



Reaching out for Peace

Capstone Report

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Background

Since 2010, the Government of Afghanistan had made several attempts to make peace with the Taliban without success. These attempts were largely unheeded by the Taliban, who consistently refused talks with the Afghan government, which they dismissed as a puppet government of the United States. As such, the Taliban had insisted on having direct peace talks with the United States as the occupying force in the country.

In 2014, peace with the Taliban was set as a high priority for the National Unity Government, which emerged after a months-long disagreement between the two front-runners in the presidential elections, Abdullah Abdullah and Ashraf Ghani. Upon becoming the President, Ashraf Ghani approached the regional countries, particularly Pakistan, to help Afghanistan in its efforts toward peace. The "Kabul Process," aimed at building a regional and international consensus on an "Afghan-led, Afghan-owned" peace process, was launched in June 2017.

During the first Kabul Conference, President Ghani outlined his efforts to convince Pakistan to bring the Taliban to the negotiating table but also stated that Islamabad had so far refused to cooperate.¹ The second round of the Kabul Peace Process took place on February 28, 2018. During this round, President Ghani offered the Taliban peace talks without preconditions. The proposal inclu-

ded amnesty for Taliban fighters, recognition of the Taliban as a political party, amendment of the Constitution, and lifting sanctions on Taliban leaders.² The Taliban, however, did not accept this offer and commenced their spring offensive in April 2018.

In September 2018, US President Donald Trump appointed Zalmay Khalilzad as the Special Envoy for Afghan Peace and Reconciliation. Khalilzad held consultations in Islamabad, Riyadh, and Doha to gather regional and international support. He also visited Russia and subsequently met with President Ghani, Afghan political figures, and some civil society representatives to register opinions, priorities, and concerns regarding a peace settlement.³

On October 12, 2018, Khalilzad held the first bilateral talks with the Taliban delegation in Doha, Qatar.⁴ Both sides agreed to continue working toward peace and hold similar meetings in the future. The second round of talks between the US envoy and high-ranking Taliban members took place in November 2018 in Doha.⁵ President Ghani's announcement about negotiating a peace with the Taliban at the Geneva Conference on November 28, 2018, continued this process. The announcement was followed by forming a 12-member negotiating team led by President Ghani's Chief of Staff.

¹ Center for Strategic & Regional Studies. (2018, February 17). *The upcoming meeting of the Kabul Process and the fate of the peace talks*. Retrieved March 2, 2019, from CSRS:

<http://csrskabul.com/en/blog/the-upcoming-meeting-of-the-kabul-process-and-the-fate-of-the-peace-talks/>

² Calamur, K. (2018, March 28). "Is Peace on the Horizon for Afghanistan?" Retrieved March 2, 2019, from The Atlantic: <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/03/afghanistan-taliban-tashkent-conference/556508/>

³ Constable, P. (2018, October 13). "Taliban says US envoy held talks on possible paths to end Afghan war." Retrieved March 2, 2019, from CITIZEN: <https://www.princegeorgecitizen.com/washington-post/international/taliban-says-us-envoy-held-talks-on-possible-paths-to-end-afghan-war-1.23462914>

⁴ Nelson, C., & Shah, S. (2018, October 12). *U.S. Envoy Meets Taliban In Push for Afghan Peace Talks*, from The Wall Street Journal:

<https://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-envoy-meets-taliban-in-push-for-afghan-peace-talks-1539377851>; and, Aljazeera (2018, October 13). *Afghanistan: Taliban confirms talks with US peace envoy in Qatar*, from:

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/10/envoy-afghan-peace-meets-taliban-officials-qatar-181013084549975.html>

⁵ Amiri, S. S. (2020, March 19). *A Summary of the Peace Process*. Retrieved July 20, 2020, from TOLONews:

<https://tolonews.com/afghanistan/summary-peace-process>; and, Radio Free Afghanistan. (2018, November 18). *Afghan Taliban Reportedly Holds Talks With U.S. Envoy In Qatar*. Retrieved July 20, 2020, from Gandhara: <https://gandhara.rferl.org/a/afghan-taliban-reportedly-holds-talks-with-u-s-envoy-in-qatar/29607328.html>

