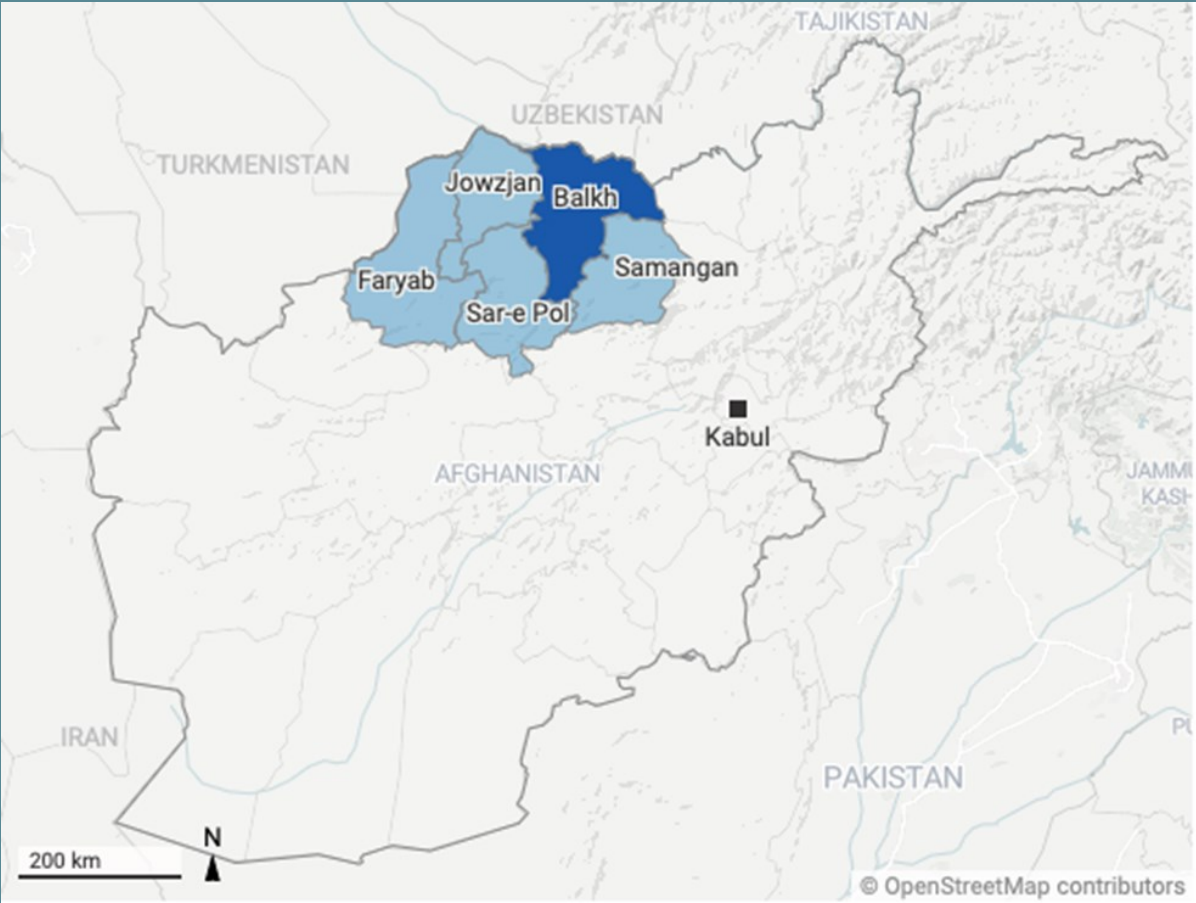




Local Dynamics of Conflict and Peace in Northern Afghanistan

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, Bamyán, 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 April 5, 2021, a local forum for peace was held in Mazar-e Sharif, Balkh, bringing together participants from five northern provinces of Afghanistan: Balkh, Samangan, Sar-e Pol, Jowzjan and Faryab.

Background

The ethno-linguistic makeup differs between provinces. Dari-speakers are the majority in Samangan, Balkh and Sar-e Pol. Balkh displays a relatively strong presence of Pashto, Turkmeni and Uzbeki-speaking communities; Sar-e Pol and Samangan of Uzbeki speakers with Pashto-speaking minorities. Turkmeni and Uzbeki are the two most common main languages in Jowzjan. Uzbeki is the main language of the majority in Faryab, followed by Dari (UNFPA, 2005).

