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A CONVERSATION WITH PRESIDENT KARZAI'S SPOKESMAN, WAHEED OMER, AND CHRISTOPHER WALKER, DIRECTOR OF STUDIES, FREEDOM HOUSE

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JEFFREY GEDMIN: We're ready. Good morning, Washington. Akbar, Omar, Chris, can you hear me?

MR. : Yes.

MR. : Yes, we do.

MR. : Yes, we can.

MR. GEDMIN: Well, if you're ready we're going to go ahead and begin. It's my pleasure to begin actually from Prague today and welcome you all to our Washington office. This is Jeff Gedmin, president of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. Chris Walker, always good to see you. I think we've met twice in the last two weeks – once in Dallas, once in Washington, D.C.

Akbar is our esteemed colleague who runs many things inside this company but also oversees Radio Azadi, who is our crown jewel – which is our crown jewel, our service that broadcasts in Dari and Pashto to this very important country, Afghanistan.

And Waheed, you and I had the pleasure and I'll say my privilege of meeting for the first time about three weeks ago in Kabul. I know how terribly busy you are on the eve of the president's visit to Washington. It's very good of you to take the time.

And with that, I think my job for the day is done. My job is to listen and learn and to turn it over to you, Akbar, as master of ceremonies to set the stage a little bit and introduce our panelists for what I think will be a terrific conversation. Akbar?

AKBAR AYAZI: Thanks, Jeff. And good morning and good afternoon to Prague. It's my pleasure to have the opportunity to have this discussion on the most important visit of President Karzai to Washington. I think we couldn't do this in a much better time and important time as we do it today, especially now that President Karzai is on his way to Washington. Hopefully he will arrive today.

You know, considering what is happening between the relations between the Afghan and the U.S. government, there seems to be up and down and I think we couldn't have this discussion in a more important time than the post-Taliban era of Afghanistan. This is, I think, a very important trip for President Karzai to Afghanistan (sic).

So Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty as any other institution is very much interested in the developments in Afghanistan and they're following the events and they're going to follow this trip of President Karzai to the United States. Radio Free Europe having the most important and the most reliable radio broadcast into Afghanistan is very keenly interested in the developments in that country, most importantly freedom of press.

So that's why we have this discussion here today to reveal some – to shed some light on the issue of the freedom of press and it is happening in a very good time while Freedom House just released a report on freedom of press in Afghanistan.

So I'm not going to have more talks because we have a good audience here and good audience in Prague. We will let them to listen to you and then I'm sure they will have many questions to be answered. I'm happy to have Chris Walker here. He is the director of studies at Freedom House. And he oversees the reports that Freedom House releases. So thank you, Chris, for coming.

And I also have Waheed Omar, the official spokesperson of President Hamid Karzai. He was previously the communication director for Karzai's reelection campaign in 2009. He was at the – present in the frontline of the campaign. So I was watching him and seeing him on TV all the time and he was taking all the beatings I'm sure from – including President Karzai – (chuckles) – because this was a very important and crucial election.

And this is where this whole relations between the two countries is taking this up and down is because the elections and the result of the elections prior to his appointment as the spokesperson of President Karzai. He has served in many different official capacities, international and national in the United States and – in Afghanistan, I'm sorry.

So Chris, I will let you start. Tell us about your report. The Freedom House that has just released this report. In the frontline or on the headline of your report it says, "Not free." Can you just you describe to us, what does this mean that freedom of press is not free while other sides all argue, look at the region; we are the most free, so what does this mean?

CHRISTOPHER WALKER: Well, first of all, thanks to you, Akbar. It's a privilege to be here and I'm grateful for the invitation from Jeff Gedmin and his colleagues at Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. And it's also a privilege to be here with Omar Waheed here at this discussion.

And Akbar, you mentioned that Freedom House just released its freedom of the press findings just shortly before World Press Freedom Day and it's been a bad year and a bad few years for press freedom generally. For those of you who didn't see the report, this was the eighth consecutive year of decline. And in Freedom House analysis, we try to be as comprehensive as possible. We look at the legal, political, economic dimensions of press freedom and we've seen erosion across all three of these areas.

We've seen this for a variety of reasons. In part, it's due to restrictive laws that are in place. In part it's due to increasing violence against journalists and the impunity with which their cases are treated. This is something we've seen in a number of areas. And in key respects, a number of well-resourced and ambitious authoritarian states who are also encroaching on press freedoms in a variety of ways that I'm not going to detail here. But all of these things have contributed to a less hospitable media landscape.

Afghanistan by its very complexity, its unique cultural features is a unique case. And I think the only way to understand Afghanistan today is to understand where it has come from in the not-too distant past. And I'll just take a moment to read an excerpt from the report we

released a decade ago. So this is the report we released almost 10 years to the day looking at calendar year 2000. So here's just a part of it:

"The Taliban continues to maintain tight control over the country's broadcast and print media. In August 2000, strict regulations on the actions of foreign journalists were introduced. Photographs have been outlawed and television eliminated. Afghans are banned from accessing the Internet. However, the Taliban maintains a website promoting recognition of its regime worldwide," which, of course, foreshadowed the sophistication they've developed their online capacity with in the meantime. "The programming of the nation's one radio station is limited to religious broadcasts and official propaganda."

That's the way it goes on. It's a depiction of a ruthless and retrograde media environment. If you fast-forward just five years from a decade ago, there were enormous strides made. So in our evaluations, I think the three categories we use to give a, kind of, crude barometer of how countries are performing – the free, partly free, not free – it has a really rough ring to it. And clearly countries that fall into the worst-performing category aren't happy to be there.

But I think what I would encourage in the contextual view of Afghanistan is that from that time on a spectrum of 100 points where 100 is the worst possible performance, Afghanistan was a 95. This puts in the zone of the North Koreas, the Libyas, the Turkmenistans a decade ago. Five years ago the country had edged its way to the level of a 68. So it's still within the not free category, the bottom third overall, but in relative terms it had moved considerably.

