



**AFGHANISTAN
CONFERENCE
HANDBOOK**

Afghanistan Five Years On

*Security, Governance, Human
Rights and International
Engagement in the
Taliban Era*

**17 SEPTEMBER 2026
TOORAK, VICTORIA,
AUSTRALIA**

Perspectives from Kabul, the Region, and far Beyond

Co-Hosted by Sage International & FHA Consulting Ltd

SAGE International is an independent Adelaide-based strategic affairs and geopolitical consultancy examining the assumptions that shape decisions in an increasingly uncertain world. Through strategic analysis, advisory work, publications and The Focus Podcast, SAGE helps decision-makers understand not simply what is happening, but why it matters and what may happen next. Challenge the assumption - Test the system - Identify the consequence.



Acknowledgement of Country

We acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the land on which we gather today, the Wurundjeri Woiwurrung and Bunurong Peoples of the Kulin Nation and pay our respects to their Elders past, present and emerging. We recognise their enduring connection to Country, culture and community, and acknowledge the continuing contributions of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to scholarship, public life and the pursuit of justice.

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Welcome and About the Conference

It is our pleasure to welcome you to the Afghanistan Five Years On Conference: Security, Diplomacy, Economy, Governance and International Engagement, to be held in Melbourne on 17 September 2026.

Five years after the Taliban's return to power in August 2021, Afghanistan stands at a critical juncture. The country continues to confront profound political, security, climate, economic and humanitarian challenges compounded by severe restrictions on the rights and education of women and girls, sustained displacement, persistent threats from terrorism and armed groups, and deep uncertainty over its longer-term political and economic trajectory. Meanwhile, regional and international approaches to Afghanistan continue to evolve and diverge. Some governments have maintained diplomatic distance and sustained political pressure; others have pursued varying degrees of pragmatic engagement, driven by security, economic, humanitarian and regional interests.

These divergent strategies raise urgent questions about Afghanistan's future and its place in the international order. Five years on, the hard questions remain unresolved. What political and security order is taking shape inside Afghanistan? Can international engagement meaningfully shift Taliban policy and behaviour? What are the consequences for human rights, education, economic development and regional stability? And how should Australia and the broader international community engage with Afghanistan without compromising fundamental principles of human rights and inclusive governance?

Through a keynote address, a special address on education, moderated panel discussions and conference reflections session, this conference will examine Afghanistan's shifting political and security landscape, resource and economic governance, terrorism and regional stability, diplomacy, human rights, women's education, humanitarian assistance, refugee protection, and the future of international engagement. Building on Afghanistan and regional focused discussions and diaspora initiatives held since 2023, this half day conference brings together former diplomats and government officials, military practitioners, academics, journalists, education and humanitarian experts, and members of Australia's Afghan community. Their combined experience offers a rare opportunity to examine Afghanistan through multiple, complementary perspectives rather than through any single political or institutional lens.

Above all, this conference is designed as a constructive and rigorous platform for dialogue: to draw honest lessons from the past five years, confront the realities facing the Afghan people today, and chart the choices ahead for Afghanistan, Australia and the international community.

The key objectives of the conference are to:



- Examine Afghanistan's political, security, economic, humanitarian, resources, and governance developments five years after the Taliban's return to power and assess their implications for the Afghan people and the wider region.



- Explore the evolving approaches of regional and international actors towards Taliban-controlled Afghanistan, including questions of diplomatic engagement, security, humanitarian assistance, economic relations, human rights and regional stability.



- Bring together policymakers, former government and military officials, academics, practitioners and community representatives to reflect on lessons from the past five years and contribute to informed discussion on future policy options for Afghanistan, Australia and the international community.

The conference aims to provide an independent and constructive platform where different perspectives can be examined openly and respectfully. Through keynote addresses and moderated panel discussions, participants will have the opportunity to consider areas of agreement and disagreement and identify practical policy considerations arising from Afghanistan's changing political and regional environment.

Conference Statement

Five years after the Taliban's return to power, Afghanistan stands at a critical juncture. Political uncertainty, deepening economic and humanitarian pressures, severe restrictions on the rights of women and girls, sustained displacement, climate issues and persistent terrorism and regional security concerns continue to define the country's trajectory and to shape its relationship with the wider international community. The Afghanistan Five Years On Conference provides a rigorous platform for informed, balanced and evidence based dialogue on these challenges. Bringing together diverse perspectives and deep practical experience to a one discussion table, the conference will critically assess developments since 2021, assess the effectiveness of international responses, and confront the difficult alternatives ahead for Afghanistan, for regional stability, for Australia, and for the international community at large.

