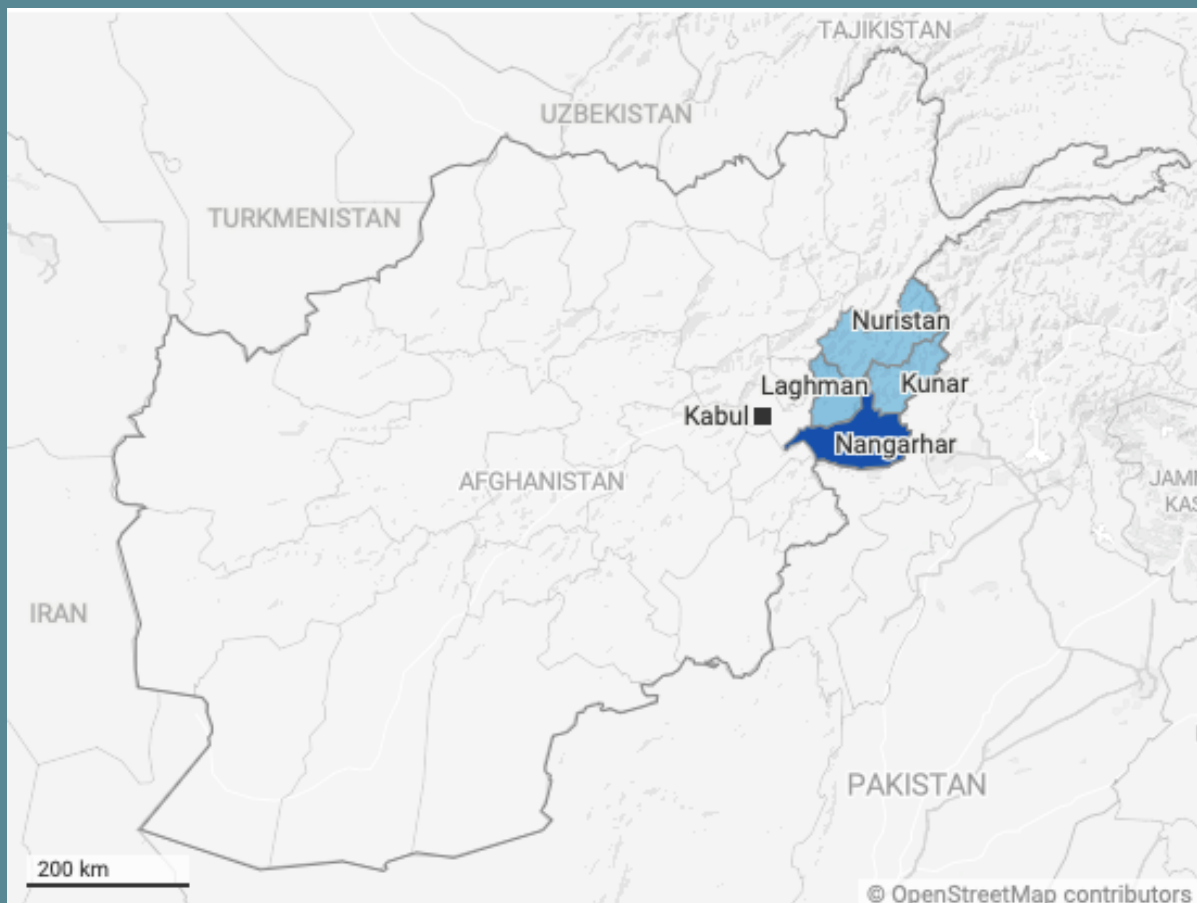




## Local Dynamics of Conflict and Peace in Eastern Afghanistan

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

On May 31, 2021, a local forum for peace was held in Nangarhar, bringing together civil society representatives from four provinces in East Afghanistan: Nangarhar, Laghman, Kunar, and Nuristan. 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 east of Afghanistan has long been a strategically important province both from a military and economic point of view. To the east lie the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK) and Federally Administered Tribal Area. To the west runs a network of valleys stretching towards Kabul, providing a passage for the trafficking of weapons and fighters opposed to the Kabul government operating from across the border. Securing access to these valleys is hence key for the control of Afghanistan.