And I would say our methodology is rather conservative. Those sorts of moves – a move on the order of nearly 30 points – is almost unheard of. It happens when there are coups in countries, when there are massive regime changes, these sorts of things. So clearly it's an unusual sort of change that recognize the improvements there.

I think what we find of concern now is that in the last several years, there have been encroachments on the achievements that had been made in the first half of the last decade as a result of increasing violence, as a result of restrictive laws that are being applied, as a result of the vagueness of certain laws in the legal regime that's there now. Some journalists don't know which laws are enforced and which to follow.

All of these things have led to a swinging back in a negative direction over the last several years in our evaluation, which we think is critically important for a number of reasons. One of them is – and President Karzai said this in an op-ed in the Washington Post just today – that capable institutions in Afghanistan are indispensable and without press freedom remaining on a positive trajectory, the notion that you're going to improve judicial performance, that you're going to tamp down on corruption, that you're going to advance other basic institutional – essential institutional dimensions of progress in Afghanistan – are very hard to imagine.

The other thing I would say in closing is without a free media, making an argument for the democratic idea is also nearly unthinkable. And this is why the forces of illiberalism work so hard to close those arteries. We're seeing it in Afghanistan today as the Taliban makes headway. We're seeing it any number of other countries in different guises, in different shapes and form.

But there is what we have identified as a larger wave of pressure on free expression often waged by the forces of illiberalism whose most potent emblem may come in the form of the Taliban right now. So I think what we have is an unfinished story, the story over the first years of this decade was a positive one in relative terms and now some question marks are being raised about the trajectory of media freedom. That's why it is where it is in our findings. It's more or less in the middle of the third basket of performers.

MR. AYAZI: Well, thank you Chris, very interesting remarks. When we go to the doctor and the doctor say, what kind of pain do you have – did my microphone cut off? Okay. Say from number zero to number 10 determining the pain. So I see you're determining the freedom of press by numbers and so from 95 it has come to 68

So hopefully from this painful situation, from the point of view Freedom House, Afghanistan will come to the numbers lower where the pain is less and there is more freedom. But I'm sure Waheed Omar, the spokesperson for President Karzai, has some remarks to make and I'm sure he has probably different perspective and view of how freedom of press is in Afghanistan. So Omar, the floor is yours.

WAHEED OMAR: Thank you very much. Thank you very much, Jeff. Thank you very much, Mr. Ayazi, for having given us this opportunity. And I find your remarks very interesting. I have read the report and it's a very good report. You mentioned in your remarks you talked about where we started from back in 2001 and I was glad you read this very important part of the report that you developed in 2001 and I had a small quotation from year 2002 report that said, "a limited journalistic climate," which basically said there was nothing really to rate in Afghanistan.

We started in 2002 from a situation where depicting living beings in picture was banned, was totally prohibited. I remember a story of a friend of mine was working with a demining agency and who, for the sake of surveying a site for demining, had to take pictures. And he ended up in jail because he had taken a picture which showed a bird on it.

And it was – because it was prohibited he had to go to jail. So next time he had to go to a site to take a picture, somebody else had to go with him before him and make sure that all the birds were away so that he could take the picture of the site of demining. That's where we are coming from.

There was not even talk of freedom of press in 2001 in Afghanistan and when we started in 2002 in Afghanistan. Today we have over two dozen TV channels and their diversity of opinions and the preferences that they have is remarkable. You can start with a news program. You have every night on at least 10 or 15 channels discussions like this. You have soap operas, Indian and Turkish and even American now.

And you have reports about – (inaudible) – not having done certain work properly. You have reports about the parliament and the government not being well-connected to each other and all kind of things sometimes at the cost of somebody like me who is working with the government. So working with the government is now more problematic than working with the media in Afghanistan. And as a government employee, I assume I have less freedoms than the journalists in Afghanistan can have. But that is the overall context for everyone.

And when it comes to security for media in Afghanistan, which is deemed as very necessary in the report as well, actually the limitations on security so far as security is concerned is a limitation which applies to everyone in Afghanistan. A journalist in Afghanistan is as safe as I am or as safe as a teacher is or as safe as a child who is going to school is. So that is something that has to be seen within that context of how – within the context of Afghanistan in terms of security.

With all due respect to Freedom House as a very important institution, the standard applied to countries that have generations of free media cannot be illustrative of reality in Afghanistan unfortunately. And there should be a ranking that calculates as to – for a situation where you start from a negative infinite (ph) and as to how much you have gone forward.

And I think if you do it in that way, you will find us as champions in press freedom. You will not have an example of a country which has gone so far in eight years after starting from a negative infinite where taking a picture of a living being was disallowed and you could have ended up in jail if you had taken a picture of a bird or if you had it at home.

I want to be very honest with you: This does not mean we don't have challenges in Afghanistan. I remember a few weeks ago when terrorists attacked this city center in Kabul, the mall and the guest houses. That was an event, an incident, planned for publicity purposes. What the terrorists had planned to do was to publicize this as much as possible; to prolong it, to put it in the media and to show how much they can do to the people of Afghanistan through the media. And all TV channels, 20 of them, they were broadcasting it live on TV.

And then our security people had this phone call intercepted which was between one of the terrorists who was in one of the buildings and who was called by someone and who was told keep on continuing this; I am watching you on TV and the security forces are somewhere there. They're far away from you, so continue; as soon as they're close to you, I'll ask you to detonate yourself and you will then go to paradise.

And that led us to something else. We thought, maybe we can talk to the media to tell them, live broadcast of a scene of crime, of a scene of terrorist activity may cause severe harm to our security forces, to civilians and to others. And we ended up in trouble with the media because as soon as we talked to them, they came up.

And there was so much noise about it that we had to sit down back – my office had to start a process whereby we had to sit down with the representatives of journalist unions, with journalists, with everybody representing media; the minister of culture sitting with me. And we had a very hard time trying to calm this.