CONFERENCE PROGRAMME

Time	Programme
2:30 – 3:00 PM	● Arrival and Registration
3:00 – 3:15 PM	● Welcome and Opening Remarks
3:15– 3:35 PM	● Keynote Address by Keith Wolahan
3:35 – 4:35 PM	● Panel 1 – Governance and Security
4:35 – 4:50 PM	● Refreshment and Networking Break
4:50 – 5:10 PM	● Special Address by Dr. Michael Suss
5:10 – 6:10 PM	● Panel 2 – Diplomacy and Human Rights
6:10 – 6:30 PM	● Panel 3 – Conference Reflections Session
6:30 – 7:00 PM	● Closing Conference and Networking

Keynote Speaker

In his keynote address, Keith Wolahan will draw on his three deployments to Afghanistan and subsequent experience in the Australian Parliament, Keith Wolahan will reflect on Australia's two decades of engagement in Afghanistan and the strategic lessons that can be drawn from the experiences. The keynote will consider the relationship between military objectives and political outcomes, the challenges of building sustainable institutions, and what the collapse of the Afghan Republic and international withdrawal in 2021 revealed about the limits of external intervention. Five years after the Taliban's return to power, his address will also consider why Afghanistan continues to matter to Australia and what lessons should inform future Australian foreign policy. It will explore Australia's interests in regional security, counterterrorism, human rights and international engagement, while considering how Australia can balance its principles and strategic interests with the political realities of Taliban-controlled Afghanistan.



Keith Wolahan

Keith WOLAHAN is a barrister practising in commercial and public law. He served as the Federal Member for Menzies from 2022 to 2025. He holds degrees in economics, law, and politics from the Universities of Melbourne, Monash, and Cambridge. Before coming to the Bar, Keith practised as a mergers and acquisitions solicitor at Mallesons and Ashurst. He also served in the Australian Army, reaching the rank of Captain. A qualified commando, he deployed once to Timor-Leste and three times to Afghanistan. He was awarded a Commendation for Distinguished Service for leadership in action as a platoon commander.

Governance and Security: Political Order, Resources, Terrorism and Strategic Lessons

This panel will examine Afghanistan's evolving governance and security landscape five years after the Taliban's return to power, focusing on political authority, institutional change, resource governance and the country's changing security environment. It will consider how the transition from the Afghan Republic to Taliban controlled governance has reshaped political order and state institutions, alongside continuing challenges posed by terrorism, armed groups and regional security pressures.

The discussion will also explore the relationship between governance, natural resources, climate and economic security, as well as the strategic and military lessons emerging from two decades of international engagement in Afghanistan. The speakers are former officials, military practitioners, academics and experts, who will undertake the discussion on what these developments mean for Afghanistan's long term stability and the wider region.

Speakers

Masoom Stanikzai

Presentation Title: Governance, Political and Security Order, and Prospects for Peace

Dr. Mumtaz Ahmadi

Presentation: Resources Governance, Climate and Economic Security

lynn O'Donnel

Presentation title: Terrorism, Armed Groups and Internal Fractions/instability

MAJGEN. Andrew Bottrell (Retired)

Presentation: Strategic and military/security lessons

Chair: Sami Omari - Former NATO Liaison

Speacial Address

In his special address, Dr. Michael Suss will discuss the long term implications of educational exclusion in Afghanistan as well as the significance of women's and girls' education for human development, building on his doctoral research and years of professional expertise in education. In his speech, he will clearly explain the adverse consequences that educational constraints may have on human capital, health, economic prospects, and social lives across generations, as well as the retionals that education access must continue to remain central on any discussion table about Afghanistan's future.



Dr. Michael Suss

Dr Michael Suss is an Australian education leader and researcher with more than three decades of experience in international and vocational education. He holds a Doctor of Education from La Trobe University, along with postgraduate qualifications in education, educational administration, international education and business. Since 2022, he has served as Chief Executive Officer of Imperial College of Australia, with responsibility for educational leadership, governance and compliance. His doctoral research examined the IELTS English language test as a mechanism of exclusion, exploring how educational and regulatory systems can restrict access to education, migration and professional opportunities for minority and non-native-English-speaking communities. His work brings a strong perspective on education, access, inclusion and the wider human-rights implications of educational policy, providing a relevant foundation for discussion on Afghanistan's education crisis and its relationship to international engagement.

A graphic of a rolled-up scroll with the text "Panel 2" written on it in a bold, black, serif font.