Stretching on the slopes of the Hindu Kush, the region is traversed by several river valleys which have historically been important trade routes and constitute the main sources of irrigation for the population.

The main waterway is the Kabul River, which flows west to east and meets with the Alingar river in Laghman, and the Kunar river to the east of Jalalabad, before emptying in the Indus across the border in Pakistan’s KPK. The Kabul and Kunar river basins have been identified as bearing significant potential in terms of energy security and water security. The management of the river basin is a contentious element of relations between Afghanistan and Pakistan (Kakakhel, 2 March 2017).

Figure 1: Population estimates (2020)<sup>1</sup>

Province	Total	Urban	Rural
Nangarhar	1,701,698	277,321	1,424,377
Laghman	493,488	5,897	487,591
Kunar	499,393	15,921	483,472
Nuristan	163,814	0	163,814

Source: NSIA (2021).

Beyond the agglomeration of Jalalabad in Nangarhar, most of the population in the four provinces is in its large majority rural (Figures 1, 2). The fertile plains in the Kabul River basin support an agricultural economy which provides provincial and national markets. Conflict, displacement, drought, and flash floods, however, have had severe effects on crop production in recent years. Adverse consequences of the conflict on rural economies have further accelerated in the past months (OCHA, 2021a, 2021c).

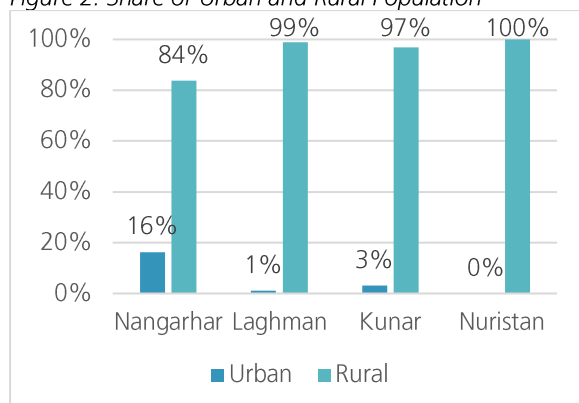
In mountainous areas that cover much of the region, limited market access, small plot sizes and limited labor opportunities account for fragile livelihoods and a rural economy largely dependent on remittances and out-migration to Pakistan.

Poverty rates are above the national average in all four provinces. They are the highest in Nuristan (80%), followed by Nangarhar (66%), Laghman (63%) and Kunar (57%) (UNDP, 2020).

Nangarhar, Nuristan and Laghman are among the ten provinces in Afghanistan with the highest rate of food insecurity (CSO, 2018). In 2020, Nangarhar experienced the highest inflation rate in the region at 12.3% (NSIA, 2021).

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

Figure 2: Share of Urban and Rural Population



Based on NSIA (2021).

Eastern provinces have long been sites of protracted conflict between the Kabul-based government and armed opposition groups (AOGs). Local warlords, militant mullahs, and Afghan Local Police (ALP) affiliated to local powerholders are also involved in power struggles, armed clashes, land grabbing, and the drug trade – aggravating the volatility of the security in the region. This is compounded by sporadic confrontations between and among powerholders, insurgents and government forces over the control of mineral resources and poppy cultivation (UNDP, 2020).

Alleged Al Qaeda presence, and the emergence, in 2014, of the Islamic State – Khorasan Province (ISKP) further complicate already complex conflict dynamics (UNAMA, 2021; Ali, 4 August 2018).

Headquartered in Nangarhar since 2015, ISKP activity has since been reported in Kunar, Laghman and districts in Eastern Nuristan (Mielke and Miszak, 2017). The group was allegedly driven out from most of Nangarhar and Kunar by Taliban and Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) operation in 2019-2020 (Ali, 1 March 2020; 3 March 2021). Attacks against civilians, however, remain a source of concern. 2020 and the first half of 2021 saw a peak in targeted attacks on civil society activists, government officials, health personnel and ‘high profile attacks’ in Nangarhar, Laghman, and Kunar (UNAMA, 2021).