The process led to a series of negotiations whereby at the end, we signed an agreement and at the end, I think I told the minister of culture, look, we wanted – somebody wanted to limit the activity of media in a scene of crime. And it seems like it was counterproductive. Now, according to this thing that we have signed, we have more limitations now.

And the process, for me, whatever the result was, the process, I think, was a good depiction of how we are slowly maturing and slowly walking towards understanding freedom of press and towards understanding the relationship between the press and the government.

We only have eight to nine years of history with free media. We have had eight to nine years to change our mindset about what free media's role could be and how we could use free media constructively in Afghanistan to try to get our messages through to the public. And the free media has only had eight to nine years to try to mature itself and try to understand what exactly free media, freedom of speech, freedom of press in Afghanistan means.

And we have a very delicate balance to hit here. We have to balance what we have with a very traditional and religious society, with what we have as a country which is extremely religious in the way of thinking, with a constitution that allows freedom of press and with the limitations that the security has in Afghanistan.

So to just finish it here and I'll be ready to take questions: The points I was taking, number one, we need to see rather than comparing Afghanistan to countries where freedom of press has been growing for decades and decades and decades, I don't think that's going to take us anywhere very soon. And I don't promise that we will score five points on your index next time. That's not going to happen. We have to see the context. And then you have to see how Afghanistan has developed in terms of freedom of press. You have to go back to 2002 and have to see where we started from. That's where we started from.

And the second point I was making was that we need to do this ranking by illustrating as to by seeing us in the context of the region that we live in, and the context of the culture and religion and all those other things which are values.

I was quite surprised to see a link to the constitution of Afghanistan as a limitation where the constitution says nothing in Afghanistan could be said or could be done against Islam. That is a – for an Islamic country, which is, the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, adhering to Islamic values is not a limitation. People don't take it as a limitation.

If I said something at my home in front of my mother which is against the religion and against Islam, I'll be stopped from saying it. But I don't take that as, say, as a limit to my freedoms. I take that as values respected.

And that discussion, I think, does not make sense in the context of freedom of speech because in Afghanistan, the constitution says it's a hugely religious country and we have an enemy that we are fighting who is trying to defeat those who are not so religious and those who are influenced by the West, and that is the kind of argument that they try to use against us.

So in that context, we cannot use religious limitations or religious values as a means to measure the freedom of press. And I wanted to make that comment about religion in Afghanistan. I think it's going to be the same for quite a long time.

MR. AYAZI: It looks like our microphone is not working, so I'm going to use this one. Thanks, Waheed. Great remarks. Thank you very much. Chris, I will ask the first question if it's okay with the audience here in Washington and in Prague.

Chris, what should be done – one, two, three – to bring the level of freedom of press in Afghanistan to a standard where Freedom House would say, okay, it's either partially free or free? If you can tell us.

And also, Waheed, if you can tell us this: What do you think should be done – you say they are (telling ?). And what do you plan – or, what does the government plan to do as a whole to bring this level to free or partially free? So Chris, you go ahead.

MR. WALKER: So the question is, improving –

MR. AYAZI: Yes, what is to be done? What do you expect? What do you want Afghanistan to bring the index from not free to the partial free or towards free?

MR. WALKER: I'll circle back to that in just a second. I'll just respond to a couple of observations that were made that I think are very important and they're fair points. One is this notion of a universal standard applied to all the countries we review.

And that's, in essence, the model Freedom House uses. We don't modify or tweak or otherwise refashion the analysis or the tool we use to treat a country in a certain setting in a certain way. It can be a difficult application in some instances but that's the way we do it. We think it's important to have a set standard.

And of course, if you look at any individual country and you had the opportunity to see how that country is performing against itself, which may be as valuable or even more valuable in a cross-regional or cross-country comparison.

I think the security issue is critical; that it may be at the top of the list. And perhaps this is a segue to your question. The observation was made that the security is as difficult for journalists as it is for teachers or anyone else in Afghanistan.

In some ways, that's precisely the point, I think, to the extent the security situation is eroding and it's more difficult to cover the news, which is one of the areas where we've seen fit to reduce Afghanistan's scores in the last several years. Violence against journalists and the byproducts of that violence which translates into self-censorship has a chilling effect.

All of these things are paramount in many ways before you can get to I think what's at the heart of your question, or at the root of your question, which is, what sort of institutional steps can be made in an environment where you still have ongoing conflict, where there is a weak state in many ways?

I don't think there are any easy solutions. I think what I would say apart from giving some sort of precise modalities for including press freedom or a press-freedom infrastructure, it would be first and foremost a commitment to making those improvements.

I think everybody is watching the political scene in Afghanistan and if the perception is that there isn't a commitment to liberal values, looking at it within the context of Afghan culture and political circumstances, people make calculations on those perceptions. They think about

what side they're going to be on, whether they do take action or don't take action to defend certain values. I think that's critical.

Apart from that, not to be self-serving to the host here, but I think the work you're doing is vitally important. Since radio is the medium that so many Afghans use, I think the work that Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty is doing along with the BBC and others is indispensable to make sure that in addition to domestic sources, you have an ongoing diet of information that people can use that isn't –

I'd make a distinction here as well. I think it's important to emphasize that the pipeline of information should be open to news and information of political and community relevance and consequence, so not entertainment that will fill its own void. The real issue is whether Afghan citizens and decision-makers are getting information that will improve their quality of life in that there is scrutiny on powerful actors so that they are more apt to do – take decisions that are in the public interest all in all rather than narrow interest.

So I think it's more a question of sticking to the fundamentals and principles rather than coming up with some sort of explicit checklist that would be more programmatic in nature. I think that would be for others to settle on.

MR. AYAZI: I think you heard what Chris is recommending. Waheed, do you – probably you disagree or agree with some of the remarks, but my specific question to you is, what are the measures you think should be taken to come to the level that we are hoping to be?