Panel 2

International Engagement: Diplomacy, Human Rights, Education and Refugees

This panel will examine Afghanistan's relationship with the international community five years after the Taliban's return to power, focusing on diplomacy, human rights, education, humanitarian assistance and refugees. It will explore how governments and international organisations are balancing engagement with the Taliban against concerns over political inclusion, restrictions on women and girls, access to education, humanitarian needs and Afghanistan's international obligations.

The discussion will consider the effectiveness and limitations of diplomatic engagement and international pressure, the continuing restrictions on women's rights and education, changes to Afghanistan's education system, and the humanitarian and refugee consequences of developments since 2021. It will also examine Australia's role and consider how future international engagement can respond to humanitarian needs while maintaining meaningful attention to the rights and aspirations of the Afghan people.

Speakers

Paul Foley

Presentation: Diplomacy and International Engagement with Afghanistan

Nasiba Akram-Haidary OAM

Presentation: Women's Rights and Education Under the Taliban Administration

Fawad Yousufzai

Presentation: Taliban Madrassas and the Future of Modern Education in Afghanistan

Dr. Tony Murney

Presentation: Humanitarian Response: Australian Aid and Afghan Refugees

Chair: Zahid Safi - Public Policy Advocate

Conference Reflections: Key Takeaways and the Road Ahead

This session will bring together discussants to reflect on the key themes emerging from the conference. Drawing on the keynote, special address and panel discussions, they will highlight major takeaways, areas of agreement and debate, and priorities for Afghanistan, Australia and the international community moving forward.

Speakers

Shahla Ibrahim

Reflection: Afghan Communities, Diaspora and International Engagement

Dr. Wajiha Azimi

Reflection: Women, Human Development and the Afghan People

Dr. John Bellanance

Reflection: Peace, Political Dialogue and the Way Forward

Chair - Masters of Ceremony

Masters of Ceremony



Iman Hurzook

Iman Hurzook is an emerging international affairs professional with interests spanning diplomacy, geopolitics and South Asian affairs. She is involved with the Australian Institute of International Affairs Victoria, working across its Young Professionals Network and South Asia Seminar Series, where she helps foster opportunities for emerging voices to engage with contemporary international affairs and regional developments.

Her interests include international security, regional diplomacy and the evolving strategic dynamics of the Indo-Pacific, particularly the forces reshaping South Asia and its place within the wider regional order.



Kalina Page

Kalina is a postgraduate student completing a Master of International Relations alongside a Master of Teaching. Her interest in international relations and humanitarian development grew from time spent living in China and the Netherlands, and travelling through rural Australia. She currently volunteers as Marketing Coordinator with the United Nations Association of Australia Victoria's Future Leaders Network. She has been active in the international space through events including the Australian Institute of International Affairs National Conference and the Australia-China Emerging Leaders Summit.

Speakers Biographies



Keith Wolahan

Keith WOLAHAN is a barrister practising in commercial and public law. He served as the Federal Member for Menzies from 2022 to 2025. He holds degrees in economics, law, and politics from the Universities of Melbourne, Monash, and Cambridge. Before coming to the Bar, Keith practised as a mergers and acquisitions solicitor at Mallesons and Ashurst. He also served in the Australian Army, reaching the rank of Captain. A qualified commando, he deployed once to Timor-Leste and three times to Afghanistan. He was awarded a Commendation for Distinguished Service for leadership in action as a platoon commander.



Lynn O'Donnell

Lynne O'Donnell is an Australian journalist, author and foreign correspondent specialising in Afghanistan and the wider region. She has reported from conflict zones across Asia and the Middle East for more than 30 years, including as Kabul bureau chief for AFP and the Associated Press. She spent more than a decade reporting from China and was a columnist for Foreign Policy magazine. Her work on Afghanistan, security and regional politics has been published and broadcast worldwide.



Mumtaz A. Ahmadi - Fullbrighter

Mumtaz A. Ahmadi is a former Fulbright Scholar with a postgraduate degree from the University of Melbourne. He has authored three books on natural resource governance, environmental sustainability and rural development in Afghanistan. He has extensive international experience in development policy, climate resilience and environmental management, working with organisations including the European Commission, USAID, the World Bank, the United Nations and JICA across Australia, the Pacific, Africa and Asia.



Shehla Ibrahim

Shehla Ibrahim is the Founder and President of Afghan Multicultural Hub (AMH) and holds a Bachelor of Business and Commerce in Human Resource Management and Industrial Relations from Western Sydney University. She is a community leader and advocate passionate about education, women's empowerment, inclusion and stronger multicultural communities.



