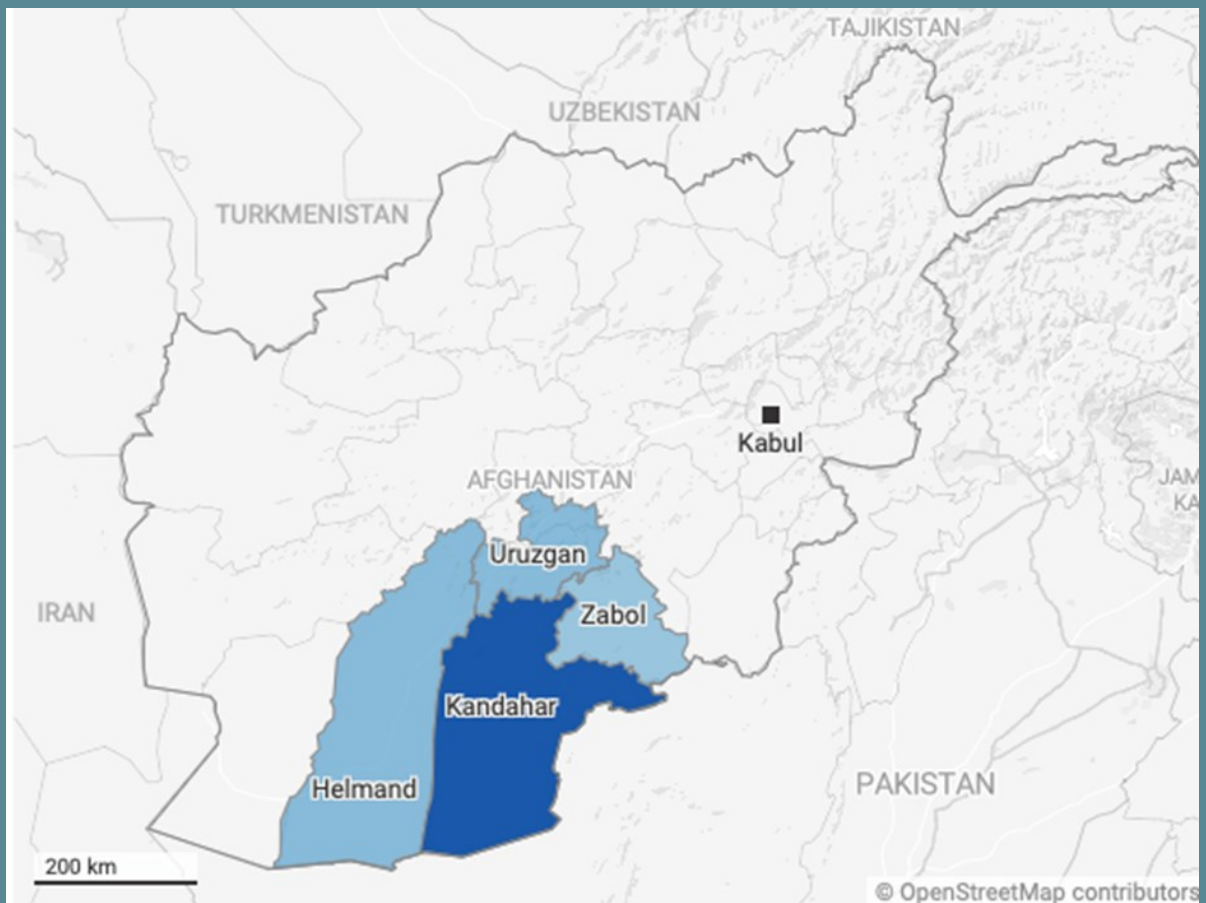




## Local Dynamics of Conflict and Peace in Southern Afghanistan

*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 and Saeed Parto as part of a partnership between FES, MADPO, and APPRO.*

On March 15, 2021, a local forum for peace was held in Kandahar city, bringing together civil society representatives from four provinces in the South of Afghanistan: Kandahar, Helmand, Uruzgan, and Zabol. 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

The four provinces roughly belong to the broader cultural and geographical ensemble of Greater Kandahar – which also encompasses the current province of Farah to the west, parts of Nimroz in the south-west, and, across the border of, South Pakhtunkhwa in Pakistani Baluchistan.

In all four provinces, infrastructure becomes progressively weaker, away from the provincial centers and larger villages while, distances to schools, clinics, and public services increase.

