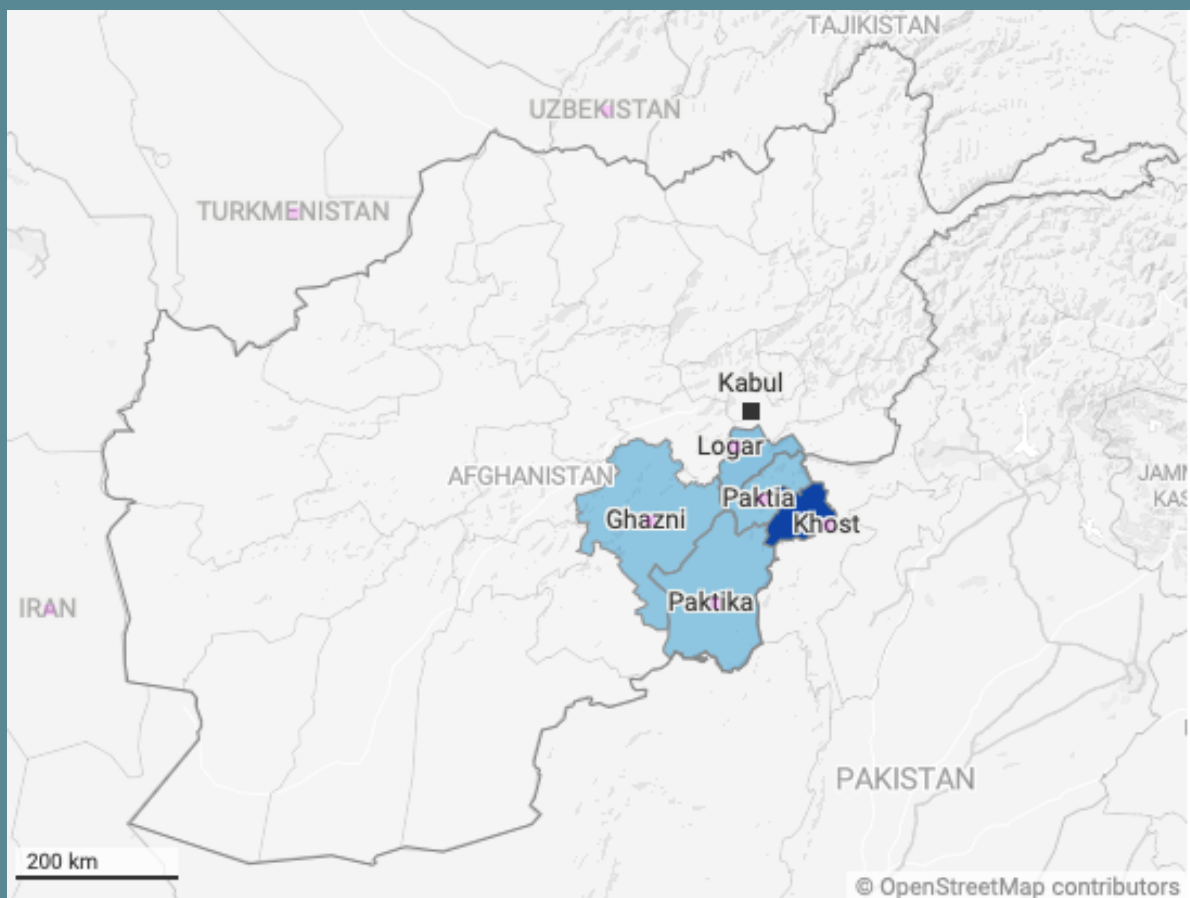




Local Dynamics of Conflict and Peace in South-East Afghanistan

Findings from a Local Forum for Peace



August 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 July 8, 2021, a local peace forum was held in Kabul, bringing together civil society representatives and local authorities from five provinces of the broad south-east of Afghanistan: Paktia, Paktika, Khost, Ghazni, and Logar. An overview of each province's basic demographic, geographic, economic, and conflict features is provided below, followed by an overview of the forum's proceedings. The brief ends with general conclusions from the discussions.