Assistant Professor. Fawad Yousufzai

Assistant Professor Fawad Yousufzai is a former Lieutenant Colonel in the Afghan National Army. He served as Deputy Director of the Mathematics Department at the Afghanistan National Military Academy in Kabul and taught mathematics at several private and government universities. He has authored mathematics textbooks published by the Afghanistan National Military Academy and Kabul University. He holds two bachelor's degrees in Educational Leadership and Administration from Kabul University and has completed leadership courses at international military academies across Europe.



Masoom Stanikzai

Masoom Stanekzai is an Honorary Fellow at the Asia Institute and a Research Affiliate with the Initiative for Peacebuilding at the University of Melbourne. He previously served in senior leadership roles within the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, including as Chief Peace Negotiator, Minister of Defence and Communications, and Chief of the National Directorate of Security, and has held key institutional positions as Head of the Joint Secretariat of the High Peace Council, CEO of the Peace and Reintegration Program, and Vice Chair of the Disarmament, Demobilisation, and Reintegration (DDR) and Disbandment of Illegal Armed Groups initiatives.



Dr. Tony Murney

Tony has lengthy experience of government and international organisations, having held several positions in the Australian Parliament, Australian Capital Territory Policing, the Australian Federal Police International Deployment Group, the United Nations (UN) and private consulting firms. He has worked extensively across the Pacific, North Africa and Afghanistan. He has subsequently served as a Director with Civil Liberties Australia, worked assisting refugees and is currently a Director with the International Police Executive Symposium. Tony's professional objectives are to share knowledge and experience of national security, stabilization, peacekeeping, phenomena labelled as terrorism and alternative sources of public order in emerging and conflict affected states.



Paul Foley

Paul Foley is a former Australian diplomat who was Ambassador to Afghanistan for almost three years from 2010 to 2012. He also served as Ambassador to Timor-Leste and Ambassador to Iran and his final role in government was as Ambassador for Counter-Terrorism. He undertook a range of roles in the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, and also had postings in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia and Kingston, Jamaica.



Sami Omari

Sami Omari is an independent geopolitical strategist and policy consultant with extensive experience in governance, security, legal reform and civil military relations. In Afghanistan, he served as an Afghan prosecutor, as a lead cultural and political instructor on a DFAT funded project, delivering cultural and political orientation course to ISAF civilian and military personnel including Australian personnel deployed to Afghanistan. He also worked as a legal adviser supporting Afghanistan's justice sector under the U.S. Department of State's Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs (INL). He later served as Government Liaison Manager for NATO's Resolute Support Mission during the US-Taliban Doha negotiations and the subsequent release of 5,000 Taliban prisoners. He also contributes to public discussion through community and policy events. His current research work focuses on Afghanistan and the broader geopolitical and security dynamics of South and Central Asia as well as Indo Pacific.



Zahid Safi

Zahid Safi is the Co-Founder and Vice President of the Afghan Australian Business and Trade Chamber. He holds a Bachelor's degree in Business Administration from Finland and has worked as a Trainer and Assessor, as well as a Training and Compliance Manager, in the private education sector. He has been involved in community advocacy and engagement for more than a decade, with a particular focus on strengthening community participation, representation and civic engagement. As a former federal parliamentary candidate, he has also been actively involved in public policy and community leadership, with a strong interest in issues affecting Afghanistan and the Afghan diaspora.



Dr. Wajiha Azimi

Dr Wajiha Azimi is a medical doctor, community advocate, interpreter and media professional with experience across Afghanistan, Pakistan, New Zealand and Australia. A graduate of Kabul Medical University, she specialised in obstetrics, gynaecology and ultrasonography and served as Director of the Family Health Centre at Cure International Hospital in Kabul. She later worked in refugee settlement and community services in New Zealand and Australia. Based in Melbourne, she remains actively involved in initiatives promoting women's empowerment, multicultural inclusion and community wellbeing.



MAJGEN. Andrew Bottrell (Retired)

Major General (Retd) Andrew Bottrell AO, CSC & Bar, DSM is a retired senior defence and national security leader with more than 39 years of service in the Australian Defence Force. During his career he deployed on operations to the Antarctic, East Timor, Iraq and Afghanistan. His responsibilities while deployed to Afghanistan for 12 months (Dec 2012 - Dec 2013) included the planning and execution of the drawdown and redeployment of Australian forces from Tarin Kowt, Uruzgan Province, as well as the reshaping of Australia's commitment in Kabul and Kandahar. Following his retirement in 2024, he founded Rockpool Partners, a strategy and capital formation firm focused on addressing complex national resilience challenges in - national security, dual-use technology, critical infrastructure, and emergency management. He is also Chair of the Board of Trustees of Melbourne's Shrine of Remembrance.