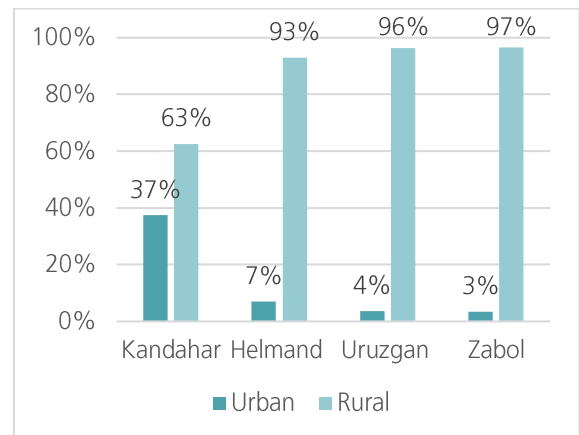
Rates of girls’ school enrollments in 2020 are among the lowest in the country, far below the national average of 39%: they are at 11% in Uruzgan, 21% in Helmand, 22% in Zabol, and 25% in Kandahar (NSIA, 2021). Three of the aforementioned provinces are among the poorest in the country, with multidimensional poverty indexes above 70% in Zabol (77%), Helmand (74%), and Uruzgan (71%) (NSIA, 2019).

**Figure 1: Population Estimates (2020)**

Province	Urban	Rural	Total
Kandahar	523,259	876,335	1,399,594
Helmand	100,361	1,345,869	1,446,230
Uruzgan	16,068	420,011	436,079
Zabol	13,009	371,340	384,349

All four provinces, particularly away from provincial centers, have high levels of insecurity with periodic skirmishes between Afghanistan National Security Forces (ANSF) and armed opposition groups (AOG). Kandahar and Helmand were among the provinces with the highest conflict activity reported between November 2019 and October 2020 (UNSG, March 17, 2020; UNSG, December 9, 2020). Targeted killings of army and police forces, government employees, the media, and civil society activists have increased in Kandahar, Helmand, and Zabol since 2018 (Ruttig, 19 October 2018; Faizi, 26 September 2019; Abed and Faizi, 2 January 2020).

**Figure 2: Share of Urban and Rural Populations**



**Kandahar** province borders Pakistan to the south and east, Uruzgan and Zabol to the north, and Helmand to the west. As figures 1 and 2 illustrate, it is the most urbanized of the four provinces, with 37% of the population living in urban areas, mostly in and around Kandahar city. The primary language of most inhabitants in the province is Pashto, and Dari-speaking communities, or “Farsiwan,” primarily located in urban areas, and Balochi minorities in the desert.

Kandahar city, located at the junction of highways from Kabul, Herat, and Quetta in Pakistan, is the chief commercial center of southern Afghanistan and the second-largest city in the country. It connects southwards to the Afghan-Pakistani border crossing of Spin Boldak-Chaman towards Quetta. The crossing is considered a major smuggling hub (Sabawoon and Ruttig, August 12, 2019).

The history of the city – tracing back to its foundation by Alexander the Great and as the first capital of the Afghan empire in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, its strategic location on the trade routes of Central Asia account for its importance as a center of trade and political power to date (Britannica, 2013).

Kandahar province is considered the birthplace of the Taliban movement, headquartered in Kandahar city during their rule (1996-2001), and a strategic province for the group – including due to its location on the border with Pakistan. Zabol and Helmand are of similarly strategic importance. Since 2016, the Taliban have regained control in remote districts of the province – a trend further accelerated after the killing of the province’s police chief and local strongman Abdul Raziq Achakzai in October 2018. Central districts, however, have remained relatively stable (Sabawoon and Ruttig, August 14, 2019; UNSG, February 28, 2019).

**Helmand** is the largest province in Afghanistan. It borders Pakistan to the south, Nimroz to the west, Farah and Ghor to the north-west, Daikundi and Uruzgan to the north-east, and Kandahar to the east. The Helmand river, flowing through the province from the Hindu Kush mountains in the north and into Nimroz in the south-west, constitutes the primary source of irrigation water in the valley, one of Afghanistan’s most fertile regions. 93% of Helmand’s population is considered rural, with 7% of urban inhabitants living in the provincial capital of Lashkargah. Pashto is the main language of most inhabitants, with some Balochi speaking minorities located in the south and Hazara Dari-speakers in the north. Helmand was the province with the estimates in terms of surface dedicate to opium cultivation, at over 90,000 (UNODC, 2021)

**Uruzgan** borders Daikundi to the north, Kandahar to the south, Helmand to the West, Ghazni province to the east, and Zabol to the south-east. The current borders of the province were drawn in March 2004, when the province of Daikundi was carved out of Uruzgan, responding to longstanding demands from the local Hazara population. The

Tirin Kot and Chor rivers, flowing respectively from the Northeast and the East, meet in the center of Tirin Kot district, flowing into the Helmand River, which crosses Deh Rawud from North to South. The valleys surrounding these rivers are the principal axes of agricultural production in a province covered by mountains on approximately three-quarters of its area. With most agriculture relying on the exploitation of surface water, droughts and mismanagement of water resources place significant strands on the local economy.

