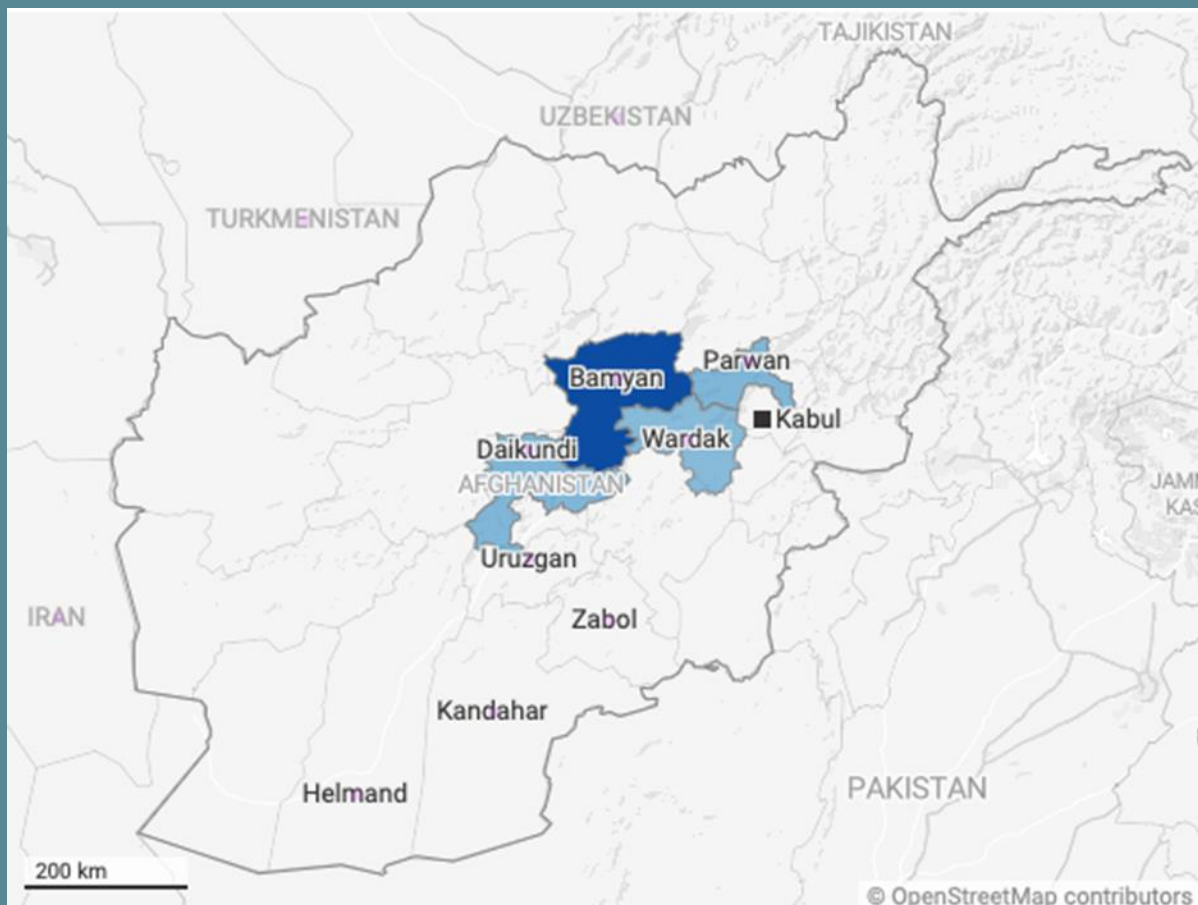




Local Dynamics of Conflict and Peace in Central Afghanistan

Findings from a Local Forum for Peace



July 2021

Reaching Out for Peace is a joint project of Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES) Afghanistan, Afghanistan Public Policy Research Organization (APPRO) and Mediothek Afghanistan for Development and Peace Organization (MADPO).

The project is designed to facilitate regular community level exchanges on local impediments to and opportunities for peace in and between seven regional nodes: Kandahar, Herat, Balkh, Badakhshan, Bamyān, Nangarhar, and Kabul.

Local forums for peace are held to engage Afghans “where they are” on ways to overcome conflict through dialogue, exchange, and activism. As such, these events encourage active participation at the community level in efforts to build a common vision for peace. Ensuing publications and visual media outputs help to inform sub-national, national, and international stakeholders and provide recommendations for future engagement.

This brief was prepared by Lucile Martin, Saeed Parto, and Martha Le Grand as part of a partnership between FES, MADPO, and APPRO.