Also, in November 2018, Russia hosted the first round of peace talks between a Taliban delegation and members of the High Peace Council, officially a non-government body responsible for overseeing peace efforts for Afghanistan. The Government of Afghanistan did not have a formal delegation present at this event. However, delegates of more than ten countries, including China, Pakistan, India, Iran, and Central Asian states, were present.⁶

The High Peace Council delegates reiterated the offer of peace talks without preconditions by the Government of Afghanistan. At the same time, the Taliban maintained that they would only talk about peace with the United States. The Taliban also reiterated their demand for the complete withdrawal of foreign troops from Afghanistan and the reform of the Afghan Constitution based on Islamic Sharia.⁷

On December 18, 2018, US and Taliban delegations held the third round of negotiations in Abu Dhabi in the presence of representatives from the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, and Pakistan. The Taliban refused to meet with the Afghan government delegation, who were also present.⁸ The fourth round of talks between the US and Taliban delegation took place in Doha on January 21, 2019.⁹

⁶ BBC. (2018, November 9). "Afghanistan war: Taliban attend landmark peace talks in Russia." Retrieved March 2, 2019, from BBC NEWS:

<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-46155189>

⁷ Kiselyova, M. (2018, November 9). "Taliban attends peace talks in Moscow for first time, no progress reported." Retrieved March 3, 2019, from REUTERS: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-afghanistan-taliban/taliban-attends-peace-talks-in-moscow-for-first-time-no-progress-reported-idUSKCN1NE159>

⁸ Aljazeera. (2018, December 17). *Taliban meet US officials in United Arab Emirates*. Retrieved July 20, 2020, from:

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/12/taliban-meet-officials-uae-monday-181217063219519.html>; and, Radio Free Afghanistan. (2018, December 18).

Afghan Taliban, U.S. Officials Meet In U.A.E. As Peace Efforts Intensify. Retrieved July 20, 2020, from Gandhara: <https://gandhara.rferl.org/a/afghan-taliban-us-officials-meet-in-uae-as-peace-efforts-intensify/29662366.html>; and, Amiri, S. S. (2020, March 19). *A Summary of the Peace Process*.

Retrieved July 20, 2020, from TOLONews:

Between February 2019 and August 2019, there were eight additional rounds of meetings between the United States and the Taliban. On February 29, 2020, the talks resulted in the "Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan" between the US and the Taliban.¹⁰ The agreement provided for the cessation of hostilities between the Taliban and the US, a phased withdrawal of foreign forces within 14 months, and the organization of intra-Afghan peace talks, to pave the way for peace in Afghanistan and planned to start on March 10, 2020. The Taliban's political office in Qatar emphasized their commitment to implementing the agreement, calling on all Afghans "to honestly work for peace and gather around the table for peace negotiations."¹¹

However, the Taliban ignored international calls for a humanitarian ceasefire because of the raging COVID-19 pandemic. At the same time, pleas for reducing violence as a prerequisite for intra-Afghan negotiations were dismissed as "illogical."¹² Attacks against Afghan national security forces and civilian targets increased significantly such that 45 days after the agreement, the Taliban had reportedly conducted 4,500 attacks throughout the country, a 70% increase from the same period in 2019.¹³ However, the Taliban attacks on foreign troops ceased immediately following the February 29 agreement.

<https://tolonews.com/afghanistan/summary-peace-process>

⁹ APPRO (2019), Short History of Peace Negotiations with Taliban, available from: <http://appro.org.af/short-history-of-peace-negotiations-with-taliban/> and APPRO (2020), A Rolling Update of Peace Negotiations with Taliban, available from: <http://appro.org.af/a-rolling-update-of-peace-negotiations-with-taliban/>

¹⁰ For the full text of the Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan, see: <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Agreement-For-Bringing-Peace-to-Afghanistan-02.29.20.pdf>

¹¹ Aljazeera (March 1, 2020) Taliban-US agreement: How the World Reacted, available from: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/02/taliban-peace-deal-world-reacted-200229165338513.html>