Government presence is primarily limited to the provincial capital, Tirin Kot. The absence of central administration in the districts and widespread disillusion with the government due to rampant corruption causes some inhabitants to rely on the Taliban for delivery of justice (Arabnews, February 9, 2020). There have been reports of clashes between Taliban and government forces throughout 2019 and 2020. Civilian casualties rose by 26% in 2020 compared to 2019, caused mainly by ground engagements, IEDs, and ANSF/ NATO airstrikes (UNAMA, 2021).

**Zabol** shares a border with Pakistan in the south-east and borders Kandahar to the west, Uruzgan to the north-west, Ghazni to the north-east, and Paktika to the east. The province is one of the poorest in Afghanistan (NSIA, 2019). Public service delivery is extremely weak, particularly beyond Qalat, the provincial capital. Anti-government sentiments are strong in the province, which is considered a Taliban stronghold. In 2019, security conditions deteriorated with a single district under government control and at least two under full Taliban control. Zabol is considered a Taliban stronghold (Sabawoon, 5 November 2019; Sharafat and Bezhan, 16 December 2018). Al Qaeda and the Islamic State – Khorasan Province (ISKP) are also allegedly present in the province (UNAMA, 2021).

## Kandahar Forum for Peace: An Overview

Seventy participants from the aforementioned provinces (41 men, 29 women) attended the local forum for peace in Kandahar on March 15th.

The selection of the participants resembled a process of selecting focus group participants whose input, while informed, was not intended to be representative of the total populations of the four provinces.



The age range of most of the participants was between 20 and 35 years, with 15 individuals over 40 years of age. Most were educated. Also, the vast majority was from the provincial centers. Religious leaders invited to the event did not attend on accounts of concern for their safety, and only some local elders participated – those declining the invitation raising similar concerns.

## Participants' Expectations About Peace

Most participants expressed concern over the possible consequences of an agreement between the Taliban and the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan on social liberties – particularly for women. On the other hand, they expected an end of violence between the two parties would lead to more physical security, and eventually, improvements in access to education, economic opportunities, and equitable justice if measures are put in place, so neither party violates the agreement.



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In each forum, participants identify the main issues that affect conflict dynamics in their communities. Once participants reach a consensus, issues identified are discussed within groups, each tasked with identifying the drivers of these issues, and how these drivers of conflict could be addressed as part of creating conditions for sustainable peace.

## Local Factors of Conflict

The four issues identified at the Kandahar forum were:

- Lack of rule of law;
- Weak economy;
- Intra-communal conflicts and kinship-related strife;
- Concerns about the peace process.

Representatives of each group then presented the outcome of their discussions to a panel made up of a senior official from the Kandahar Governor's Office, a university professor, and two women's rights activists from Kandahar and Zabol provinces.

The issues and how they might be addressed according to the participants and panelists are summarized below.

### Issue 1: Lack of Rule of Law

There is broad consensus among participants that general awareness about the constitution and legal framework is low in many communities. Even when there is some acquaintance with the legislation, its at best ineffective implementation has undermined citizens' confidence in and respect for the formal legal system. As mentioned by a panelist:

*Because of the many years of conflict and lawlessness, compliance with the law is no longer a part of people's behavior. If laws are not adhered to or enforced, violence increases, and rights will not be respected. Resolving conflicts requires legitimacy, which at the moment can only come from [local] elders and leaders. If they do not adhere to the rule of law, then no one will. -- Male panelist 2, academia.*

At the same time, participants widely shared the view that many government officials abuse the law, increasing public distrust of government officials. A recurrent observation in discussions was that administrative corruption and widespread nepotism had estranged citizens, who expect to be asked for bribes from the formal justice system. Instead, many prefer recurring to religious authorities or traditional dispute resolution mechanisms, considered as swifter and less corrupt.

### Issue 2: Weak Economy

Widespread poverty and a weak economy combined with the longstanding and ongoing conflict deprive Afghanistan of utilizing its natural wealth of minerals and agricultural produce. As one participant noted, even if the conflict is resolved,

*without a proper plan, there will be no economic development. The country will continue to depend on external assistance and will not be able to generate its own sources of revenue. -- Male participant 1, civil society.*

Some expressed disillusionment, explaining donor funds that could have been invested in economic infrastructure had been diverted abroad. Others

mentioned that nepotism continues to limit access to the job market for many.