Figure 1: Population estimates (2020)¹

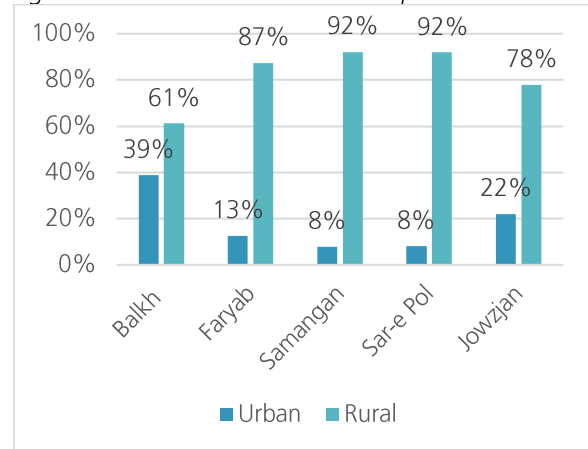
Province	Total	Urban	Rural
Balkh	1,509,183	584,886	924,297
Faryab	1,109,223	139,754	969,469
Samangan	430,489	33,906	396,583
Sar-e Pol	621,002	49,976	571,026
Jawzjan	602,082	132,259	469,257

Balkh, where the city and regional trading center of Mazar-e Sharif is located, is the province with the highest proportion of urban residents, as well as the greatest connectivity. The other four provinces are largely rural, with most inhabitants relying on agriculture for subsistence (see figures 1 and 2).

Severe drought and floods in 2018/2019 have had adverse impacts on the livelihoods of rural residents, who were still coping with the consequences in 2021 (IFRC, June 12, 2020; IFRC, March 19, 2021).

¹ Demographic estimates are based on NSIA (2021). There are indications actual numbers are higher.

Figure 2: Share of Urban and Rural Populations



Based on NSIA (2021).

Until 2019, Balkh and Samangan were relatively stable as compared to Jowzjan, Faryab, and Sar-e Pol where the activity and presence of armed opposition groups (AOG) has intensified since the withdrawal of NATO troops in 2014. More generally, lack of resources, high unemployment, limited and dysfunctional public services, and widespread insecurity in the three latter provinces feed into local conflicts over access to resources – ranging from land to government posts and rights to levy taxes. Insecurity and arbitrary violence lead to a situation described as “anomic” (Mielke and Miszak, 2017).

In 2020, 42% of residents in Jawzjan were either displaced or returnees, close to 25% in Sar-e Pol, Faryab and Balkh, and 15% in Samangan (IOM, 2021a, 2021b, 2021c, 2021d, 2021e). Jawzjan and Samangan are the two provinces in Afghanistan where opium cultivation has soared between 2018 and 2019, increasing by 294% and 223% respectively (UNODC, 2021).

Historically part of greater Khorasan, **Balkh** province is a cultural center and trade hub with an ancient history. The province occupies a strategic position in the Balkhab valley and along the northern border with Uzbekistan, across the Amu Darya River.

The Ring Road stretching across the province connects Mazar-e Sharif to Herat in the west, Bamyan and Kabul to the Southeast. Highways branching off from the Ring Road link the city to Kunduz in the east, and to the border crossing and port town of Hairatan in the north, one of the two main gateways for Afghanistan into central Asia.² Balkh borders Jowzjan and Sar-e Pol to the west, Samangan to the south-east, and Kunduz to the east.

Since the change of regime in 2001, the provincial capital Mazar-e Sharif has benefitted from favorable economic conditions, largely due to Balkh's location, relative security, and upgraded road infrastructure (Fishstein et al., 2013). Much of the provincial economy, however, has been driven by a private construction sector prone to informality, corruption, and illegal appropriation of land. There are further indications that economic indicators have been adversely affected by uncertainty in the years leading to the international military drawdown of 2014 (*ibid*).

Mazar-Sharif is the fourth largest city in Afghanistan, accounting for the relatively higher proportion of urban inhabitants in Balkh (39%) as compared to the four other provinces of interest.