Background

Paktia, Paktika, Khost, and parts of Ghazni are part of the historical region of Loya Paktia [“Greater Paktia”]. The region retains a strong identity, with a history of administrative autonomy from the state accounting for a stronger resilience of tribal structures and mechanisms than in other parts of the country (Gregg, 2009; Ruttig, 2009). In 2001, Loya Paktia was one of the few regions where the Taliban and Al-Qaeda fighters were driven out by the people, organized in tribal councils, rather than by commanders or warlords (Clarke, November 24, 2011).

The vast majority of the population in all five provinces is rural, with the highest concentration of population in the urban centers of Ghazni (Ghazni province), Gardez (Paktia), and rapidly expanding Khost City (Khost) (cf. figures 1, 2).

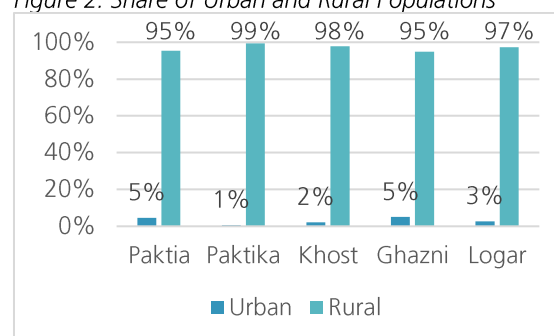
Figure 1: Population Estimates (2020)

Province	Total	Urban	Rural
Paktia	611,952	28,304	583,648
Paktika	775,498	5,052	770,446
Khost	636,522	13,416	623,106
Ghazni	1,362,504	68,993	1,293,511
Logar	434,374	11,352	423,022

Source: NSIA (2021).¹

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

Figure 2: Share of Urban and Rural Populations



Based on NSIA (2021).

The overwhelming majority of the population of Paktia, Paktika, and Khost are Pashtun and Sunni Muslim (over 90%) – with minorities of Shia Hazara and Sadat, Hindu and Sikh communities in Gardez (Paktia), Urgan (Paktika), and Khost City (Khost). Ghazni offers a more contrasted ethnolinguistic and religious profile, which can schematically be presented as follows:

Dominantly Pashtun and Sunni in the east, Hazara and Shi'a in the highlands of the west and north, with a mix of Tajik, Hazara, and Pashtun populations in the central districts and the provincial capital. In Logar, Pashto-speakers represent an estimated 60% of inhabitants, with Dari speakers (Tajik and a minority of Hazara) accounting for 40% of the population (UNFPA, 2005).

Main livelihoods include agriculture, animal husbandry, and trade and services in urban centers. Most households engage in multiple activities (farming, wage labor, shopkeeping, transportation, and services). Rural livelihoods, however, are vulnerable to flash floods and limited access to clean water resources, particularly in mountainous areas. In Paktia, Khost, and Paktika – the three provinces bordering Pakistan, the economy relies largely on cross-border trade, and the Paki-

stani Rupee is the main currency used by residents. Poverty rates are the highest in Ghazni at an estimated 58% - well above the national average of 52%, followed by Khost (51.6%), Paktia (48.3%), Logar (30.4%), and Paktika (29.7%) (UNDP, 2020).

While conflict patterns vary between provinces, common characteristics include a weak government footprint, limited reach of Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) beyond urban centers, and a well-established presence of Armed Opposition Groups (AOGs) (UNSC, June 2019).

At the local level, conflict dynamics are fueled by strong inter-communal competition over land and water resources. The control of timber is a significant feature of local conflict dynamics in the wooded mountainous areas of Khost and Paktia.

Throughout 2020, ground engagements between ANSF and AOGs and pro-government armed groups, including the Khost Protection Force (KPF) and the Paktika "Shaheen" forces, contributed to general insecurity. This trend intensified throughout all provinces in the first half of 2021. The Islamic State – Khorasan Province (ISKP) has targeted civilians in Khost and Ghazni, and Al-Qaeda presence is reported in Khost and Paktia (UNAMA, 2021; OCHA, 2021). In the border provinces, there are accounts of links between the insurgency and organized criminal groups involved in drug trafficking (UNSC, June 2019).