Poverty and lack of economic opportunities were also reported as one of the factors contributing to the recruitment of male youth by AOG's:

*An issue that warrants some attention is the link between economic hardship and conflict. It is now well known that many young men join the AOG because of a lack of economic prospects and future. [...] After [a peace deal], efforts must be made to generate alternative livelihoods for these young, demobilized fighters to prevent them from going back to armed conflict. -- Female panelist 2, civil society.*

Participants identified some ways forward to address economic issues. They stressed the importance of strengthening the agricultural value chain, referring to Kandahar and Helmand's considerable potential in agricultural production.

Some also emphasized that significant investments in transportation infrastructure could increase the mobility of goods between national and international markets. Another suggestion was to encourage the wealthier diaspora to invest in the country and increase its industrial base.

Finally, the point was made that Afghanistan has accumulated a significant number of educated people who are currently unemployed - this unprecedented amount of human capital should be used in a better way.



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### Issue 3: Intra-Communal Conflicts and Kinship-related Strife

One of the groups pointed out that powerholders are typically biased toward serving their own immediate families and kin at the expense of all others. Members of the group also explained intra-com-

munal divisions and conflicts (over resources or caused by offenses to one's reputation and respectability) fostered high risks of disintegration at the community level.

To prevent and resolve local conflicts, participants insisted community members should appeal to the social responsibility of their local elders and religious leaders to address whole community needs and, when necessary, to resort to mediation by neutral third parties.

### Issue 4: Concerns about the Peace Process

Participants from the fourth group explained there was both disinterest in the ongoing negotiations between the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and the Taliban in Doha, and distrust in their potential outcomes among the population of southern provinces.

Scant awareness about, and interest in, the process is attributed to how information about societal issues is and could be communicated, – particularly to segments of society such as women who have less access to public life and interactions with people outside the household.

*To increase awareness and interest in peace, the selected team members should have been adequately introduced to the public. [...] Efforts should be made to ensure that the team that negotiates with the Taliban knows that root causes of conflict in Kandahar are different from those in Badakhshan, for example. -- Female panelist 1, civil society.*

Factors that contribute to a general lack of confidence in the peace process include insufficient awareness, and general uncertainty about the current situation as well as the prospects of a negotiated deal. There is, in addition, negative local propaganda about the peace process by those who oppose it.

Disillusionment in the peace process is further aggravated by the volatility of the security situation. The increase in tactics of targeted killings by AOGs in southern provinces has placed significant strain on initiatives by local representatives:

*Given the strength of beliefs in religious values in Afghanistan, religious authorities and elders can play a very instrumental role in paving the way for a peace consistent with Islamic and traditional values. This has not happened so far because the ulema and the elders denouncing violence and*

*calling for peace have also been a target of armed groups. -- Male panelist 1, government.*

More specifically, participants felt aloof to the negotiations ongoing in Doha and raised concerns about representativeness within the negotiating team of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan:

*The process to select the team members for the negotiations with the Taliban in Doha could have been much more transparent. [...] Those who were handpicked to go and negotiate with the Taliban feel no obligation to account to a constituency of ordinary Afghans. -- Female panelist 1, civil society.*



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## Conclusions

Several conclusions can be drawn from an analysis of the proceedings of the Kandahar local peace forum.

First, it proved difficult for the organizers to keep the focus of participants and panelists on identifying the main drivers of localized conflicts and how these drivers of conflict could be addressed to create conditions for sustainable peace at the local level. Indeed, in exchanges on conflict resolution and working toward peace, the main point of reference and concern for the participants and panelists was the negotiations in Doha. They expressed little hope local conflicts could be resolved if higher level negotiations failed.

A second, inter-related observation is a propensity among government officials, intellectuals, and civil society to focus on general, high-level issues rather than specific, localized issues. There is also a tendency to use dialogue and debate as an opportunity to compile a list of demands to be met by

higher-level actors, be it the government or international donors.

Third, most of the participants made a clear link between peace and economic development. The fact that proponents of peace make this linkage strongly suggests that an agenda for peace must contain provisions and plans on how to address economic issues in the longer term.

Fourth, there is genuine concern about the consequence of national peace for women's rights and fundamental rights more generally. This concern also indicates that a comprehensive agenda for peace at any level must have explicit provisions for the protection of fundamental rights of men and women.

Fifth, there are concerns about divisions within communities based on kinship alignments of the local powerholders. Some fear that failure to resolve these divisions is likely to lead to localized kinship-based violence, with or without a peace agreement between the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and the Taliban.

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