Dr. Yacoobi is a moral giant. That is not obsequious or unwarranted praise. It is simply the truth. In describing the struggle to promote education in Afghanistan that she and her companions at the Afghan Institute for Learning (AIL) have worked on tirelessly since the mid-1990s, she was inspiring and powerful. That was the takeaway from her talk. She was not like the prior speakers we have had in this series. The facts and figures she cited could easily be looked up on the Internet. There was no deep analysis of Afghanistan’s internal political dynamics or a discussion of Afghanistan’s international relations. There was instead a palpable spiritual strength. Think for a moment about what this woman does. This is an elderly woman who confronts the Taliban on a daily basis with nothing but her character as a weapon. If that does not impress, you cannot be impressed. It is one thing to act bravely in a moment of crisis. It is quite another to live a life that defines courage. Despite this courage though, there is not a hard edge to her. She remains kind, gracious, and good-humored, which only adds to the sense of awe one gets when she speaks. In general, I am not one to heap praise on public speakers and yet I still feel that this paragraph has not done her justice. Alas, Dr. Yacoobi’s exceptionality surpasses my command of English.

The extraordinary bravery displayed by Dr. Yacoobi was simultaneously encouraging and discouraging in terms of thinking about Afghanistan’s future. On the positive side, one cannot help but have hope for the people of Afghanistan if there are even a handful of people like her in the entire country. Furthermore, her work through the AIL will brighten countless lives and make Afghanistan a better place for as long as it remains open. As long as it remains open. That is the problem. With western troops’ presence in Afghanistan decreasing over the coming months and years, to what extent can AIL stay open? Dr. Yacoobi has stated herself that security considerations prevent her staff from reaching many provinces. A previous speaker mentioned that the area around Kabul that is considered secure enough to travel to is continually getting smaller and smaller. One imagines that the areas where girls are allowed to go to school are also decreasing in number and shrinking in size. On a more profound level, how evil does one have to be to oppose this woman and how dysfunctional does a country have to be that this kind of moral strength is even required to do something as simple and humane as teach girls to read and wash themselves properly? I try my best to understand why people from other cultures think and feel the way that they do, but I cannot fathom opposing girls’ education as anything other than bizarre, alien, and cruel. And I don’t think that I really want to try understanding it either. Some actions and some ideas are simply beyond the pale.

In one sense, in terms of success, every child educated by AIL is a child that may not have been educated at all otherwise and so every child touched by AIL counts as a victory for Dr. Yacoobi. That she and her team could have achieved so much with so few resources in the face of such astonishing adversity is amazing. Though extraordinary, Dr. Yacoobi is not singular; one need only think Malala Yousafzai to find another female moral giant in the region and she is but the most famous of many who labor in the name of girls’ education in the most inhospitable area of the world for girls’ education. So there is hope. Still in the immediate context, it is hard to see. It is difficult to envision AIL defeating the Taliban in hard reality terms and Afghanistan is a place of particularly hard realities. In the kingdom of heaven, there is a special place for people like Dr. Yacoobi. But to state the obvious, Afghanistan bears little resemblance to that kingdom.