Armed clashes between the ANSF and AOGs, and between Taliban and ISKP throughout 2019-2020 have caused the displacement of thousands of households across the region (OCHA, 2019, 2020, 2021a).

**Nangarhar** borders Kabul province to the west, Laghman to the north-west, Kunar to the north, and shares an international border with Pakistan to the east. The Kabul and Kunar Rivers, and perennial streams from the Spin Ghar mountain

provide abundant water resources for irrigation, completed by a system of canals.

The main language of most of the population is Pashto (an estimated 92%), with Pashai and Dari speaking minorities (UNFPA, 2005).

Sitting astride the main highway connecting Kabul to Pakistan through the Torkham pass, the province holds a strategic economic position. It is also a critical site of competition over control between the government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and AOGs. The strategic importance of Nangarhar also accounts for it being the largest recipient of foreign – and particularly American – aid (Hakimi, 2012; SIGAR, 2019, 2020).

Outside of the provincial capital of Jalalabad, most of the population relies on agriculture and livestock for livelihoods. The province, however, has been hit hard by flash floods which have destroyed crops and damaged irrigation infrastructure (FAO, 2019). Mining is another source of employment in Goshta and Khogyani district in the south of the province, where large deposits of marble, talc and chromite are located. Illegal mining of marble and talc has also been reported as a source of revenue for AOGs (Byrd and Noorani, 2017).

Jalalabad is the fifth largest city in Afghanistan – accounting for a higher proportion of urban residents than neighboring provinces which are overwhelmingly (if not almost entirely) rural (Figures 1 and 2). The city is a regional hub of trade and commerce and the cultural, political and economic capital of the east of Afghanistan (Hakimi, 2012).

Nangarhar has one of the largest in-migration ratios in the country and is among the provinces with the highest combined numbers of internally displaced persons (IDPs) and returnees, with one in three inhabitants being either a returnee or an IDP (IOM, 2021a; CSO, 2018).

Security has consistently declined in the past decade. Nangarhar was one of the three provinces to suffer the highest number of civilian casualties in 2020, primarily as a result of suicide attacks or the use of non-suicide IEDs (UNAMA, 2021). Government paramilitary units, operating under the National Directorate of Security (NDS) have also been accused of carrying out summary executions of civilians in the province in 2019 (HRW, 2019).

Nangarhar is one of two provinces (with Kabul) displaying the highest levels of drug trafficking in Afghanistan (SIGAR, 2019).

**Laghman** borders Panjshir and Nuristan to the north, Kabul and Kapisa to the west, Kunar to the east, and Nangarhar to the south. The province is irrigated by three main rivers: Kabul, Alishing and Alingar, supplemented with canals across the province. Most of the land in the province is mountainous, with the population settlements concentrated in the valleys. In the North and East, mountains covered in coniferous forests are exploited by local villages for their wood. The Kabul-Jalalabad highway passes through the southern district of Qarghayi, with one provincial road branching out towards the provincial capital of Mehtarlam and toward Nuristan.

Main languages spoken include Pashto (an estimated 58%), followed by Pashai (30%), and Dari speakers (12%) (UNFPA, 2005).

The wooded mountains of Laghman have been a relatively safe base for AOGs, its valleys providing a passage from border regions towards the center of Afghanistan. While security was relatively stable prior to 2018, it has sharply deteriorated due to increases in ISKP and Taliban operations in remote mountainous districts (Khaama Press, 2018). Armed confrontations between the insurgents and ANSF in recent years have caused significant displacement within the province (IOM, 2021b, NSIA, 2020). Families have also fled to Laghman from Nangarhar to escape intensified conflict. There have been 267 civilian casualties in 2020 in this province (UNAMA, 2020).

**Kunar** province borders Nangarhar to the south, Laghman to the west, Nuristan to the north, and Pakistan to the east. A mountainous terrain and poor road infrastructure hamper access to the province. The main language of over 90% of the population in Kunar is Pashto, with minorities of Nuristani and Pashai speakers (UNFPA, 2005).

The province is rich in deposits of precious and semi-precious stones – including tourmaline, aquamarine, topaz, but also ruby, sapphire and emeralds. Deposits are exploited informally by local communities and carried across the border Pakistan to be sold on Peshawar's gemstone market of Namak Mandi.