MR. OMER: I agree with most of the points that Chris is making. Actually, in the second part, I agree with all of the points that Chris is making. There's no quick solution to – or quick way to the end of the line where we want to go. It has to happen gradually. And we're just started eight to nine years ago.

And the remarks about freedom of press being better in the first half of the past 10 years than the second half actually goes again within the context of the overall situation in Afghanistan. I was a more free person in 2003 than I am now because the situation has unfortunately changed. And violence and extremism and terrorism, it has deteriorated again for the reasons we all know.

On the press freedom day, we had a roundtable with journalists in Afghanistan where we talked about what the government would do to better the situation and what the challenges were. The two challenges that came from the Afghan journalists in Kabul and in the provinces – and I was directly talking to them – they were talking about security and they were talking about accessibility to information that the press rightly mentioned.

Security unfortunately is an issue and security is an issue, as I said earlier, for me; security is an issue for my sister who goes to school, security is an issue for a farmer who is working on his farm, and security is an issue for a journalist, for all of us. And that is the grounds for everything else and we hope that in the next couple of years, three years, we have gradual improvement in security which provides the journalists with a conducive environment.

Accessibility, I think, is extremely important. We have had as a government who came in 2002 and it was a constant walk-up to 2004 and 2005. And in 2004 and 2005, there was a burst of – a barrage of media entities getting introduced. So we all of a sudden from one state televisions, we went to 25 televisions to, I think, 400-something radio stations to hundreds of print media. And it's always not easy to catch up with that kind of a growth. So yes, we were taken b surprise as a government. In the meantime, we were a government which came from a very different background. And getting used to it, takes some time.

What we have done over the past two years – I'll give you one example – for example, we developed something called a government-media information center – I don't know if any of you heard about it – called the GMIC, supported by our international partners and a bunch of – 40 young Afghans working.

What we are doing at the moment, well, through the GMIC that I would invite anyone who has a visit to Afghanistan to come and visit, what we are doing is we are trying to make sure that we connect as much as possible media to our government so that we get – number one, that media has access to the government; number two, the government people have access to government information.

We do trainings for government spokespeople and government press officers as to, we're starting from writing press releases; we're starting from arranging press conferences; doing interviews and all that kind of things that we believe the Afghan government has to do better in. And in the meantime, we are doing trainings for free media, about what freedom of press is all about and what the responsibilities and what the freedoms are when it comes to journalism, everything else.

And that has given – I think that is an experience in the past two years that brought us a point to think that maybe in the past two years, for the first time, we thought a government and a free press can work together to the advantage of both of them.

So we have realized now that the quick growth of media in Afghanistan is not a risk; it's an opportunity. And that mindset, when we talk about political will and intentions, I think that is a mindset that my president shares with me and that's a mindset which most of people in my government, in the higher offices of my government, share with me. But I wouldn't say that there aren't people who don't necessarily share that and who will take some more time to get used to being criticized. And it's something that criticism is a way of constructive growth.

MR. AYAZI: Thank you. And now we're going to go to questions and answers. Prague, we'll come to you, colleagues, soon, so let's take two questions here in Washington, then we're come to you.

You had your hand up, so please introduce yourself and also say who you are representing. Thank you.

Q: Sue Pleming from Reuters. I had some questions about President Karzai's visit to the United States. And very basic questions: what he's hoping to raise with President Obama on Wednesday –

MR. AYAZI: Are we allowed to talk about that or is this –

(Cross talk.)

Q: And what are the concerns that President Karzai has? And is the storm over in terms of the fairly hostile exchanges that there have been in recent weeks?

(Off-side conversation.)

MR. AYAZI: The trip to Washington, as we said it before arriving here in Washington, is extremely important for us as the government of Afghanistan. And learning from the media, it's also very important for the public in Afghanistan, especially after what happened in the past two or three months. And I'll go back especially after what happened during the elections and after the elections in all those.

And it's a very important opportunity, in our view, to both sides to sit together within this strategic framework that Afghanistan and the United States have been cooperating, and to talk about issues where there have been disagreements.

We would like to be frank here in Washington and with all – however nice we can be, we will raise issues that we believe, if advanced jointly by Afghanistan and the United States, will help us strengthen this partnership and will help us bring peace and security in Afghanistan as a result to the region. And as a result, people will be safer here in the United States.

We are going to raise the issue of civilian casualties and how that impacts – affects the cause – our cause – our joint cause in Afghanistan. We will be talking about detention centers and nitrates and all those. These are the issues. Of course, there will be lots of positive stuff that we'll be talking about. But these will be the issues that we would like frankly addressed.

We will be talking about our efforts for anticorruption and we will definitely commit our resolves to doing more when it comes to corruption. But we'll also talk about how corruption is not something only connected to the Afghan government. That side of it, we'll also raise here in Afghanistan.

We are going to talk about gradually taking responsibility in Afghanistan in a gradual manner and that will start from taking responsibility in the sector security and that we will not be asking for an increase in the number of ANA and field troops. We will be asking for more equipment, for whatever more we can do to institutionalize the security forces.

So in that regard – and there are a dozen of our cabinet ministers and other important government figures here who will be talking to their U.S. counterparts, taken from agriculture to energy to mines and to education and health and employment.

But just to finish this, we believe it's extremely important; it's in a very, very sensitive time. We will talk about some issues that will be future-oriented. We'll be looking into the future rather than looking in the past.

And my understanding after being here in Washington in the past three days and talking to several different people here, we hope that both sides are ready to move forward and both sides are ready to talk frankly and both sides and ready to strengthen this partnership so that we have results.

MR. AYAZI: Thank you. I hope that you all will be nice to Waheed and Chris and focus on our topic today. Yes, go ahead, sir.

Q: Hi, I'm Dan Sagalyn from the PBS "NewsHour." I wanted to ask a question on this week's meetings and that it's – will Karzai be asking the Obama administration to support its efforts to talk with the senior leaders of the Taliban? How high up in the agenda is that? And what are the different points of view between the U.S. and the Afghans on that?