Rural-urban migration of casual laborers from rural districts and neighboring provinces has contributed to urban growth. In the first half of 2020, Balkh also had the fifth highest numbers of internally displaced persons (IDPs) nationwide, with an estimated one in six persons in the province having been displaced between 2012 and 2020. In the two districts directly neighboring the provincial capital, the proportion of IDPs was estimated at 46% in Nahr-e Shahi and 58% in Dehdadi in the first half of 2020.

Considered as one of the most stable provinces in Afghanistan, Balkh has witnessed a steady deterioration of security in the more remote districts since 2009, and a sharp increase in criminal activity and Taliban attacks since 2018, partly attributed to the forced resignation of Governor and local strong-

man Atta Noor. In 2020 and the beginning of 2021, Balkh was among the four most active conflict areas in the country (UNSG, December 9, 2020; UNSG, March 12, 2021). Heavy fighting between government forces and the Taliban resulted in the displacement of an estimated 96% and 65% of the population of the southern districts of Zari and Keshendeh, respectively (IOM, 2021a; UNOCHA, March 4, 2020). Balkh was also the province with the highest number of reported civilian casualties after Kabul in 2020 (UNAMA, 2021). As of June 2021, at least eight districts in the province were considered as contested, and one, Dawlatabad, under Taliban control (Roggio, 2021).

To the east of Balkh, along the Amu Darya, **Jowzjan** shares a border with Turkmenistan to the north, Faryab province to the east, and Sar-e Pol to the south. Jowzjan is largely rural, with an estimated 80% of the population relying on agriculture for subsistence. The province is rich in natural gas and petroleum resources (Pajhwok, 2019).

Insurgent activity in the province has been on the rise since NATO forces started to handover security responsibility to government forces in 2012 (Habib et al., n.d.). The Taliban have strengthened their hold on the province, intermittently allied to the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU). Whether ISKP is present and active remains uncertain.

The conflict landscape is complicated by the predatory criminal behavior of armed militias and paramilitary units of local powerholders – including those of former vice-president General Abdul Rashid Dostum. In 2017, irregular and anti-government forces were considered as outnumbering Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) in the province (Mielke and Miszak, 2017). As of June 2021, the Long War Journal reports five districts are contested, and Khamyab, along the northern border with Turkmenistan, is under Taliban control (Roggio, 2021).

Sar-e Pol borders Faryab to the West, Jowzjan to the northwest, Balkh to the northeast, Samangan to the east and Ghor to the south. The province is rich in minerals and petroleum resources. Exploitation fields, however, have been the target of Taliban attacks (Tolonews, January 3, 2019).

Conflict patterns are similar to those in Jowzjan: fiefdoms of strongmen competing over scarce re-

² The other, Sherkhan Bandar, is located further east in Kunduz province, on the border with Tajikistan.

sources, shifting alliances and anti-government sentiments account for highly complex conflict dynamics. In June 2021, none of the districts were considered fully controlled by the government, and four were under Taliban control. (Roggio, 2021)

Faryab borders Jowzjan and Sar-e Pol to the east, Ghor to the south, Badghis to the south-west, and shares an international border with Turkmenistan to the north and northeast. Agriculture and animal husbandry are the main source of livelihood for a population rural at an estimated 87%.

Faryab's location on the main connecting routes linking the west to the north of Afghanistan give it strategic importance. The province has been the scene of fierce competition between the Taliban and Government and displays a strong presence from AOGs and illegal armed group. (Ali, March 17, 2017). The Taliban have established a shadow administration and military structure drawing on local recruits in both Faryab and Sar-e Pol (*ibid*). As of June 2021, four districts in Faryab are reported as being under Taliban control, and the rest as contested (Roggio, 2021). In 2020, Faryab was the third province with the highest number of civilian casualties after Kabul and Balkh (UNAMA, 2021)

Located to the southeast of Balkh, **Samangan** borders Sar-e Pol to the west, Baghlan to the east and Bamyán to the south. Agriculture is the main source of livelihood for a population rural at over 90%. Livelihoods and food security are vulnerable to drought, floods, and inadequate irrigation. Coal mining and brown marble extraction are two other sources of employment (German Cooperation, ND). In 2019, the province was one of eight across the country ranking above 70% in terms of multi-dimensional poverty (NSIA, 2019).