Another source of livelihood is the logging of high-value timber. Regulated in the past by local communities, timber logging has increasingly been at the center of resource conflicts over the past decade, with large scale illegal logging and smuggling of timber causing the depletion of forest resources. Driven in large part by economic necessity, local communities have been actively involved in the illegal exploitation of timber – complicating their relationship to government

authorities. AOGs active in the area allegedly retain control over the trade (Anwari and Siddique, 5 October 2017; Bader et al, 2013).

Government control is minimal in the province. There have been several incidences of fighting between Taliban and ISKP since 2018. In 2020, cross-border incidents involving Pakistani Military forces have also been reported (UNAMA, 2021).

Formerly divided between Laghman and Kunar, **Nuristan** was carved out as a province by the Najibullah government in 1989, and formally established as an administrative entity in 2001. The province borders Kunar to the south, Laghman to the south-west, Badakhshan to the north, and Pakistan to the east. The border area is a strategic point of entry for military supplies and AOG fighters operating from Pakistan.

Nuristan is covered by mountains on 95% of its area, interspersed by fertile valleys used for livestock grazing and farming. A mountainous terrain and limited road infrastructure account for difficult access – a situation further aggravated in the winter months (UNEP, 2016). The province has largely remained out of the scope of both government and international development actors. Only a handful of organizations deliver food assistance and agricultural development projects in the province.

Despite its remote location, Nuristan is one of Afghanistan's most strategically important provinces. To the east lie border areas which have long been a haven for armed group opposed to the government of Afghanistan. To the west runs a network of valleys stretching all the way to Kabul. The province has thus long been a crucial passage for insurgents to carry supplies from Pakistan.

Nuristan province is riven by resource conflicts with minimal government presence or local capacity to address them. Like in Kunar, AOGs operating in and around the province have consistently used these conflicts to gain leverage over local communities.

### **Nangarhar Peace Forum: An Overview of Proceedings**

24 women and 36 men attended the local forum for peace held in Jalalabad, Nangarhar. Participants included members from the local government civil society, local elders, businessmen and women, representatives of youth organizations and university students.



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 one 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 an expert panel. In Nangarhar, the forum was composed of three men and one woman. This included one academic who is also a member of the Nangarhar Peace Council, one representative of a civil society network in Nangarhar, one civil society representative from Kunar, and one civil society representative from Laghman.



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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. Expectations for peace and drivers of local conflict identified by participants are outlined below.

### Participants' Expectations About Peace

Participants in the Nangarhar forum for peace were rather positive about the outcomes a negotiated deal between the Taliban and the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan.

Most expected an agreement would curb armed conflict and would in turn improve economic conditions. A post-agreement government was considered as opening up opportunities for more equity in the distribution of resources, a reduction in criminal activities, and an elimination of corruption. Some also thought access to education would improve and hoped that conditions for women's education would be maintained.

There were also expressions of confidence that civil society organizations would find ways to

build a relationship with a newly formed government. This was based on the expectation that democratic structures would be preserved:

*Civil society will cooperate with the new government and continue their activities because civil society institutions are the people. They are neutral, and their goal is to raise the voice of the people. One of the foundations of democracy is that civil society organizations have the right to participate in governance and express themselves, because the definition of a democratic government is a government by the people, for the people. – Male participant 1, civil society*



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The main concern expressed by participants over the outcome of an agreement relates to restrictions placed on women's mobility and participation in the public space and labor market. Some were also worried that removing women from the public scene would further reinforce the traditionally patriarchal social norms.

Participants felt that positive changes due to a post-agreement government were all incumbent on a reduction of violence— including armed conflict and criminal activities. Some, however, were worried a deal with the Taliban would not be enough to stop armed violence as non-Taliban AOGs and local powerholders were likely to continue their activities. For instance:

*We will be able to resolve conflicts when there will be an end to the rule of powerholders in Afghanistan. Local powerholders and criminal networks have laid the ground for more conflicts to arise. – Male participant 2, civil society.*

Some expressed concern about the lack of transparency surrounding what was discussed at the negotiating table and uncertainty about its outcomes. So far, all expectations concerning a negotiated deal have been mere speculations:

*Meetings are held, but we do not really know what is going on in the peace talks. Nor can we*

*defend the issues that they might decide to put to the side. [...] There is a pervasive anxiety about what will happen tomorrow. On the one hand we hear a lot of noise about the fact that peace is a necessity, but I, as a representative of civil society, have no idea what is going on behind the closed doors of the negotiation room. Issues discussed must be shared with the people. – Male panelist 1, civil society.*

There was widespread agreement among the participants that the path to peace was likely to be long and strewn with acts of violence.