Paktia borders Logar to the North, Ghazni to the west, Paktika to the south, and Khost to the east. The province shares a 100-kilometer international border with the Pakistani province of Khurram Agency to the east.

The Kabul-Gardez highway, crossing through Logar and over the Tera Pass, links Kabul city to Paktia's provincial capital Gardez, where it connects to the Gardez-Khost highway, leading further south to the Ghulam Khan border crossing into Pakistan. Both highways have been the scene of targeted attacks by Taliban forces against employees of government, non-government organizations (NGOs), and ANSF (Hamid, July 7, 2020). A second axis connects Gardez to the Dand-e Patan border crossing to the east and Sharan in Paktika to the west.

Paktia is covered in mountains on most of its territory, with the population concentrated in the vast Gardez plain in the western half of the province. Crop rotation supplemented with animal husbandry and timber harvesting in mountainous

areas constitute the primary sources of livelihood for rural dwellers. Located at the crossroad of historic trade routes leading to Kabul, Ghazni, and northwestern Pakistan, Gardez's trading potential has nevertheless remained limited mainly to timber (IRC, 2021).

As in other parts of former Loya Paktia, anti-government feelings have long been strong in Paktia, fueled by administrative inefficiency, repeated abuses by government forces, and a general lack of reconstruction or development efforts (Ruttig, 2009; Ali et al., September 4, 2019). Different strands of insurgency are active in the province – including the Taliban, Al-Qaeda, and ISKP. Attacks against human rights defenders and civil society activists, threats against NGO personnel, and forced closure of health facilities have been reported throughout 2020 (UNSG, December 19, 2020; UNAMA, 2021). The border crossing of Dand-e Patan – the closest to Kabul, has regularly been the focus of Taliban attacks and was among the seven dry ports under Taliban control in July 2021 (Tolonews, April 16, 2018; ANI, July 14, 2021).

Khost borders Paktika to the southwest and shares a 135 km border with Pakistan to the north, east, and south. The western half of the province is covered in forested mountains exploited for their wood and pine nuts by local communities. To the east, vast arable plains stretch along the Kurram river, flowing east into the Indus River in Pakistan. One highway connects the provincial capital of Khost City to Gardez in the west, leading across the border to Pakistan in the east.

A center of trade, benefitting from its strong connections with industrial areas of Punjab and Karachi, Khost city is the economic capital of former Loya Paktia (TLO, 2008). In the past two decades, the city has benefitted from foreign investments in infrastructure and facilities – a prominent example being the Sheikh Zayed University built with United Arab Emirates support in 2003.

However, smuggling goods across the border with Pakistan adversely impacts licit economic activities in the city. This includes the trafficking of manufactured goods, timber, drugs, and chromite ore extracted informally in the province (Shah, March 19, 2014).

Urban expansion and speculation over constructible land – the most expensive in the South-East – is a major source of local conflict in and around the provincial capital. In 2014, an estimated 283,000 individuals fleeing a military offensive in North Waziristan, Pakistan, sought refuge in

Khost and Paktika. The settlement of refugees in the outskirts of Khost city, combined with protracted internal displacement and the settlement of nomad communities, contributes to increasing pressure on land and public services (UNHCR, December 5, 2019; UNAMA, 2021).

In the wooded mountainous areas, competition over water resources and access to timber or land regularly fuel conflicts between local communities. Construction of buildings on disputed lands is often perceived as a provocation and can ignite or refuel old inter-communal rivalries. Land disputes are further complicated by the widespread lack of land documentation and conflicting interpretations of property rights between customary and formal institutions of governance.

Located on infiltration routes for insurgent networks from Pakistan, Khost has historically had a strong presence of AOGs, with regular attacks on government officials and employees and the recurrent use of intimidation tactics against civilians. Citizens' confidence in security forces has been eroded by the combined effect of their inability to protect them from abuse, their lack of understanding of community governance mechanisms, and repeated rights violations by individuals or groups affiliated to the government – such as the KPF.