MR. OMER: When it comes to a reconciliation or a reintegration – and I want also to address Sue in this because that is when you use freedom of expression in the wrong way because I was not prepared for this question. But reconciliation and reintegration is something that we'll definitely talk about here.

And on reintegration, where we talk about bringing back to normal life foot soldiers those who have joined, who are involved in armed opposition against the government due to several of many factors and would be willing to come back and start a normal life in Afghanistan, but who are afraid of coming back, who don't have the economic means to come back or who don't have the opportunity to reintegrate into their societies. In that part, there is a 100 percent agreement between everyone and everybody is ready to move.

When it comes to reconciliation, we presented reconciliation in London conference where it got unanimous support from the world including countries in the region and countries in the West. But in the meantime, we have issues to discuss when it comes to reconciliation and we definitely know the concerns of our international partners.

The concern which we will discuss here in the United States as to who we are talking to, what the conditions will be, what effect on women will be when it comes to reconciliation, and all the other concerns that do not put in question the program as a whole but the bits and pieces which can be discussed and which can be resolved. And those will be the issues we will be assuring our partners here about the impact of this program on the achievements that we have had over the several past years.

And we are not going to compromise the achievements that we have had with any reconciliation program, we're not going to compromise our constitution and we are not going to compromise the freedoms whether it's freedom of press, whether it's freedom for women and whether it's any other freedom; we are not going to compromise. So basically, that's the point that we'll be making here and, yes, it will be discussed and I think it will be discussed a lot.

MR. AYAZI: May I go to Prague for a second? Then I'll come back to you. Prague, anybody has a question? If not, then we can continue.

MR. GEDMIN: Yes, Akbar, happily. Jeff Gedmin here. Waheed, we talked about free media in Afghanistan and steps that your government may take to create a more hospitable

environment. Could you say something about the Taliban? Do the Taliban have a media strategy? How do they use media?

MR. OMER: Well, Chris had a reference to how the Taliban used media 10 years ago. And at the moment, our priority number-one is to keep media and to keep journalists safe from the hazards of Taliban. That is our first thing.

So frequently, when I talk to journalists about security and about freedom of press, we tell them, look, if you go to Helmand or if you go to Kandahar or if you go to Uruzgan to cover a story, then that's an achievement because you wouldn't be able to go if a government or our international partners are not present. So that is the kind of security that, of course, is far from ideal but is some security.

The Taliban use the media basically to advance their cause which unfortunately is something that sometimes is really difficult to understand, in a way. They keep on calling TV stations or radio or journalists to tell them how many people they have killed in some province in Afghanistan and that they want it to be there.

They keep on harassing; they keep on threatening journalists to take their stories and to publish it – which is normally about killing; which is normally about a bomb blast; which is normally about how they have been successful in attacking so-and-so school or so-and-so place in Afghanistan and how many people they have killed. That's the only way they are using media.

And I think one area where we have made progress over the past three years since we have this media and information center, we have managed to take more space away from Taliban; the space that they could otherwise use. We get every day in a conference hall that we have in the GMIC, two or three press conferences by a government minister about so-and-so development in Afghanistan in the area of education or so-and-so development in the area of agriculture. And we are managing to feed media more.

And the more we understand – the more we feed media, the more information we give media, the more space we take away from otherwise the news by Taliban, which is mostly propaganda. They do propaganda; they threaten journalists in a way that has a major impact on the freedom of press in Afghanistan. And our responsibility number-one is to keep journalists safe from Taliban.

MR. AYAZI: Thanks. You, in the back there, please?

Q: This is Lalit Jha from Pajhwok Afghan News. (Inaudible) – question that Karzai gives interviews of Western media, he expresses his frustration how Afghanistan is being portrayed in the Western newspapers, the media, when it comes to portraying his corruption issues, the relationship with his family he has – his brothers and other things. Can you give us a sense of how you view Western media coverage of the Afghanistan war and President Karzai in particular?

MR. OMER: I think the only one instance where the president referred to the Western media about Afghanistan was the elections in 2009. Overall – I mentioned this before as well –

there is an unprecedented level of attention towards Afghanistan when it comes to local media or when it comes to international media all over. And sometimes, it works against our cause. Sometimes, when you go back, for example, to elections, I think we did a lot in the elections when it comes to media to, in a way, depict a picture of Afghanistan that was not helpful for the future of Afghanistan.

Yes, I think the president – our president – is – since I've been working with him, I've seen him as one of the most receptive people in Afghanistan to criticism. He has been criticized for almost anything especially over the past two or three years. People have gone to talk about his family and there are stories that talk about, for example, killing off a member of his family, or all those kinds of things. Corruption, for example, has been overplayed in many ways.

And being in Afghanistan with the ground realities that we have, with the kind of enemy we face, with the kind of international support we get in Afghanistan and with the way money is spent in Afghanistan; with the way, for example, some of us had the role in empowering people that we keep on criticizing the president for, and many other aspects of this brings you to a point where you feel like sometimes you are not being fair to us.

But that doesn't mean that in overall picture what the free media or international media is talking on Afghanistan is wrong. But sometimes, I think, and the president believes as well, sometimes we think that we are not being treated fairly and the context is not seen properly and everybody goes with a trend that is not necessarily the right trend.

So I was talking to a friend in Afghanistan – to a TV channel which extremely, extremely critical of the Afghan government – very critical. And I was talking to him over lunch. He's a friend and I have said, look what we're doing. He said, look, I get more – we get more commercials and we got more viewers the more we criticize you because you guys – you're under attack and if we stop attacking you, we will not have viewers.

So that trend sometimes – and I'm not talking about everybody here. I'm talking about some cases where people get – become follow trend without looking into broader concept. We will have always loved to see corruption, talking about corruption. We have never said that we don't have a problem such as corruption. We always admit that there is corruption within the government in Afghanistan and that corruption – we are taking steps and we need more steps to take to try to eliminate that from Afghanistan. But there's always other dimensions to it that we, for example, would like media to also pay attention to so that we don't become very narrowly involved in on aspect of things and some way victimize people.

