as well, for his exceptional contributions to research and scholarship.

I would also like to join Ambassador Istrabadi in welcoming all of you here today—especially those who have traveled long distances—for this important and timely conference, maybe made even more important and timely by the events of the last few weeks.

## 2. WEEKS AND DECADES OF CHANGE

A few days ago, I received a message from an investment advisor. It started with a very striking quote which read:

"There are decades where nothing happens; and there are weeks where decades happen."

Coming from an investment advisor, one of the foot soldiers of capitalism, one might ask who does this quote come from? Warren Buffett? Henry Ford? John D. Rockefeller? No, in fact it is attributed to Vladimir Ilyich Lenin. Coming as it does this week the irony, though tragic irony, is at many levels.

Even the most cursory study of human history underscores the acute accuracy of this observation. And the last few weeks, and probably the next few weeks to come, are of exactly the kind alluded to in this quote. More relevant to this conference, one might also observe that the weeks around August 15 last year—when Kabul fell—were also of this kind. At that time, we saw verities and certitudes of decades overturned and replaced—in weeks—by chaos, uncertainty and instability, bringing the urgent need for wholesale changes in geopolitical strategies and policies, not just by the United States but by many other nations as well.

This imperative is reflected well in the theme of this conference. It is in exceptional times like these that the strategists and policy makers have the greatest need for expertise and resources, and sometimes of a rare and highly specialized kind. Here is where the expertise and resources of America's most internationally engaged research universities really come to the fore.

As I said a few days ago in a statement on the tragic situation in Ukraine, universities have a duty to keep alive the history of human civilization and society through the ages—and the cultures and languages that are their bedrock— to teach, to analyze, and to explain it to those affected in one way or the other by its moments of convulsive change. And they have a duty to stand for truth in the face of those who would distort and abuse this history in all of its aspects.

### 3. IU'S LONGSTANDING INTERNATIONAL ENGAGEMENT

Indiana University has always prided itself on being such a university, as do many of those institutions from whence you come. Of all the components that comprise an IU education, international literacy and experience rank with the most important. The world in which our students will live will require more, not less knowledge about the world. Central to scholarship and research in these areas is IU's Hamilton Lugar School of Global and International Studies, under whose auspices this conference is being held. The school was established in 2012, and its mission is to provide an education at the highest level in all aspects of international affairs and international studies, with a major focus on foreign language proficiencies. IU teaches over 70 languages, more than any university in the country. It is an education that involves an understanding of social and political megatrends worldwide, a deeper knowledge of various aspects of global change, and the development of cultural fluency and sensitivity for different parts of the world. Much of this is taught and learned through our area studies centers, of which IU has the largest number in the nation. One of these is the Center of the Study of the Middle East, which Ambassador Istrabadi directs.

More generally at the university, IU is also home to some of the oldest continually operating study abroad programs in the nation. Throughout my 14 years as IU president, we made it a top priority to vastly increase the number of our students who study abroad. In that time, we saw a doubling of these numbers to become one of the highest in the nation.

We have one of the nation's largest and most diverse international student bodies, representing 160 countries. We warmly welcome all of our international students and value them for the diversity in thought and culture they bring to our campuses, and for the window that they provide into their own countries and cultures.

Like many other major research universities, we draw our faculty from all over the world. Indeed, more than 20 percent of IU's faculty members are foreign-born.

And our library resources that sustains the scholarship that underpins our international engagement rank at the very top for almost all areas of the world.

#### 4. IU'S TIES TO AFGHANISTAN

IU's ties to Afghanistan date back more than a half-century to a time when it would have been hard to envision it becoming the center of international conflict that it is today. In the 1950s and 60s, the country was taking steps to modernize, become more liberal and westernized, and enhance its educational system in a way that would make it a model for the Eastern world.

In 1966, at the invitation of Kabul University President Touryalay Etemadi, who had completed a master's degree at IU a decade earlier, IU's 11<sup>th</sup> president Herman B Wells traveled to Kabul to meet with officials at Kabul University. In conjunction with the United States Agency for International Development, IU commenced a project to help develop and modernize the administration and organization of Kabul University. Over the five-year period of this project, a number of faculty and students from the university came to IU to complete master's degrees and, in some cases, Ph.Ds.

Sadly, the decades that followed would be dominated by bloody coups, a Soviet military invasion, a brutal civil war and oppressive Taliban rule.

In 2003, following the 9/11 terrorist attacks and the launch of U.S. military operations in Afghanistan, IU hosted a conference here in Bloomington that brought together leading Afghan and Afghan American scholars to discuss the reconstruction of higher education in Afghanistan. Attendees at the conference included the late Sharif Fayez, then the country's minister of higher education.

IU also continues to offer beginning, intermediate and advanced curricula in Afghanistan's two official languages, Dari and Pashtu, through departments housed at the Hamilton Lugar School.

## 5. RESPONSE TO CURRENT CRISIS

This past summer, following the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Afghanistan and subsequent Taliban takeover, Indiana University quickly mobilized its people, expertise and other resources to address the resulting refugee crisis. The crisis saw the evacuation of more than 75,000 people from Afghanistan to be resettled in the U.S. Students, faculty and staff from across the university contributed to the care and resettlement of the roughly 7,000 Afghan refugees who were housed from September through January at Indiana's Camp Atterbury, the military and civilian training base located about an hour northeast of here.

Members of the IU community supplied refugees with winter clothing, diapers, personal hygiene items and other essential supplies, while also helping to set up rudimentary education facilities at the camp. The Hamilton Lugar School organized an effort to deliver 1,000 Dari and Pashto phrasebooks to soldiers stationed at the camp. IU's Center for the Languages of the Central Asian Region assembled a list of interpreters to support the Camp Atterbury's language-related efforts.

The humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan brought out the best of the IU community. The crisis also arrived at the height of a global pandemic that knew no national borders—further underscoring the responsibility we have to invest in the global literacy of our students and ensure they are fully prepared to confront the gravest and most pressing challenges of our planet.

## 6. CONCLUSION

So again, in a multitude of ways, this conference could not be more timely. The ramifications and implications for policymakers and strategists of the stunning events in

Afghanistan last August, especially now in the context of the epochal events in Ukraine, makes the results of deliberations and analysis of the kind you will be undertaking, even more vital. Thank you.