In 2020, the province witnessed a 43% increase in civilian casualties compared to 2019 – due to shelling, targeted killing, and complex attacks by both pro-government and anti-government elements (UNAMA, 2021). Violence has led to the displacement of populations, affecting basic access to services (MSF, 2021).

Paktika borders Ghazni and Zabul to the west, Khost to the northeast, and shares an international border with Pakistan to the south and east. National Highway 11 connects the provincial capital, Sharan, to Ghazni in the northwest and branches off towards the Zurmat district of Paktia.

Of the four provinces formerly part of Loya Paktia, Paktika is the weakest economically. The province is mostly arid, having suffered from severe deforestation.

Paktika has been the scene of regular clashes between the ANSF and AOGs – including Taliban and Al-Qaeda and Pakistani paramilitary movements crossing over the border (UNSC, June 2019; Khoshai, November 8, 2019). Most areas beyond the provincial capital of Sharan are considered insecure. Government employees and soldiers have been the target of recurrent attacks and ambushes on roads connecting districts.

Ghazni borders Wardak and Bamyan to the north, Logar, Paktia and Paktika to the east, Daikundi, Uruzgan and Zabul to the west. Located around a section of the Kabul-Kandahar highway, the province occupies a strategic position, connecting the southwest and south-east regions of the country. Another highway connects the provincial capital to Paktika – although the road, regularly blocked by the Taliban, was partly destroyed in November 2020 (Alim, November 9, 2020; Maftoon, November 3, 2019).

Rural inhabitants, which constitute the majority of the population, rely on agriculture for subsistence – with cultivated areas concentrated in the south and east, where they benefit from irrigation from the Ghazni river and the Sarde Dam. Livestock grazing and rainfed agriculture constitute the main source of income for populations in the north and west.

Gold, copper lithium, and onyx deposits have been identified in the province – much of which is being exploited illegally (UNDP 2020). The province also sits astride a major route of drug trafficking from the South to Kabul.

Ghazni City, the provincial capital, is an important historical and cultural heritage site, displaying several important Islamic and pre-Islamic sites. Designated as Islamic Cultural Capital for the Asian region in 2013, access to the city has been hampered by a volatile security situation – which further undermines the economic potential it had gained as a commercial and industrial center along the Kabul-Kandahar highway (Kennedy, May 24, 2011; UNAMA, April 13, 2013).

In August 2018, a Taliban offensive on Ghazni city destroyed critical institutional infrastructure and markets, killing hundreds (Rahman, December 16, 2018). The attack was held concomitantly with a broader offensive throughout the province – the Taliban capturing five districts and actively contesting others, thereby significantly reducing government control in Ghazni.

The province has since been the scene of regular clashes between the government and AOGs. Abuse by both pro and anti-government forces has been reported – with accounts of Taliban targeting journalists and civilians and pro-government militias harassing and killing civilians (HRW, 2019; HRW, 2021). Thousands of students have been deprived of education following the forced closure of schools (SCA, June 10, 2021). In 2020, Ghazni was one of seven provinces with the highest number of civilian casualties (UNAMA, 2021).

On June 29, 2021, another Taliban offensive was launched on the provincial capital (Nikzad, July 12, 2021). The city was still surrounded at the time of writing. Three of the eastern districts of the province were contested, and the rest are under Taliban control.

Logar is located on the southern entry route to Kabul City. It borders Wardak to the west, Paktia and Ghazni to the south, Nangarhar to the east, and it shares a short international border with Pakistan.

The majority of the population lives in the Logar valley plains irrigated by the Logar river – albeit affected by drought and over-exploitation of water resources. Income-generating activities include agriculture, animal husbandry, and trade. Illegal exploitation of copper and chromite deposits constitutes an additional source of income for local communities – as well as a source of inter-communal conflict. The production and smuggling of hashish have high conflict potential at the local level (Ruttig and Sabawoon, July 18, 2020).