MR. AYAZI: Thanks, Omer. I would like to come to this corner, somebody – yeah, you had a question – you? Yeah.

Q: I thought I would try to be the non-journalist asking a question today for the program. I'm from the U.S. Senate. So you talk a lot about the perspective of women and trying to be sensitive to that or be inclusive, but we've seen, at the reconciliation meeting in London – I can't remember exactly what we're calling it, a conference or not, but women were not – I mean, it had to be forced – at the last minute, women were on the outside. They weren't invited to be a part of it.

The peace jirga's coming up. Women want to be there in good numbers – and the right women. And so to have, you know, to train spokespeople is a very good idea. I know USAID is working with the Afghan government on ways that they can be helpful and good information and press releases are important.

But, you know, to get to civil society and those that are trying to have messages or work in partnership, I recognize there's a context there and it's very important and we completely agree there's a context and we can't sit here in Washington or in Prague or whatever and decide for you, but when you have an entire society and you see a good portion not being included in the message, not reaching them or even intending to do so or asking the questions as well, it's not just a one-way communication. So that's one side.

The second side is, you know, to have journalists know how to do their jobs better – what's your ideas about how – better pay for journalists, better programs and schools, obviously not – a proportion are going to university, how can you do a better job getting those into skills, even just in – infused in mainstream education, asking questions, being analytical, that kind of thing?

MR. OMER: Absolutely. You talked about two things that we would definitely, definitely want to count as our achievements over the past seven, eight years. That is number one, bringing back women to the scene and number two, freedom of press. And those are two things that we would be least ready to compromise with anything else, including bringing peace to Afghanistan.

If peace or stability in Afghanistan costs us to compromise freedom of press in Afghanistan and freedom of women in Afghanistan, then we'll be going back to the Taliban era because they brought some kind of case, but they did not bring freedoms and they did not bring justice to the people.

Women – London conference, of course, that was a story, we were only allowed to take our president and minister of foreign affairs and I think a couple of more ministers and unfortunately, none of them was women. We hope to have a woman president at some point or a woman foreign minister.

When it comes to peace jirga, we have, I think it's going to be a significant representation of women in the peace jirga. Our parliament, I think, within the region in which we are living, our parliament has the most representation of women based on quota and based on them getting elected from the constituencies.

We have, in the both houses of parliament, which is about 400 people, we have 100-and-something, 102 women in the both houses of parliament who will directly go to the peace jirga, both houses of the parliament will be invited to peace jirga. Apart from that, we have a good number of women in the provincial councils who will find the way. So all these statements that will find a way to the peace jirga will have women involved.

But then on top of that, we have a specific quota for women who are not active in one of these segments which go to the – which to go the peace jirga to be represented – solely representatives of the women. So I'm talking about 250 women in the peace jirga. And in a

country like Afghanistan, if you manage to get out of 1,000 participants, 250 participants, I think we will be very happy with that and we will be very happy with the words that will be made.

We've got lots of vocal women in Afghanistan and we have had, as a government, had lots of problem with women and peace in the past five years. And I think that was – is quite strong, the advice of women in Afghanistan and that will work to continue to make it stronger in Afghanistan.

Yes, journalists, professional training for journalists that has been an issue. Apart from us in the government not being used to freedom of media, not being used to be criticized in all those other aspects that we have to mature ourselves; journalists in Afghanistan have to learn to be more analytic, have to learn to use the freedom of press in a way that's – in a way that it's used in the rest of the world and the rest of the free world. Those things need training. Those things need professional experience and those need also education.

And I think we have a good number of young Afghans who are going out – men and women – who are either in the United States or in London or were in Germany or somewhere else in world, in India, for short trainings, for master's degrees in mass communication and journalism, but this is going to be slow but steady process.

Yet, there is not quick solution – will not get all of a sudden, people in Afghanistan, young people in Afghanistan will have all those requirements of international standard for journalists. But we are making progress and it's steady, but of course, it's slow.

MR. AYAZI: Thanks, Waheed. I think where I can add something is – as Chris referred to it – besides the local media and the organizations that are playing important role and they're growing and they're learning, I think, important radios such as Radio Free Afghanistan, Voice of America, BBC. They all can play an important role in training and developing free media and journalists. And I think to some extent, we do that and hopefully we would be a much bigger player there. This gentleman has been trying to ask a question. If I can go to him.

Q: Mike Isikoff for Newsweek. Among the issues you said that President Karzai wants to raise with President Obama, you mentioned detention facilities and also that corruption is not just connected to the Afghan government and I wondered if you could expand a little bit on the specific points that he wants to make on those two issues.

MR. OMER: On the detention facilities, there has been good progress. We have been talking with – the president has been talking with Gen. McChrystal about it and there is an agreement on both sides that for Afghanistan to be able to exercise judicial sovereignty is very important.

And for that, a transfer of detention centers where Afghans are kept to the Afghan government will help us long way and that's what the president referred to in his op-ed on the Washington Post. That, in principle, there is an agreement on both sides. And there has to be a discussion about the practicality of it and the timing of it that we hope to take up here.

And the corruption is something that will be discussed here and as the president has said in his op-ed, corruption is an issue for the government of Afghanistan. It is really not helping

our cause. It's not – really not helping out people and it's not helping our government's reputation elsewhere in the world and within its own people.

That recognition is there and the president has talked about the two recent steps that we took in the past month-and-a-half, including the signing the – Afghanistan's local governance policy which gave local governments more power to be able to plan, design and spend – design programs and to spend money and also to make appointments in the provincial governments through the administrative reform commission or the civil service commission, which, if implemented properly, will take us a long way in fighting corruption. And also the authorities that the president gave to the high office of oversight, including a joint monitoring commission, which will have Afghan nationals and internationals on it, will monitor the process of anticorruption activities there in Afghanistan.

