Dear Ministers, Mayors, Honored Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Thank you for the invitation to speak with you today. It is an enormous honor to be with you as we begin this conference on urban governance and peacebuilding in Afghanistan. There is no more important time to do this. I would like to thank the Independent Directorate of Local Governance, The Ministry of Peace, and USAID for inviting me to return to Afghanistan to discuss the role of urban authorities in advancing peace.

I have been conducting research on local governance issues in Afghanistan and Central Asia for more than twenty years, so it is a true honor and very humbling for me to speak to those from whom I have learned so much over so many years. I have visited so many of your cities and your villages over the past two decades. People have opened their homes and their hearts to me. In my work, I have knocked on hundreds of doors of complete strangers in this country and have never been turned away. This kind of warmth and generosity is not seen anywhere else.

We are hearing a lot about a possible peace agreement. The details are not settled, but one thing is certain: when peace comes it will be the cities of the country that will determine whether peace lasts. The ability of municipalities in Afghanistan to manage reintegration will determine the future of any agreement.

Today Afghan municipalities are under great stress. There has been a dramatic movement over the past forty years of people from the villages to the cities. This means that municipalities are now are home to diverse populations that have come seeking economic opportunities, better services, and hope for their children.

Peacebuilding is a process supports the establishment of a durable peace and tries to prevent the recurrence of violence by addressing root causes and effects of conflict through reconciliation, institution building, and political as well as economic transformation. As we all know, Afghanistan is caught up in a vicious cycle of violence that is difficult to stop.

There are answers to explain why Afghanistan remains trapped in such a cycle. We can learn from how other municipalities in other countries have stopped conflict.

Sharing examples from other countries is hard. Why? Because Afghanistan is a very special place, but let us try.

Columbia moved to end its civil war in a 2016 peace agreement that put an emphasis on integrating former insurgent groups into the political system, especially in urban municipalities. The peace agreement emphasized the importance of decentralized decision-making to sustain peace. It created a very decentralized public procurement mechanism that allowed local governments to promote local decision making. Although Columbia was already decentralized

before the peace agreement, the agreement sought to strengthen democracy and ensure that decentralization was implemented as the constitution had promised.

Guatemala, had a 36-year civil war that came to an end in 1996. Municipal government reform and decentralization were a very important part of the peace agreement. The constitution gave municipal leaders a lot of authority to plan and execute public services, and they were given their own revenue to do this. The peace agreement was important because it established municipal investments in health, education, and infrastructure. Yet, in Guatemala the peace has remained incomplete because the government never fully implemented a decentralization law, which gave more decision making and fiscal authority to municipalities. Line ministries resisted giving up power. Achieving the decentralized system that was promised to citizens will take a leader who wants to give up some power. This is always very hard and very rare. This is why achieving peace is so challenging, because it almost always requires an existing leader to give up some of his or her power.

Somalia is an important case for Afghanistan. I bring up Somalia because the duration of conflict in Afghanistan and Somalia are among the longest in the world. Like Somalia, Afghanistan is also characterized by diverse populations, Islamic traditions, as well as enduring tribal and customary governance structures. Like Afghanistan, Somalia also had a very strong centralized form of government that in many ways was an obstacle to peace. In recent years, Somalia has surprised the world and become much more peaceful because agreements have allowed for local decision making over budgets and other important issue. It seems that peace is finally achievable in Somalia because urban peacebuilding focuses on decentralization.

Peace creates new opportunities for women and allows for their fuller participation in the economy and society. As Afghanistan knows probably better than any other country in the world, women are often the biggest beneficiaries of peace. This is particularly true when families shift from rural environments to urban environments. When women are included, peace is more durable.

The next element is obvious: participation and local accountability—usually through political and fiscal decentralization. This is probably the most important and obvious part of maintaining peace in urban governance. One of the greatest threats to peace agreements come in the years after a first agreement is signed. Most agreement include municipal elections for mayors and local councils. Yet, such participation is often fragile. Often strong or technocratic leaders come to power who believe that they can achieve progress much faster if they did not have to deal with so many objections by voters and council members. These leaders worry about a return to violence. They want to achieve results quickly in order to show citizens that peace is possible. But what happens is that this desire to achieve results quickly ends up in a weakening of democracy and participation. Leaders move to weaken democratically elected bodies that are the foundation of a new consensus and replace them with planned solutions, such as a reliance on development plans or development councils.

Land is a very important issue to municipalities. In countries that can keep peace, property rights are managed in a very participatory way. Land is a very controversial issue because after a peace

agreement is signed. This is because many people flood into cities in anticipation of greater opportunity. Therefore, transparent land markets are so important to fostering peace. As you know, many conflicts emerge over land. This is why participation, real citizen participation and oversight over land markets at the local level is very important. Some countries have been successful because they allow municipalities to experiment and to try different ways of registering and selling land.