Protracted insecurity due to ground engagements between ANSF and the Taliban has adversely affected province residents for years – impeding access to basic services and causing civilian casualties at the hand of both insurgents and government forces. In July 2020, the provincial capital of Pul-e Alam was the scene of a suicide bombing resulting in 81 civilian casualties. Temporary Taliban roadblocks on key routes to Kabul and abductions of government officials and NGO staff have also been reported. By Mid-July 2021, the government did not retain full control of any of the districts in Logar – at least half of which had fallen to the Taliban (Maqsood, August 13, 2018; Ruttig and Sabawoon, July 18, 2020, UNAMA 2021; UNSC 2021).

Khost Forum for Peace: An Overview of Proceedings

Initially planned to be held in Khost, due to security concerns, logistical impediments, and Covid-19 restrictions, the South-East forum for peace was held in Kabul on July 8, 2021. Twenty-seven persons attended: six women and 21 men. Participants included civil society activists, religious scholars, local community elders, government officials, and representatives of youth groups.

In each local forum for peace, participants discuss among themselves and identify key drivers of conflict at the community level. These drivers are presented to panelists tasked to suggest ways to

address these drivers through local, community-level initiatives.

In the South-East forum for peace, five panelists responded to participants' observations on drivers of conflict in their communities. This included two women and three men: one civil society representative from Paktia, one youth representative from Paktika, a representative of the Provincial Governor's office in Khost, a member of the Logar Provincial Peace Jirga, and a member of the Provincial Council from Ghazni.



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Another feature 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 factors of local conflict identified by participants of the Khost forum for peace are outlined below.

Participants' Expectations About Peace

The participants held mixed views on the potential outcomes of a negotiated deal between the Taliban and the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. If a brokered deal translated into a visible reduction of violence, most participants considered this would bear three sets of positive short and medium-term consequences:

Economically, suppose peace results in safe transportation routes and facilitates trade between urban hubs. In that case, the willingness to invest in the region will be higher and could provide relief from high unemployment rates. Also, a reduction in active conflict would result in less spending on the security sector, and more resources could be allocated to public investments in infrastructures and services.

It was also expected that a new government formed as an outcome of negotiations would be stricter in addressing corruption and ensuring a fair distribution of resources. Illegal and illicit economic activities, such as the production and

smuggling of drugs and the trafficking of manufactured goods across the border, would decrease due to stricter implementation of the law.

Second, with a negotiated peace, political relations at the national level would be less confrontational with less factional fighting due to a power-sharing agreement. Some, however, expressed doubts that factions with diverging ideological views would be able to come to an agreement over the governance model to adopt and feared ideological strife would intensify.

Third, participants from three of the four groups stated that they expected access to education to improve. This was attributed both to a better security situation allowing teacher postings in remote areas and decreasing corruption within the education system.

Expectations regarding the future of Afghanistan's international relations generated debates among the participants. Some expected that a post-settlement government would minimally change Afghanistan's current relations with donor states and neighboring countries. Others feared that if the new government were not to uphold its commitments to international treaties and democratic institutions, it would be alienated by the international community, resulting in significantly reduced aid to Afghanistan. Some also feared more interference from neighboring countries in Afghanistan's national affairs.

Positive expectations surrounding an end to violent conflict withstanding, many participants were alarmed by the potentially devastating consequences a government at least in part controlled by the Taliban would have on social, civic, and political rights.

Recalling Taliban rule in 1996-2001, members of civil society were worried women's involvement in public life would be curtailed by strict restrictions on women's mobility, barriers to their access to the labor market, and their removal from the judiciary. Participants also expected the media would suffer from strict control and that freedom of speech would be at risk.

Some raised concerns about the role of civil society organizations in a new governance framework, with several participants expressing their hope that a republican model of governance would prevail and democratic institutions would be maintained.

Local Factors of Conflict

The four main factors of conflict identified by participants in the Khost forum for peace were:

- Weak economy
- Organized crime
- Conflict over resources
- Proliferation of weapons

The key features of each factor, as outlined by participants, are detailed below.