## Local Drivers of Conflict

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

- Corruption
- Weak economy
- Lack of rule of law
- Low availability and quality of education

The specifics of each factor are outlined below.



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### Issue 1: Corruption and Nepotism

One of the key drivers of conflict raised by participants was widespread corruption and nepotism obstructing equal access to jobs, housing, and services – including justice and education. Favoritism based on kinship and ethnic affiliation was also noted as contributing to increasing the divide between citizens and heightening tensions. Aid injected into corrupt institutions further aggravated the issue and provided additional opportunities for corrupt government representatives to draw on resources from international aid to serve their private interests. Youth and local businesses were listed among those most affected.

Participants reckoned that addressing corruption would be a difficult task requiring both a reform

of administrative processes and a change in citizens' mind sets.

At the level of the administration, they called for effective implementation of existing legislation, and setting up clear mechanisms of accountability and transparency. They further insisted the judiciary needed to take clear and swift action to prosecute corrupt practices.

Civil society has an important role to play by strictly monitoring the functioning of government institutions – but that change would require persistence over the longer term, particularly if the government did not take its role to account to citizens seriously.

*I counted eleven government departments tasked with eliminating corruption. None has been effective so far. [...] Until we have a real commitment from the government to fight corruption, these issues will continue to prevail, and the distance between the government and the people will continue to increase. – Male panelist 2, civil society.*

Accountability, the panelist added, entailed regular and effective collaboration and coordination between local government representatives and civil society organizations.

### Issue 2: Weak Economy

A second driving factor of conflict raised by participants was widespread poverty caused by a weak economy. The fact that powerholders continue to benefit from the war economy, investing more in illicit and destructive, rather than productive, economic activity was raised as a barrier to creating conditions for peace. One participant explained:

*The root of many conflicts is poverty, most people are poor, and when one person has to deal with poverty, loses his/ her job and cannot find another, s/he is likely to turn to illicit activities to secure a living. This eventually paves the way to conflicts. – Male participant 3, civil society*

Group members suggested paying more attention to, and investing in, small businesses and to build capacity in line with market needs. The group also demanded putting barriers to capital flight and ensuring prominent Afghan businessmen invested in the country rather than abroad.

While international aid would continue to provide support to the most vulnerable, the stakeholders of aid needed to be more transparent about how aid was spent and demonstrate how they could be more accountable to the communities. Participants insisted that the government

and its international donors should focus more on building industrial and transport infrastructure.

Key actors identified to address the issue of poverty included line ministries and local directorates of Labor and Social Affairs, Rural Rehabilitation and Development, and of Agriculture, Irrigation and Livestock. However, participants also recognized that government investment would be difficult without continued support of the international community.

Many feared that protracted conflict and the continued influence of strongmen would hamper development efforts.



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### Issue 3: Lack of Rule of Law

The third factor of conflict identified by participants was widespread lawlessness and impunity of perpetrators of abuse. Members of the group working on the issue described a situation where a multiplicity of agents spoils the functioning of governance institutions, from AOGs to local commanders, criminal networks and government-backed militias. They pointed out that the inability of the government to curb criminal activity, the impunity of powerbrokers with connections within the government, and abuses committed by paramilitary units delegitimized the government in citizens' eyes, and contributed to recruitment by AOGs.

As one panelist put it:

*In 2001, instead of focusing on how to address issues at hand, the government relied on militias, and warlords were given positions in ministries. Just imagine, when a governor is appointed through the recommendation of a militia, will he be accountable to the state or to his own militia? The militia of course. Rule by the gun continued, and this war destroyed the value of our nation. – Male panelist 1, civil society.*

Group members felt communities were disempowered and unable to address rule of law issues. They called for a reform of the justice system to ensure criminals and perpetrators of abuse were brought to justice and held accountable. They further demanded measures to address the wide spread of weapons and disarming militias serving the interests of private groups or individuals.