I have talked about three aspects that are important to municipalities: participation, gender inclusiveness, and land markets that stimulate growth.

Something that I would argue is less important is planning. I know that may sound strange to mayors who are constantly told that their city plans are old or outdated. It is not that plans are not important, but experience shows that too much emphasis on planning detracts from the hard political and reconciliation work that must happen as part of the peace process.

Planning processes are relatively easy compared to the many other aspects I have discussed here. In fact, in many countries that experience reversals from peace, leaders use planning processes to substitute for participation. Donors often demand National Development Plans in order to receive aid, which create incentives to focus heavily on creating plans. Urban development plans are sometimes part of those plans. Unless those who participate in the planning process are elected officials, then planning is a technical issue.

Technical solutions alone cannot sustain peace. They must be accompanied by meaningful changes in the way decisions over resources are made at the local level.

Urban planning is important. But I would argue that a focus on planning before a focus on meaningful participation could undermine peace. Without participation—and I mean real participation of citizens in the policy process—urban plans adopted by new governments simply become technical documents.

Finally, there must be some flexibility. After a peace agreement is signed local officials must understand that they are living in an uncertain situation. They must have tools that allow them to adapt to rapidly changing circumstances. This means that administrative and political institutions must be flexible enough to allow leaders to adapt and experiment with their own solutions at the local level. This may mean providing services in a new way using new models that are different from what the central government has done before. Flexibility also allows local leaders the ability to make mistakes. All leaders make mistakes. The challenge is when we do not learn from them. We cannot learn if we do not try to change.

Allowing for local experimentation is also very important. I am sure all the mayors here today understand this and appreciate better than anyone else in the world.

Local experimentation in peacebuilding should be easy to achieve in Afghanistan. Why? Because Afghanistan has enormous wealth in this area. Decades of conflict means that citizens became stronger. Rather than waiting for someone to solve their problems, the people of Afghanistan showed how they are very capable of finding solutions to problems on their own without the help of authorities. You will not find anyone more optimistic than me about the

capabilities that people in this country have for finding solutions to their own problems. This means that citizens are truly resilient. This is embedded in social norms like ashar.

In my own research I have found that since 2001 individual trust in informal governance such as traditional authorities, including wakil-e gozars, has grown. This is not just my finding, but the finding of major opinion surveys. At the height of efforts to build the state, trust in non-state organizations has grown. Why? Is this bad for peace? Is this bad for Afghan municipalities? No, it is not.

Trust in these organizations has grown because they have proved to be responsive and adaptive. These informal or traditional organizations are not the same as they were decades ago. They changed because the demands of citizens changed. I found that they became much more responsive to the needs of citizens. Many of them even include women.

I found that when communities have greater trust in their informal governance organizations, they are more likely to support democracy and even women's rights. This is because when communities have stronger organizations, they feel more empowered to deal with the state. When individuals have strong community organizations, they are more likely to stand up to fight corruption. Officials are also more careful and respectful of communities when communities are better organized. This means that communities feel far more comfortable with democracy when they are stronger because they know their rights will be protected.

These informal organizations are not just important in rural areas, but they are important in urban areas. As you well know, people migrate to cities with their communities. They often bring their neighbors with them. They bring their customs and traditions with them.

What lessons can we draw about global experiences of urban peacebuilding for Afghanistan?

First, after peace we know that the expectations of citizens from their government change. We know that citizens will not accept the status quo that came before. This is true of former combatants, but it is also true of those who may have the sharpest disagreement with insurgents. Some people call this the "golden hour" of peacebuilding where change from the past is most possible.

Second, technical solutions cannot create peace. All durable peace agreements are political and involve political solutions and political changes. This means that things such as efforts to simply improve current systems like improve the efficiency of revenue collection or improve efficiency of service delivery are not going to create the ground for peace. People must feel that they are included differently in politics. This means that people's voices must be included in the creation of policies and budgets at the local level. For example, participation in donor-supported councils is not the same as real participation in the creation of local budgets.

Third, because expectations of citizens change quickly after peace agreements are signed, municipalities must consider ways to allow real citizen participation in the policy making process. They must have a real voice in how their taxes are spent. They must be able to veto authorities.

Finally, we know that people always react and change more rapidly than their governments. This is true of every country in the world. This is a very important point, because it shapes the way we think about how municipalities can create opportunities for peace and for supporting their diversity.

Although these lessons are drawn from other countries and even from Afghanistan's past, today is different. Today Afghanistan has a new chance at peace. The future will be different from the past. So these two days are an opportunity to think about new solutions. We are so grateful for all of you who came to attend this conference as both participants and panelists. You are all so busy, but your wisdom is priceless. Individually, we all have ideas for what should be done and how it can be done, but only when we sit together do we understand how we can make those ideas a reality.

One thing is certain: Afghanistan will choose a path that is different from anything the world has ever seen. It will be unique path.

Thank you.