Samangan is the province with the least conflict intensity out of the five provinces of focus. That said, control of coal mining has been identified as a driving force of conflict in the province, and security has deteriorated steadily since 2016 (Ali, October 30, 2019). Civilian casualties have increased between 2019 and 2020 by 196%— mostly due to complex attacks, landmines, and targeted killing (UNAMA, 2021). Of seven districts, one is reported as under Taliban control in June 2021, and one as contested (Roggio, 2021).

Balkh Forum for Peace: An Overview

26 women and 38 men participated in the local forum for peace held in Mazar-e Sharif. The presence of women from Jawzjan, Faryab, Sar-e Pol and Samangan was facilitated by the relative security of roads at the time of the event.

In each forum, participants are tasked to identify the main issues that affect conflict dynamics in their communities, which are then discussed within 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 Balkh, the panel was composed of two men and two women, including an academic, a human rights and women's rights activist, a representative of the Office of the Governor of Balkh province, and a member of Balkh's Provincial Council.

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

In discussions held as part of the forum, participants explained they expected a negotiated deal between the Islamic Republic and the Taliban would result in reduction of armed violence, a potentially more stable economic environment creating opportunities for job creation, and more rule of law.

At the same time, participants expressed concern about persistent high levels of poverty despite a peace agreement, as well as risks of further concentration of power in the hands of a few, the increase of sectarian and ethno-linguistic tensions, and the spread of "irresponsible gunmen".

Another significant concern, particularly among women, was their eviction from the public space, access to higher education and labor rights. Finally, some participants expressed worries about the rise of extremism further curtailing civil liberties – including the practice of artistic and cultural activities, and public expression of dissident opinions.

Some members of civil society explained ensuring lasting peace and protecting the wellbeing of all would require strong commitments to preserve fundamental rights enshrined in the Constitution of 2004, clear measures to ensure the rights of minorities would be protected, and democratic structures of governance would be put in place.

Unlike the previous two decades, some added, more attention should be given to support even development across the national territory.

Local Factors of Conflict

The four most prominent factors of local conflict identified by participants in the Balkh forum for peace were:

- Administrative corruption;
- Factional strife between local powerholders;
- Lack of accountability among political elites; and
- Unequitable distribution of resources

The specifics of each factor are outlined below.

Issue 1: Corruption

Participants raised administrative corruption as one of the determining factors of political instability. Corruptive and nepotistic practices within government offices, they explained, cause distrust among citizens in the civil service, and damage government legitimacy.

The general perception of members of the group was that holding a public office has been treated more as a strategy to accumulate capital through the extraction of bribes and through land grabbing, than as a position at the service of citizens.

Group members insisted structural reforms were needed to strengthen and enforce anti-corruption measures and prevent tax evasion. They also called for existing measures to be enforced, including the registration of assets of members of the government.

Another suggestion was to limit inter-personal contact between citizens and government officials by digitalizing administrative procedures – thereby reducing opportunities for requesting bribes. Issues of lack of digital literacy among the population, and of limited access to digital media, were not addressed, however.



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Issue 2: Factional strife between local powerholders

One of the groups focused on the factionalization of political life as a factor of conflict in local communities. Political parties, they explained, are not united by a political agenda or shared view of how to address social and societal issues, but are more akin to rival groups and fiefdoms segmented along ethnic lines or affiliated to an influential figure.

In Mazar-e Sharif, political disputes resulting in armed clashes between factions belonging to local powerholders are a major source of concern for citizens. Beyond the provincial capital in Balkh, conflict is fueled by competition between local strongmen. This is also the case in Faryab, Jowzjan and Sar-e Pol. Participants expressed disillusionment in the government's capacity to address such issues – government representative themselves often being meddled in powerplays and local disputes.

The pre-eminence of personal interests over the common good among political elites was closely associated to insufficient representativeness in local political structures. One participant noted:

We need to entrust [political] work to the people. By this I mean to recruit government officials based on merit and make access to office elective. [Provincial] governors and representatives of ministerial departments are appointed in Kabul. If we want them to care about citizens, they should be elected by citizens. – Female participant 1, civil society.