Nasiba Akram-Haidary OAM

Nasiba Akram-Haidary OAM is a distinguished humanitarian advocate and community leader, and the Founder and Chair of the Yassna Foundation and Project Humanity. She also serves as Chair of the Bruce Wong Foundation and is a member of Soroptimist International of Hornsby. A former refugee from Afghanistan, Nasiba has dedicated several decades to advancing community development, refugee support, women's empowerment and social inclusion in Australia and internationally. Her extensive professional experience includes roles with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, SBS Radio and Television, AC Nielsen, and Settlement Services International (SSI). Nasiba holds a Bachelor of Journalism and has been recognised with numerous prestigious honours, including the STARTTS Humanitarian Award, the International Zonta Award, the Australian Centre for Leadership for Women Award, the Medal of the Order of Australia (OAM) in 2024, and the Global Women Peace Ambassador Award in 2025. Her leadership and commitment continue to inspire and create meaningful change in communities across Australia and beyond.



Dr. John Bellavance

Dr John Bellavance is a distinguished academic and community leader with extensive experience in peacebuilding and education. He currently serves as a Global Vice President at Sun Moon University (SMU) and is the Oceania Coordinator for the International Association of Academicians for Peace and the International Association for Peace and Economic Development. Additionally, he holds the position of Vice-President of the Universal Peace Federation (UPF) Australia. He has recently finished a book on "Values in the Digital World" and "Living with Purpose".

Dr. John Bellavance has worked in the non-profit sector for 45 years. In the 1980s he and his wife Anne worked with the African American community to fight crack cocaine. His efforts were recognised by the White House, where President Reagan sent him a letter of appreciation for his efforts to rid America of this social ill. In the 80s and 90s he worked with the Summit Council for World Peace to encourage political leaders to mobilise political leaders to foster world peace. This work brought him to meet American governors, congressman and mayors. In Canada he met with two Prime Ministers in this capacity.

Dr. Bellavance's work is deeply rooted in the principles of "living for the sake of others" and creating harmonious, sustainable societies.



Dr. Michael Suss

Dr Michael Suss is an Australian education leader and researcher with more than three decades of experience in international and vocational education. He holds a Doctor of Education from La Trobe University, along with postgraduate qualifications in education, educational administration, international education and business. Since 2022, he has served as Chief Executive Officer of Imperial College of Australia, with responsibility for educational leadership, governance and compliance. His doctoral research examined the IELTS English language test as a mechanism of exclusion, exploring how educational and regulatory systems can restrict access to education, migration and professional opportunities for minority and non-native-English-speaking communities. His work brings a strong perspective on education, access, inclusion and the wider human-rights implications of educational policy, providing a relevant foundation for discussion on Afghanistan's education crisis and its relationship to international engagement.

Organising Committee

SAMI. OMARI

Director of FHA Consulting Ltd

ZAHID SAFI

Co-Founder of Afghan Australian Business & Trade Chambers

DR. TONY MURNEY

Retired Australian Federal Police

DR. JOHN BRUNI

CEO of Sage International

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Map of Venue

Armagh Venue

226, Kooyong Road,
Toorak, Melbourne,
Victoria

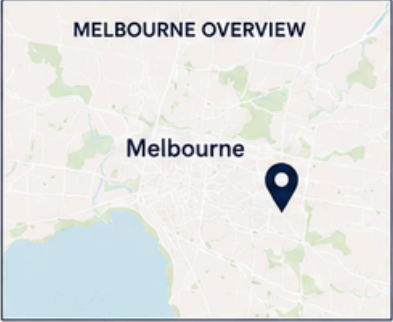
VENUE LOCATION

ARMAGH VENUE 226

226 Kooyong Road,
Toorak, Melbourne,
Victoria 3142

Armagh Venue 226 is a heritage building located in the heart of Toorak, one of Melbourne's most prestigious and accessible suburbs.