On June 9, 2021, a local peace forum was held in Bamyān, bringing together civil society representatives and local authorities from Bamyān, Daikundi, Wardak and Parwan. An overview of basic demographic, geographic, economic and conflict features of each province is provided below, followed by an overview of proceedings of the forum. The brief ends with general conclusions from the discussions.

Background

Bamyān and Daikundi, as well as parts of Wardak and Parwan, are part of the historical region of Hazarajat, which stretches over Ghor in the west, as well as parts of Ghazni and Uruzgan.

The four aforementioned provinces are almost entirely rural (cf. figures 1, 2). The majority of the population relies on animal husbandry and subsistence agriculture, the better off depending on the trading of crops. Parwan, connected to neighboring Kabul through the Salang Road, is a key supplier in agricultural products for the Afghan capital. In Bamyān, local tourism also constitutes an alternative livelihood. Mining is another source of employment in Daikundi, a province rich in minerals, as well as in Wardak and Parwan where chromite deposits are exploited. (Basharat, 3 September 2017, Ghafari, 3 February 2014, Byrd and Noorani, 2017).

Poverty rates are the highest in Daikundi and Wardak (both at 67%), followed by Bamyān (59%). Parwan is the only of the aforementioned provinces to have a poverty rate below the national average of 52% - at 42% (UNDP, 2020).

Located in the central highlands, mountainous on over 90% of the areas, and covered in barren, arid lands, Bamyān and Daikundi are among the provinces with the highest vulnerability and sensitivity to climate change (UNEP, 2016). Repeated

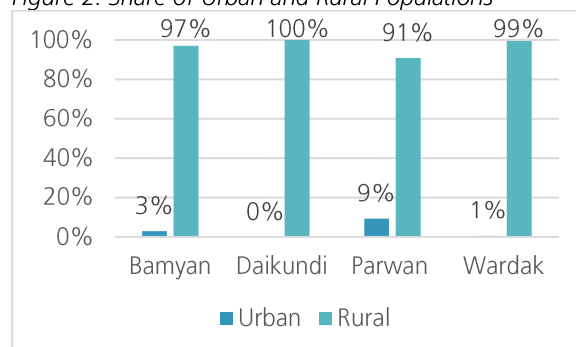
droughts in recent years have had dramatic conditions on the livelihoods of rural inhabitants.

Figure 1: Population Estimates (2020)

Province	Total	Urban	Rural
Bamyān	495,557	14,472	480,815
Daikundi	516,504	0	516,504
Parwan	737,700	67,960	669,740
Wardak	323,187	1,802	321,335

Source: NSIA (2021).¹

Figure 2: Share of Urban and Rural Populations



Based on NSIA (2021).

Bamyān, Daikundi and Parwan have been relatively stable in terms of security in past years, and remain among the six provinces with the lowest numbers of reported civilian casualties in 2020 (UNAMA, 2021). That said, sections of the Kabul-Bamyān highway neighboring the Ghorband area in Parwan have consistently been the scene of road blocks, occasional abductions and killing of civilians by armed opposition groups (AOGs) over recent years, hampering safe access to the province. There have been some clashes in the districts of Kahmard and Shibar of Bamyān and the districts of Watoo and Kajran of Daikundi in 2019 due to activities by non-state armed groups (NSAG) (OCHA, September 15, 2019). Bamyān and Daikundi have also long been the scene of protracted conflict over access to pastures and water sources between farmers and Kuchi no-

¹ Estimates are based on government figures. There are indications actual numbers might differ.

mads. Since 2001, the issue has become an important driver of political propaganda and of ethnic tensions (Giustozzi, 2017, Foschini, 2013).

Located on the western end of the Hindu Kush mountain range in the central highlands, **Bamyan** province is mountainous or semi-mountainous on 90% of its territory. It borders Ghor to the west, Sar-e-Pul to the north-west, Samangan to the north, Baghlan, Parwan and Wardak to east, Ghazni and Daikundi to the south. The province is majority Shi'a Hazara and Dari-speaking at close to 98% (UNFPA, 2005).

A rough landscape covered in barren, arid lands accounts in large part for one of the lowest agricultural productivity in the country – further aggravated by competition over land and mismanagement of natural resources (Afghanistan, 2019a, UNEP, 2016).

While the security situation is typically described as stable in the province, conflict induced civilian casualties have witnessed an unprecedented increase of 1820% in Bamyan in 2020 as compared to the previous year (UNAMA, 2021). Abductions by Taliban on construction sites were also reported in July 2020, and on November 24, 2020, an IED attack on the market in Bamyan center killed 18 and injured 60 (*ibid.*).