Reacting to participants' observation, a panelist noted the Afghan Constitution provided a pathway for citizens to claim their rights. He insisted more awareness of the existing rights framework within the population would empower citizens to request their rights and resist abuse.

### Issue 4: Low Availability and Quality of Education

Participants felt that low access to education and the poor quality of education available contributed to disinformation, the rise of identity-based prejudices and gender-based discrimination. Women and girls' restricted access to training and schools was mentioned as a pervasive issue in all four provinces.

Progress had been made in access to education, observed one panelist, but the type of education provided, how, to whom and by whom remain contentious issues:

*Let us not forget that education has improved over the years, the number of schools and institutes of higher learning have increased, students can choose the faculty in which they want to study. But the problems we have been raising for long now are that there is widespread corruption in the education system, and that debates over which language to teach in, and what is in accordance with religion or not continue to dominate over those concerning access to, and quality of, education. – Female panelist 1, academia.*

Members of the group working on the issue called for a more effective implementation of existing education-related policy frameworks. They further insisted the recruitment of teachers should be transparent, as many teachers were hired based on connections rather than skills.

Participants further insisted civil society organizations needed to continue their efforts to raise awareness about the importance of girls' school attendance. Also, local elders needed to be engaged to generate more understanding and support of the benefits of public education.





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One key challenge raised by participants in supporting access to education was general insecurity discouraging households from sending their children to schools when schools were increasingly under attack. Insecurity also resulted in many teachers not accepting posting in remote areas. Until a ceasefire was reached and schools were secured, addressing the problems with the education system would be very difficult.

## Conclusions

Six key conclusions can be drawn from the discussions at the local forum in Nangarhar.

First, there is an overwhelming shadow cast by the prevalence of violence in the four provinces. A ceasefire leading at least to a reduction in armed conflict was considered as a prerequisite for measures addressing local drivers of conflict.

Second, there is a strong belief in a democratic system of governance and the value of the existing legal framework in protecting citizens' rights. But many also felt that this democratic government was yet to come. The system of government established since 2001 has lost legitimacy in the eyes of citizens due to a combination of corruption and nepotism, connections between criminal networks and government officials, and abuses by government forces and government backed militias.

Third, the two points above perhaps explain the hope placed in the outcome of negotiations ongoing in Doha, Qatar, between the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and the Taliban. Most participants expressed a certain degree of confidence that a deal resulting in a power sharing agreement between the Islamic Republic and the Taliban would bear positive outcomes. They notably expected a reduction in violence would provide opportunities for trade and investment, and that a change in the mode of governance would improve rule of law and result in more "social justice" – a term recurrent in discussions.

Fourth, the complex networks of factors driving conflict might explain the relative silence of participants on the ways in which communities could address some of the issues raised during the discussions. That said, some members of civil society felt that existing legal provisions provided citizens with an important tool to resist abuse and claim their rights. This points to the importance, for civil society, of preserving the existing legal framework.

Fifth, beyond security, the three factors of sustainable peace prominent during the discussions were identified as access to justice, access to quality education and education for all, and economic stability. Addressing these issues would require structural changes in the mode of governance – notably more consultative government institutions, stronger accountability mechanisms, and a government involved in directly providing services to citizens.

Yet, participants were also wary of the capacity of a new government to provide the necessary resources to support economic development in the short and medium term without support from the international community. International assistance would be essential to ensure the rights of minorities and women would be preserved, and the rights enshrined under the 2004 Constitution would not be withdrawn as an outcome of the negotiations in Doha. One panelist observed that aid was intended to serve local communities, not the government and individuals within it, nor donors and their own strategic interests.

Finally, and despite hopes expressed concerning the possible outcomes of a negotiated agreement in Doha, uncertainty surrounding what is being said and negotiated continues to generate anxieties.

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Front cover photograph taken by Mohammad Aref Karimi

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