MELBOURNE OVERVIEW

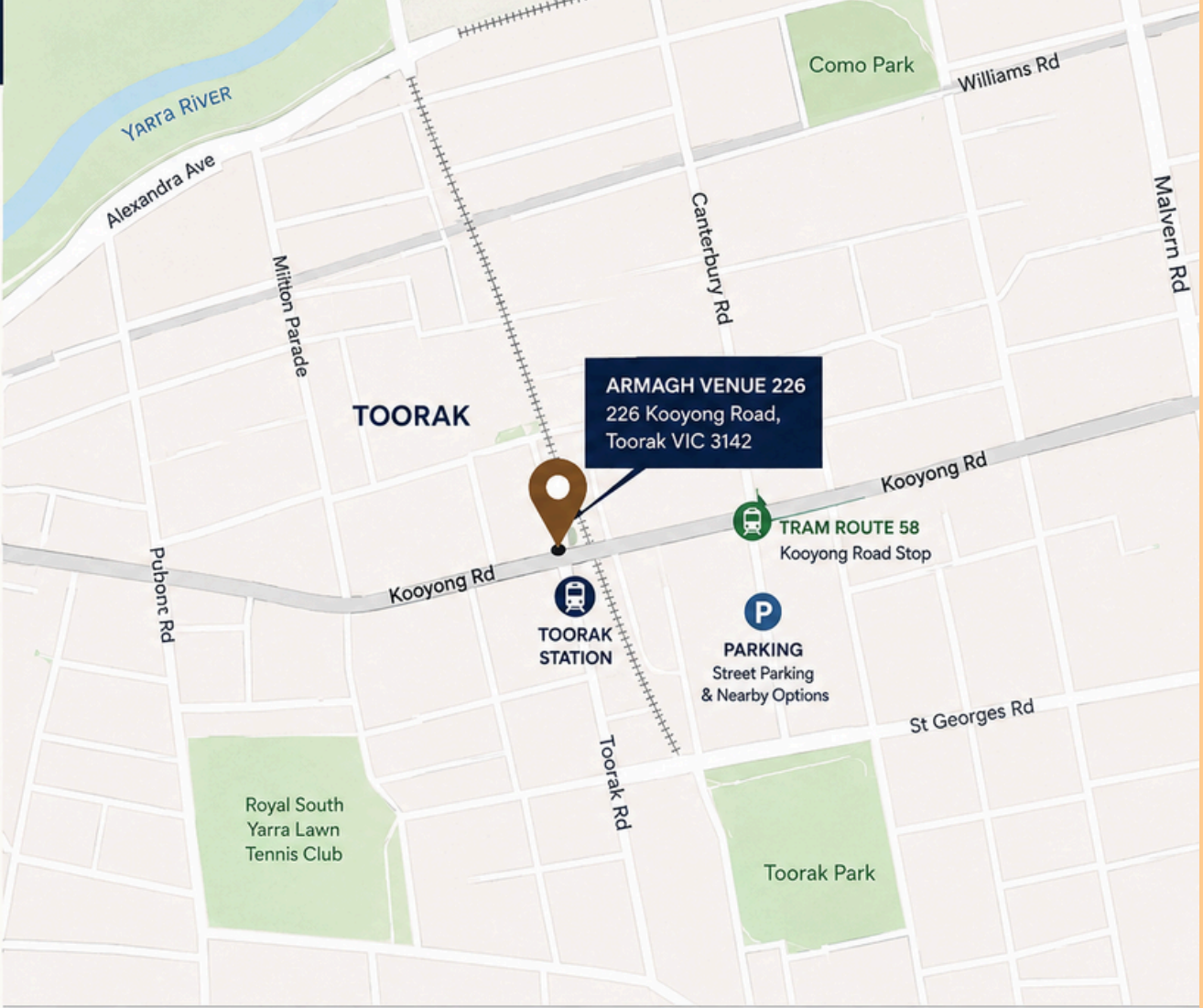


ARMAGH VENUE 226
226 Kooyong Road, Toorak VIC 3142

TRAIN STATION
Toorak Station (Glen Waverley Line)

TRAM STOP
Tram Route 58

PARKING
Street parking available and nearby parking options



BY TRAIN
7 minute walk (550m) from Toorak Station (Glen Waverley Line)

BY TRAM
Tram Route 58 stops directly on Kooyong Road (2 minute walk)

BY CAR
Approx. 10 minutes from Melbourne CBD via St Kilda Road

PARKING
Street parking available on Kooyong Road and surrounding streets

Afghanistan on Five Years: Security, Governance, Human Rights and International Engagement in the Taliban Era

NOTES

DATE: / /

SUBJECT: _____

GOVERNANCE, SECURITY, Human
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in the Taliban Era

Afghanistan Five Years On

CONFERENCE HANDBOOK

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