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Issue 1: Weak Economy

Participants pointed out that widespread poverty and unavailability of employment fueled local conflicts, with disputes exacerbated by competition over scarce resources. Also, lack of income-earning opportunities is seen as a cause of recruitment of male youth in armed forces – both pro and anti-government.

Regarding poverty and associated food insecurity, a panelist related the following:

The main problem is that people are hungry, unemployed, and deprived of the blessings of education. Ignorance reigns in the country, and I believe the main cause of conflict and violence is poverty." – Male panelist 1, Member of the Logar Peace Jirga.

Group members saw the government as the main actor responsible for ensuring the well-being of citizens. They insisted that public investments in infrastructure and large-scale public projects in agriculture and mining were necessary for rural economies to develop. Frustration was expressed over the inability of the government to ensure decent working conditions and provide a stable economic environment – a source of its lack of legitimacy in the eyes of citizens.

The misappropriation of resources from public investments by corrupt members of local authorities exacerbates anti-government sentiments. Participants explained that nepotism and the widespread use of bribery to get positions or appointments hamper the planning and implementation of public projects and skew access to resources, with officials more concerned with "lining their pockets" than with the public good.

Corruption was also mentioned as preventing skilled professionals from entering the civil service and discouraging others from securing a livelihood through licit activities. Stepping out of the vicious circle of conflict and poverty would require firm commitments by national and local government institutions to fight against corruption.

Government agencies need to take action to help local economies through targeted sectoral support. This should include training for small entrepreneurs, initiatives to improve management of and access to water resources in rural areas, and support for sustainable agricultural activities. Government investment in mining activities to generate employment for local communities would also be needed, with some participants deploring that illegal extraction and smuggling of minerals fueled inter-communal conflicts.

Group members expressed disappointment that neither the government nor international aid providers had managed to make sustainable investments in rural economies in the past two decades.



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Issue 2: Organized Crime

The second cause of conflict raised by participants was the reach and power of criminal networks involved in the production and smuggling of drugs and the trafficking of goods and people across the border.

Security forces are perceived as largely ineffective in maintaining order and controlling criminals' activities, who often cultivate relations both with the insurgency and the government. As a result, the formal justice system is seen by many as highly compromised and captured by criminal elements.

In terms of the ways forward, the focus was on the security sector, the rule of law, and community mobilization. There was general agreement that more efficient control of roads and border was required. However, most of the discussions centered on the need for a systematic reform of the security sector to ensure law enforcement officials are properly trained, effectively implement the law, and are accountable to the communities they should protect. The deficit of trust in the police and judiciary was mentioned as a critical element fostering illicit activities.

Participants and panelists alike emphasized the ability of communities to mobilize to defend their interests and insisted more needed to be done to increase mutual trust and foster collaboration between security sector institutions and local community representatives. The panelist from Khost, for instance, explained:

If communities cooperate with the police and the police perform their duties conscientiously, we can address trafficking. However, we see that when people contribute to a criminal's arrest, police release him for a handful of Afghani. This fuels distrust in police forces and the government. [...] Our communities are strong and cohesive; they have a history of defending their interests, more needs to be done to build on their capacities:— Female panelist 1, government representative, Khost.

Among those who could be effectively mobilized through joint initiatives between the government and communities were religious leaders, community elders, and youth organizations.



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Issue 3: Conflict over resources

Land disputes were named as one of the most prominent causes of violent conflict, particularly in provinces that are part of former Loya Paktia. Some inter-communal conflicts have roots tracing back several decades and are regularly reignited when one of the conflict parties is seen as trespassing by the other. These upsurges can reach high levels of violence with inter-tribal rivalry and account of hundreds, sometimes thousands, of fighters being mobilized (TLO, 2013)

At the community level, factors mentioned by participants as contributing to the violent escalation of land disputes include a lack of cooperation and communication between elders from neighboring communities on the one hand, and a generational rift between elders and youth on the other, with younger community members being unaware of customary arrangements over boundary setting, use of resources and land ownership.