But then in the meantime, the context is, Afghanistan over the past eight or nine years has only, as a government, has only spent 20 percent of what the world has spent in Afghanistan. If the world, for example, has spent 10 billion in Afghanistan, only 2 billion of that has been spent to the government of Afghanistan. And the rest of it, 8 billion, is spent by the world directly, through NGOs, through contractors, through international organizations. And that is something that we, of course, don't know.

So within that 20 percent that we have been spending, 12 percent of the money from that 20 percent – from that 2 billion, for example – 12 percent of it is the money that is earmarked by the donor. The donor has a say as to where and how we can spend that money. Only 8 percent out of the hundred is the money that is given to the government of Afghanistan and the government of Afghanistan can spend freely.

So we're talking about a 92-percent funding, which is spent either directly or indirectly, by the donors in Afghanistan and an 8 percent which is spent by the government of Afghanistan. We have always said we will – we understand there is corruption in Afghanistan. We understand that the 8 percent of money we are spending, we can spend it better and we are trying to take steps. We recognize this problem and we are trying to take steps to make sure that we spend it properly in Afghanistan.

But the rest of the money, through contractual mechanisms, through many other mechanisms, is spent in Afghanistan without the control – beyond the control of the government of Afghanistan. That is where we think the bigger part of the problem lies. And the world has to recognize that and the world has to really address that.

MR. AYAZI: Thank you. I'm coming back to you, Prague. If anybody has a question, please let me know. And then, if not, we are still in Washington.

Q: Akbar, could I ask a question?

MR. AYAZI: Sure, go ahead.

Q: I'm Andy Heil with the Central Newsroom. I just wanted to ask a question about a specific case that I think has wider implications. And that was the case – I'm not sure if I'm getting the first name right, but Kambaksh, the young man who was sentenced to death in a hasty

trial, near Mazar-i-Sharif, I think. And that case ran its course and I know the president was quite cautious in terms of intervention, but there was a lot of pressure both inside the country and outside the country.

The young man was basically sentenced to death for apostasy, I guess on the basis that he's a part-time journalist and student. He was eventually – he's free now, as I understand it. Were there lessons learned in that case, do you think? And Chris, from your perspective, are there lessons that you think should have been learned in that case?

MR. OMER: I'll talk about this case and also the case that – we referred to a case, press and report, about the Payman daily. This was a daily newspaper who was closed in Afghanistan. The case of Pervez Kambaksh has to be seen within – once again, I would recommend that we have to see that within the context of opinion of Afghanistan and within the context of Afghanistan as a country where traditions and religion and other factors have influence on the life of every family.

Pervez was a young student in Mazar University who had distributed – printed from Internet an article which was believed to be anti-Islam, or which was believed to be contrary to the constitution of Afghanistan. And guess what? The students to whom Pervez had distributed these articles reported to the court and they made a case against Pervez in the court. And later, this went to the court and went to the ulama and others. And he was finally tried. In the court, Pervez – made a ruling about Pervez that we all know.

I wouldn't say the president was cautious about it. I would say the president wanted, had to balance, once again, I would repeat: The president had to hit a delicate balance between the freedom of Pervez Kambaksh and also avoiding any tool that would be used against the government, that would be used against the overall situation in Afghanistan, by anyone.

So it had to take a – struck, and it had to be handled in a way that was not seen as an un-Islamic act by the government of Afghanistan that, I will stress again – I'll emphasize – we cannot afford. We cannot afford being seen in Afghanistan as a government which does not value religious beliefs and we are not going to indulge in anything that makes that case for our enemy, or makes that case for anybody – for our neighbors, or whoever else – to use our people against us.

So that was the context within which we were dealing with Pervez Kambaksh. Unfortunately, we are not in that stage where action like that could be skipped, or could be seen as trivial. We want to arrive at a point where we – I, as a person – can read that kind of an article, but we are not there. I cannot do that. Pervez could not do that, I cannot do that. And I'll be in trouble if I do that. And I'm not going to encourage any other young Afghan to try that right now, at the moment, in Afghanistan.

MR. AYAZI: And Chris, your part of the response, I think the question is, what should be done?

MR. WALKER: Well, I think we're uncomfortable with the anti-blasphemy provisions and its application precisely because there's motivation for the illiberal forces in that setting to push that side. So in essence, if I understood the response correctly, there was a feeling that the

president and the government was exposed in some ways and had to protect its flank. It's a very slippery slope when you enable those sorts of considerations to determine what is appropriate discussion and what isn't. And if anything, I think the last few years indicate that those sorts of encroachments are starting to reveal themselves in some ways, in limiting the space for free expression.

So I'd say that and I'd also say, just as an observation, that at one point Waheed mentioned that there are challenges and opportunities in Afghanistan. And I think given the fact Freedom House has designated Afghanistan as not free, it's important to mention that one of the things that distinguishes Afghanistan, in the full constellation of countries we examine, is that there are some countries that are not free and there's no media pluralism. And there's no media ferment at all. The media's either somnolent because they're bought off by the authorities or because there's no space whatsoever.

That isn't the case in Afghanistan. And I think, if I come back to one of your questions, Akbar, I think the flip side of the challenge in Afghanistan is that you really have an opportunity. Because you have media ferment. You have media pluralism, even if it's under great duress. That's something that should be safeguarded at all costs because if that's eroded, or constricted, or whittled down from the fragile state it's in now, it'll be a whole lot more difficult to achieve all the things that are on the table. All of the very daunting and humbling things on the agenda all become that much more difficult if the information space is closed and the arteries are shut off.

MR. AYAZI: Thank you. I think I will go with one more question here in Washington. And this gentleman has been trying from the beginning to ask a question. Sorry for not coming sooner to you.