To the south of Bamyan, **Daikundi** borders Bamyan to the north-east, Ghor to the north-west, Ghazni to the east, Helmand to the south-west and Uruzgan to the south. Daikundi is mostly mountainous and difficult to reach due to extreme weather conditions during wintertime, as well as an inadequate infrastructure (Afghanistan FSC, 2018). The province is among those counting the most income-poor in the country (NSIA, 2019).

Fighting has been reported between AOGs and the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) in the districts bordering Helmand, and concern expressed among the population about the possible overspill of Islamic State-Khorasan Province (ISKP) militants from neighboring provinces (OCHA, 15 September 2019). Linkages between political parties in Daikundi and local armed groups have also allegedly fed insecurity in the province (Pajhwok, 2019). 70 conflict induced civilian casualties were reported in 2020, a number that is, however, among the lowest in the country (UNAMA, 2021).

Parwan borders Baghlan to the north, Bamyan to the west, Wardak to the south, Panjshir and Kapisa to the east, and Kabul to the south-east. The province is located along the Salang road, the

country's main trade route to the north, which branches off towards Panjshir in Charikar, and Bamyan in Jabaul-Saraj. The main language of 70% of inhabitants is Dari, followed by Pashto for an estimated 30% of the population. Parwan residents count Sunni, Shi'a, and Ismaili Muslims (MRRD, 2020, UNFPA 2005).

Parwan is mostly mountainous and semi-mountainous. Its weather and topography, however, are more favorable to agriculture than Bamyan and Daikundi. Water from the Ghorband and Panjshir rivers, and abounding natural springs are sources of irrigation for a variety of crops, with surplus production sold on the market in Kabul, and distributed country wide.

While security was generally considered as relatively stable in the province, 2019 also saw a spike in violence, including the abduction of teachers and school closures by Taliban, and a 500% increase in civilian casualties as compared to 2018 due to suicide attacks, ground engagements and search operations (UNAMA, 2019). The Ghorband valley, historically the scene of competitive strife between Jamiat-e-Islami and Hezb-e-Islami, has long been a site of insurgent activity (Ruttig, 2011).

Two of the western districts along the valley were considered under Taliban control in June 2021, and one contested 2021 (Roggio, 2021). Parwan was mentioned as site of operation of paramilitary units in a 2019 report by Human Rights Watch revealing serious cases of rights abuse by forces operating under the National Directorate of Security (NDS) as part of covert operations of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA).

Wardak province, also known as Maidan Wardak, borders Bamyan to the northwest, Parwan to the northeast, Kabul and Logar to the east, and Ghazni to the south. Residents include both Shi'a and Sunni Muslims – including Sunni Hazaras.

Almost all of Wardak's inhabitants live in rural areas, and half in mountainous regions. The highest density of population is found along the Kabul-Kandahar highway, a major trade route which crosses the province from northeast to the south (Goodhand and Hakimi, 2014).

Wardak's main income generating activities are subsistence and commercial agriculture, livestock, and non-farm labor. The province also has an unexplored mining sector, and illegal extraction of gold has been reported (Goodhand and Hakimi, 2014, UNDP, 2020). The conflict has af-

affected the livelihoods and farming-economy of residents, caught in crossfire between the ANSF and the Taliban, and sometimes forcibly evicted from their fields by the ANSF (Qazizai, 2019).

The location of the provincial capital of Maydan Shahr, 40 km southwest of Kabul along the Kabul-Kandahar highway, makes the province a strategic location linking the north to the south and the east to the west through a provincial road leading to Bamyan.

Wardak is a heavily contested province, with intermittent armed clashes between the ANSF and the Taliban – causing civilian casualties and displacement (Osman, 2019; UNSG, 2020; UNAMA, 2021). As of June 26, 2021, all districts except one, Maydan Shahr, were considered under Taliban control (Roggio, 2021).

Bamyan Peace Forum: An Overview of Proceedings

85 persons (51 men, 34 women) participated in the local forum for peace held in Bamyan on June 9, 2021. The participants were drawn from a wide range of backgrounds, including government officials, civil society actors, religious scholars, local elders, representatives of conflict victims and the disabled, of the private sector, youth groups, and university students.



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In each forum, participants are tasked to identify the main issues that affect conflict dynamics in their communities, which are then discussed in groups. Within each group, participants identify the drivers of each issue, and how these drivers of conflict could be addressed as part of creating conditions for sustainable peace.

Conclusions from group discussions are then presented to a panel of four members. In Bamyan, panel members included a member of the Bamyan provincial council, a representative of the Department of Education in Wardak, a member

of civil society in Bamyan, and a local advocate for peace.