Ensuring representativeness translates into responsiveness, noted another participant, requires increased understanding of the functioning of democratic institutions among citizens – so people demand clear programs from their representatives and cast votes based on the extent to which these programs match their needs and those of the general public.

Issue 3: Lack of accountability among political elites

A related issue raised by participants was lack of accountability among political elites – calling for a structural reform of the political system at all levels of governance from the national to the sub-national and community levels. Rule of law, explained the group representative, is not enforced uniformly, and those with power are the least likely to be held accountable for their actions. One group member argued ruling elites’ lack of accountability was reinforced by a political model whereby power is concentrated within the executive, with judiciary institutions limited in their ability to keep power imbalance in check.

Solutions raised for addressing issues related to accountability, beyond institutional reform, included more engagement by civil society and citizens, notably by mobilizing social media to initiate campaigns, denounce and shame misuse of power.

Participants further insisted on the necessity to strengthen a culture of inclusive consultation at the community level. It was observed youth and women were too often excluded from local decision-making processes – starting from within the family, to the neighborhood, close community, and upward to institutions of governance at higher levels. For instance:

Unfortunately, we live in a patriarchal society today. Most male heads of household do not share important matters with their spouse. [...] If I do not give equal rights to my wife, not consider the opinions of my children and brothers, we will never be in a situation where debates are constructive and beneficial for all. But my hope is for a sustainable peace, and this needs to start within our own families, our own villages, the streets in which we live. – Male participant 1, civil society.



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Under-represented ethnic and linguistic minorities, members of the group added, need to be taken more into account in provincial and national level policy design and implementation, and would benefit from dedicated measures to support their participation and inclusion in political decision-making.

Issue 4: Unequitable distribution of resources

The fourth factor impeding peace at the local level was the fact that infrastructure projects have been implemented to serve the direct benefits of a small elite rather than for the common good.

Since our main goal is lasting peace, then we must ensure that resources, particularly infrastructure projects and public facilities are distributed evenly. Lasting peace will not be possible without an equitable distribution of power and wealth, because this is what directly benefits the people. [...] peace will not be possible without ensuring the wellbeing of the people. – Male participant 2, civil society

Members of the group called for more involvement of local governance structures such as Provincial Development Councils in planning and supervising the implementation of infrastructure projects. They also insisted decisions should be made based on previous assessment of needs at the local level to avoid misunderstanding among the population, and local communities be consulted.

Members of parliament were listed among the key actors with a responsibility to defend the needs of their constituencies at the national level, and report back to citizens about their activities and challenges.

Another important actor listed was the media, which could play a greater role in ensuring transparent communication about development and infrastructure projects.

Finally, civil society is considered as an important stakeholder to hold members of parliament and of provincial councils accountable by monitoring the implementation of development and infrastructure projects, and litigating should irregularities be identified. “Public lawsuits”, mentioned one participant, “is one of the ways to make the government aware of its responsibilities and force it to fulfill its legal obligations.”

Conclusions

Four main observations emerge from the Balkh local forum for peace.

A first observations is the general disillusionment among participants in the ability of existing structures of government and governance to address issues at the heart of citizens' concerns. Legal and constitutional provisions to protect citizens rights, and measures put in place to address structural deficiencies are perceived as on-paper only. Political elites are seen as self-serving and disconnected from citizens, concerns, and democratic institutions as dysfunctional.

Second, throughout discussions surrounding the four issues brought up at the Balkh forum for peace, participants' main concern revolved around good governance, whether it related to fair representation of citizens, government accountability and responsibility in ensuring the public good, or the integrity of public officials.

Third, another element of discussions was the importance of creating conditions for economic well-being and distribution of wealth among citizens. Inequitable access to resources is seen as a driver of tensions, criminality, and general distrust in the capacity of the government to provide for its citizens.

Finally, and despite expressions of disappointment in the functioning of government institutions over the past two decades a major take-out from the forum is participants request more, not less government. Their demands center on the set-up of a strong government, less centralized and more accountable to its citizens, providing public services to all and directly involved in infrastructure and development projects – including, for some, if this requires the payment of taxes.



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Acknowledgement

Front cover photograph taken by Mohammad Aref Karimi

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