Q: Ibrahim Nassar (sp) from the Voice of American, Ashna, radio. I'll just try to expand on the same question, on the last question: freedom of press and religion. I mean, the two words "Islam" and "Islamic" are, unfortunately, the words that have been exploited more than anything else in the entire Islamic world and particularly when it comes to Afghanistan. So when do we define when something is written, when somebody says something – and how do we define that it is Islamic or un-Islamic?

For example, there was this journalist a few years back, Mehedewi (ph), who wrote against the warlords who considered themselves as patrons of Islam in that country, in Afghanistan. But this guy was chased back all the way to Canada. He was put in prison and he took refuge in Canada. And the case of Kambaksh is another example. So what is the authority that defines what is Islamic and what is un-Islamic? You also mentioned that Taliban were considering taking a picture of a bird as un-Islamic. So is there any authority that defines Islam and Islamic?

MR. OMER: This is a very important question and I feel – I think I don't have a very direct answer to this question. As an Afghan myself, as a young Afghan living in Afghanistan through all this – whatever happened in Afghanistan – I have a complex understanding of this. We have a history, over the past 30 years, where our people have been killed. People have been put into jail. People have been tortured in many ways, in most of it, either through people who would claim to safeguard Islam in Afghanistan or people who would claim the opposite.

So this is a very – I once again stress, this is a very delicate discussion in Afghanistan. And in the situation where we are, now, number one: The supreme court in Afghanistan, the courts in Afghanistan, decide as to what – because our courts are supposed to be ruling on Shariah basis as well. They have a combination of sharia law and the modern practices, or judiciary practices, together. So the court can identify as to what is constitutionally beyond what the constitution allows people to talk about religion in Afghanistan.

Yes, this is a complex situation. Yes, many of us don't like this. Many of us want to get out of a situation where several people, in the name of religion, can actually cause trouble for citizens who would be asking or would be hoping for a normal, civilized way of life. That is something that we are dealing with in Afghanistan. And that's something that our enemy's using against us.

And our foremost vulnerability in Afghanistan is for the people of Afghanistan to see us as a government – with the presence of all of us in Afghanistan, our international partners in Afghanistan – with the boom in the freedom of – freedom of media has been a challenge, in a way. It's been used as a challenge to us by our enemy in many ways. The presence of internationals has been used in many ways. And to depict us as a government that does not respect Islamic values, that is something – the best tool that our enemy has in their hand.

And we have to hit a delicate – I said it earlier – we have to hit a delicate balance between making sure that Pervez Kambaksh or Ghous Zalmai or Mehedewi is free from jail and also to the larger benefit of the Afghan people, that nobody can use that as a means to take us to war for 30 more years. That is a very delicate balance. And I'm sure, being of Afghan background, you know that better than me.

MR. AYAZI: Thank you. Chris, you wanted to say something?

MR. WALKER: I have to say, I think the slippery-slope argument is the most vexing here because these sorts of laws – and not only laws based on religion, but extremism laws or state-secrets laws – can be applied in vague and uncertain ways. And when governments or others have the ability to apply the laws, often with a political view, even if it's not necessarily the intent at the outset, the temptation is always there. I think the bias should be towards safeguarding more expression rather than less.

It's not to minimize the sort of pressures, problems, challenges that are now confronted in Afghanistan. But I think, as a principle, that's what you want to aim for. I'd also say there's exquisite irony in the Taliban having destroyed televisions and eradicated the use of inanimate objects in this sort of – and now using the sort of online sophistication they do to communicate their messages. I think that you can't get a greater dose of hypocrisy and irony in one jolt than just taking that into account.

MR. AYAZI: Thanks, Chris. We're going to wrap it up. Very brief closing remarks from you, Chris, and brief closing remarks from you and then we'll end today's discussion. So I thank you both very much for taking time and coming here. Please, Chris.

MR. WALKER: Well, I think I'd reiterate the point I made a short while ago, which is: Of the 196 countries we examine globally in our annual Freedom of the Press report, there's probably few that are as vexing to analyze as Afghanistan. And as much as the country has enormous problems and challenges, which are clear, I think it's important to keep sufficient attention, resources and will behind supporting the freedom-of-expression pillar in Afghanistan. Because to the extent that erodes or evaporates, every other question that's come up today during the discussion becomes eminently more difficult to achieve.

And it's not to say there's a simple prescription for achieving that. I think some of the ideas have been discussed here today. But I think, as a matter of principle and as a foundational approach, this idea of guarding more expression rather than less, helping journalists and news organizations, supporting the government to reach those aims, are essential if there's really going to be progress on those other institutional questions in Afghanistan.

MR. AYAZI: Thanks. And you, Waheed?

MR. OMER: Yes, I think I've said much of what I wanted to say, but to cut it short, I believe I can assure you that the Afghan government, as a government, has an unprecedented level of commitment to freedom of media in Afghanistan. We have used freedom of media for the better of our government. And I think the more awareness that we get in that regard, the more we will do to safeguard this.

Number two: In the meantime, we should not be judged, in terms of freedom of media, based on the standard international factors or standard international way of measuring freedom of media. We have to be seen within the context of Afghanistan and within the context of the region. We are – the trip and the journey that we have taken in the past nine years – historically, I haven't seen an example of how another country has gone from where we were in 2001 to where we are in 2010.

But that means – that doesn't mean we don't have challenges. We have lots of challenges. And some of those challenges, unfortunately, are beyond our control – security and others. Some of them, like accessibility to information and other challenges, are within our control. We are not a perfect government. We are a government which is struggling, which is maturing, and the discussion of freedom of media has to be seen within that context.

MR. AYAZI: Jeff, I'm passing it back to you if you have closing remarks. And you started, so I would prefer you finish it.

MR. GEDMEN: Well, Akbar, that's kind. Jeff Gedman here in Prague and I'm just going to say thank you to the guests who joined us in the Washington office, the colleagues here. Chris, Akbar and Waheed, you have a busy week. Good luck. Thank you for today.

MR. WALKER: Thank you.

MR. OMER: Thank you.

MR. AYAZI: Thank you very much.

(END)