Another component of the local forums for peace is an open discussion among participants on expectations surrounding peace and the potential advent of a negotiated deal between the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and the Taliban.

Participants' Expectations About Peace

Participants in the Bamyan forum for peace hoped a negotiated deal would create the conditions for a reduction of violence and the establishment of a new interim government to prepare the ground for elections and a reform of governance. They also considered an end to fighting – were it to take place – would support the development of the economy and provide opportunities to restore infrastructures.

That said, participants expected these outcomes would only be possible under the explicit conditions that civil and political rights enshrined in the Constitution of 2004 were to be preserved, and if the agreement resulted in a power sharing agreement between the two negotiating parties.

Were these conditions not to be met, participants were seriously concerned a government heavily influenced by the Taliban, or fully controlled by them would result in the dismantlement of existing structures of government and democratic institutions, the strengthening of patriarchal social norms, the eviction of women from the social and political scene, the marginalization of minorities, and the curtailing of the media. They also anticipated civil society organizations who had been active with support from Western donors since 2001 would be significantly weakened, and international aid would decline.

Participants notably feared Taliban definitions of what constitute “rights” and “governance” would conflict with rights standard promoted in Afghanistan since 2001. Some expressed serious doubts about the Taliban’s willingness to compromise and were reluctant to rub shoulders with them in the event of their integration in the government. In the words of a panelist:

We are told the Taliban of today are different from the Taliban of yesterday. Unfortunately for us, this claim has not proven to be true. [...] I am sure the people of Afghanistan are not the people of twenty years ago. Unlike before, youth are now involved in civil society, the media, raise their voices to call attention to the suffering of their communities, monitor the activities of the government. Whatever shape the next government will take, this role should not

be taken from them. – Female panelist 1, local government.

Finally, strong alarms were expressed over the perspective of yet more ethnicization of the conflict and the aggravation of sectarian divides between Shi'a and Sunni.

Local Factors of Conflict

Four prominent factors of local conflict identified by participants in the Bamyan forum for peace were:

- Lack of Rule of Law
- Ethno-linguistic and sectarian divide
- Weak economy
- Inequitable distribution of resources across the territory



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Issue 1: Lack of Rule of Law

Two interrelated themes were raised by participants concerning the intersection of a lack of rule of law and conflict. The first was the widespread impunity of powerholders benefitting from the war economy. The second was the inability of citizens to claim their rights due to inefficacy and rampant administrative corruption. The latter is viewed as encouraging perpetrators to continue committing exactions, undermining trust in the government, and exacerbating already cast inequalities between a minority with connections and the rest of citizens.

Group members called for a profound overhaul of the administration and the justice system, and an effective, rather than on paper only, implementation of regulations for anti-corruption.

This would not be enough, however, if regular citizens – as users of public services and government employees – do not assume the responsibility to resist corrupt practices and denounce abusive individuals. One way to support civic engagement against corruption, noted a participant, is to increase general awareness about the law and

mechanisms to fight corruption among the population.



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Issue 2: Ethno-Linguistic and Sectarian Divides

The ethnicization of politics was mentioned as a key aspect of conflict dynamics at the local, but also national level. For instance:

Ethnocentrism and racism have taken such a large place in our society that when we go to another province, before introducing ourselves as an Afghan, we have to state we are so and so from [such province] and with [such ethnic identity]. This is a very harmful cultural practice that has been institutionalized in our society and which will be very difficult to uproot. [...] Let's stick together, build our homeland hand in hand, otherwise peace will not be possible. – Female participant 1, academia.

A panelist added:

Believe me, even if peace comes, it will be short-lived. The Taliban first need to come to an agreement with this government and concede to power-sharing. And even then, we will not see security and stability in the short term. The reason is the divide that has been dug between segments of society in the past twenty years. – Male panelist 1, civil society.

Addressing this issue, according to group members, required a combination of measures focused on education and on structural reforms within the political system. At the local level, they suggested strengthening civic programs within the school system, focusing on common belonging rather than ethnic or sectarian identities. They also proposed to enforce legal requirements forbidding the manipulation of ethnic and sectarian identities by political parties, and introduce stronger regulations preventing the formation of parties based on ethnicity or religion/ sectarian affiliation.

While participants considered the government of the Islamic Republic to be at least partially to

blame for the ethnicization of politics, they also estimated that government institutions were endowed with the responsibility to reverse the course.

Among other actors mentioned as potentially playing a crucial role, were religious leaders and professors.