The complexity surrounding land ownership is compounded by disagreements over the type of normative framework to be applied (formal or customary), the lack of clear delineation of public and private land, and the wide-spread absence of land documentation.

The government is also seen as unable to take effective action to prevent violent escalation of conflicts. As one panelist related:

Laws promulgated are not enforced at the local level. Disputes over mountainous land in Loya Paktia, for instance, result in the deaths of tens of community members. The government intervenes only to request a ceasefire but cannot find a durable solution to the problem. None of the perpetrators of violence are arrested, and there are risks the conflict will reignite [...] By contrast, in areas controlled by the Taliban, firm measures have been put in place. No one can break their rules. No one can cut down trees. If the local government wants legitimacy, it needs to be firm and seriously enforce its laws. – Male panel member 2, youth representative, Paktia

In constructible rainfed areas surrounding the provincial capital, the role of government officials in land grabbing and the inability of the formal justice system to swiftly and adequately address disputes over land are pointed to as being among various reasons for distrust in government institutions.

According to group members addressing land disputes will require consistent cooperation between authorities and local communities in adju-

dication and land titling. Some suggested customary agreements had to be recognized, formalized, and recorded. Others insisted linkages between customary mechanisms of land dispute resolution and the formal justice system should be fostered. A group member raised the example of mixed systems of land governance in Khost:

Tribal councils can play an effective part in resolving conflicts over access to resources. They are made up of people from the area. A dispute resolution commission in Khost province involves government officials and tribal representatives, which has been very effective in resolving land titling issues. – Male participant 2 – Civil Society

However, efforts to improve relations between the state and citizens would need to be underpinned by conscientious efforts to eradicate corruption and mismanagement of resources.

Issue 4: Proliferation of Arms

Trafficking of weapons across the border and a high level of arms possession were major drivers for the brutal escalation of conflicts. Some explained the widespread ownership of weapons among the population due to the inability of government security forces to ensure the security of citizens, with local communities arming themselves for protection.

As in the case of other drivers of conflict raised above, participants reiterated the importance of more collaboration and communication between government institutions (in this case, security forces), customary actors of governance, and civil society representatives.

Another area of focus was effective enforcement of the legal framework and punishment of perpetrators of violence "in front of people's eyes." The widespread impunity of those committing brutal acts of violence was seen as encouraging violence and criminal behavior.



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Conclusions

Four main conclusions may be drawn from the South-East Peace Forum.

First, economic well-being appears at the heart of citizens' concerns. Sustainable peace for most participants translates into food security, a stable economic situation, and decent working conditions. Inequalities in access to resources, buttressed by rampant corruption, are sources of bitterness for some, anger for others.

Second, there is a strong sense of distrust toward formal institutions of governance that have been in place for the past two decades and their capacity to address citizens' needs effectively. Inefficiency, lack of capacity and professionalism, and corruption within government administration were regularly raised as factors fueling anti-government sentiments.

Seemingly a paradox, but perhaps a correlate to the intense disappointment expressed in public officials and institutions is participants' insistence on the need for the government to provide for and protect citizens directly. Public welfare, state-run projects to build transport and water management infrastructure, and state involvement in agricultural development were recurrent elements of discussions on economic well-being. Participants and panelists also expressed the need for clarity and efficiency in law enforcement – contrasting the state's inability to apply its own rules with the predictable, strict, and swift enforcement of justice by Taliban courts.

Third, participants and pasts alike insisted on the importance of more collaboration between local customary and non-governmental structures of governance on the one hand and formal government institutions on the other. Involving local representatives, religious leaders, civil society activists in discussions and implementation of policies was a common thread throughout the event.

Finally, and despite strong reservations about the current government and its ability to apply the policies it designed and the laws it promulgated, participants in the forum expressed a firm belief in the values sustained by the current legal framework. This goes particularly for the Constitution, referred to by one participant as "the mother of all laws."

Therefore, the outcome of the Doha negotiations in terms of governance are a source of both hope and concern – hope that it would bring the active conflict to a halt and concern that a deal would result in the dismantling of existing (albeit dysfunctional) formal institutions of governance.

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