Issue 3: Weak Economy

Poverty and unemployment are considered as both a consequence and a source of conflict. Some of the effects of decades of war and displacement indeed include the destruction of local irrigation infrastructure, sometimes loss of agricultural savoir-faire, strains on transportation infrastructure, and hindered access to market outlets. Difficult access to natural resources and livelihoods, compounded by repeated climatic shocks, is at the root of local conflicts over land and water. The effects of war and climate change are aggravated by erosion of soil caused by poor management of natural resources in rural areas.

Group members thus reckoned efforts to introduce methods for sustainable resources management to restore the ecosystem and adapt to climate shocks would be useful to prevent further depletion of scarce resources and protect livelihoods.

In the semi-urban provincial centers where trade and services take more part in local livelihoods, participants explained the labor market was unable to respond to the needs and expectations of increasingly educated and qualified youth – particularly in Bamyan. For instance:

There are lots of different fields of study at Bamyan University, but students who graduate from them do not find jobs and end up working in the fields. – Male participant 1, civil society.

Nepotism in access to jobs was another factor mentioned as increasing frustration among the youth.



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Participants considered a stable security environment was a preamble in addressing poverty and unemployment. More security would indeed boost the nascent tourism sector in Bamyan, bolster outlets for the production of handicrafts, and create conditions for small enterprises to stabilize in all provinces. They had serious doubts, however, these conditions would be met in the short term.

Participants also insisted that, in the event a new government took shape as a result of ongoing negotiations in Doha, serious efforts needed to be made to regulate investments to direct them toward the national economy and prevent the flight of national capital to foreign countries. They further called for a more reasonable balance between public spending on security and on development.

Issue 4: Inequitable distribution of resources across the territory

One of causes of social conflict raised by participants was the inequitable distribution of resources across the national territory. A backdrop to this statement is the Roshanayee Movement of 2016-2017, which mobilized thousands to protest against the rerouting of a transregional powerline initially planned to pass through Bamyan.

Participants further complained that some provinces had benefitted more than others from development assistance from Western donors and from government investments. They therefore insisted measures needed to be put in place by the government and donors alike to ensure development plans were more equitable and based on needs assessments rather than political interests. Participants further called for a broad engagement of both civil society and political parties to conduct targeted advocacy, hold parliamentarians and provincial authorities to account, and mobilize citizens to voice their needs.

Conclusions

Four main observations can be drawn from the discussions held at the local forum for peace in Bamyan.

First, economic considerations hold a significant part in the concerns of participants.

These concerns are associated with a high awareness of the risks of climate change, as climatic shocks have rendered rural economies more vulnerable. This is particularly the case in Bamyan and Daikundi, but also in Parwan, where reduced river flows (and hence reduced production) can impact food insecurity beyond the province by limiting the availability of surplus for sale on Kabul markets (UNEP, 2016).

Active conflict has also directly affected local economies in Bamyan, where it restricts access of tourist clients to burgeoning services and handicrafts industry, and in Wardak, where farmers have restricted access to lands otherwise benefiting from relatively good irrigation conditions.

In the minds of participants, putting an end to violent conflict is therefore a priority in terms of economic well-being: it would bear economic benefits on the short-term by re-launching production, and on the longer-term by creating more attractive conditions for both private and public investments in development, sustainable economies, and resources management.

A second priority that emerged in the discussions is education, described as one of the most efficient ways to build social cohesion and resolve identity-based divisions in the long-term. Education the general public was also seen as a way to empower them to resist abuse from those who manipulate the administrative system.

Third, participants demonstrated relative trust in the capacity of government structures to reform themselves. Local departments of Ministries of Agriculture, Irrigation and Livestock, of Education, of Mining and Petroleum, of Haj and Religious Affairs, and of Women's Affairs were listed as actors that could play an important role in community development should the government be less consumed by security concerns and allocate more resources to development.

While participants sharply criticized the (dys)functioning of structures of governance over the past two decades, they also showed a firm belief in democratic institutions and the role they could play in supporting local efforts for peace – from representative institutions within the government to the judiciary, civil society, religious institutions

and the media. Group members and panellists alike further called for citizens' direct mobilization to hold the government to account.

Finally, expectations of stability are explicitly tied to the prospect of a "success" of ongoing negotiations in Doha – a success defined by an effective end to the conflict and the formalization of a clear framework for rights and governance. It is clear from discussions, however, that participants have little hope the negotiations will bear such results. They express doubts that the Taliban will compromise and are alarmed by the perspective of a further breakdown of social cohesion, a roll-back of some of citizens' achievements in terms of civic involvement, access to information and knowledge, rights of women, youth and minorities. There further are strong anxieties surrounding the ability of society to overcome ideological and identity-based strife.

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