¹² <https://gandhara.rferl.org/a/taliban-calls-for-halting-war-before-afghan-peace-talks-illogical-/30722340.html>; <https://gandhara.rferl.org/a/safeguarding-afghanistan-s-vulnerable-millions-from-coronavirus-threat/30545863.html>

¹³ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-afghanistan-taliba/taliban-step-up-attacks-on->

In the meantime, the United Nations Security Council unanimously endorsed the Doha Agreement on March 10, 2020, through Resolution 2513 (2020), which stated that "sustainable peace can be achieved only through an Afghan-led, Afghan-owned peace process that leads to an inclusive, negotiated political settlement." The resolution also emphasized "the importance of the effective and meaningful participation of women, youth, and minorities". It affirmed that "any political settlement must protect the rights of all Afghans, including women, youth and minorities, and respect the strong desire of Afghans to achieve durable peace and prosperity."¹⁴

Similar sentiments were expressed in earlier statements by prominent international actors, civil society, and Afghan government officials. Most statements and sentiments about peace in Afghanistan were clear about the peace process being multi-faceted, multi-level, complex, and requiring simultaneous efforts on multiple fronts.¹⁵

Despite these developments, the intra-Afghan peace talks were repeatedly delayed as the negotiating sides could not agree on the pre-requisites for the talks. On April 9, 2021, announcements were made by the US and Turkey about preparations for a "senior-level intra-Afghan peace meeting" in Istanbul from April 24 to May 4, 2021.¹⁶ However, a subsequent announcement was made on April 20, 2021, to postpone the meeting "due to the Taliban's non-participation."¹⁷ On August 15, 2021, Taliban forces entered Kabul and effectively assumed control over Afghanistan.

By all accounts, the peace process had numerous flaws and shortcomings and offered

[afghan-forces-since-signing-u-s-deal-data-idUSKBN22D557](https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/02/taliban-peace-deal-world-reacted-200229165338513.html)

¹⁴ Resolution 2513

¹⁵ See, for example, the European Union's Outcome of Proceedings (2017), available from: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/23921/st13098en17.pdf> and Outcome of Proceedings (2019), available from: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/39011/st07978-en19.pdf>; and Aljazeera, March 1, 2020, Taliban-US agreement: How the World Reacted, available from:

a historic opportunity. Many Afghan and international observers objected to the unilateralism exercised by Zalmay Khalilzad on behalf of the United States in arranging peace talks that excluded the Government of Afghanistan. At the same time, a possible peace agreement with the Taliban was welcomed by Afghans and the international community alike. The intra-Afghan peace talks were seen as a unique opportunity for multiple stakeholders at multiple levels to articulate their aspirations and anxieties about peace with the Taliban. This optimism persisted until a few days before August 15, 2021, when the Taliban staged their takeover of Kabul.

This report is based on eight local forums for peace, all held before the Taliban returned to power on August 15, with the last forum being held in Kabul on August 2, 2021. The "Reaching Out for Peace" project was launched in March 2021 in response to the widespread optimism about peace and the opportunity for peace, both created because of the consultations between the United States and the Taliban and the subsequent intra-Afghan peace talks.

The rationale for this project was also based on the recognition that many of the political differences at the higher levels in Afghanistan had community roots and manifestations that needed to be identified and, ideally, addressed at multiple levels from the local community level to the highest national political level. Even though the political situation in Afghanistan has fundamentally changed since the August 15, 2021, takeover by the Taliban, many issues identified through this project persist and need to be addressed over the longer term if further conflicts are to be avoided.

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/02/taliban-peace-deal-world-reacted-200229165338513.html>

¹⁶ Daily Sabah (April 9, 2021), available from:

<https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/diplomacy/prep-underway-for-intra-afghan-peace-talks-in-istanbul-us-says>

¹⁷ Reuters (April 20, 2021). "U.S.-backed Afghan peace conference in Turkey postponed over Taliban no-show -sources", available from: <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/us-backed-afghan-peace-conference-turkey-postponed-over-taliban-no-show-sources-2021-04-20/>

The first expectation in releasing this report is that the findings from this project, revisited in light of the most recent developments in Afghanistan, will provide an opportunity for a critical examination of the intervention approach by the international community in Afghanistan during the 2001-2021 period.

The second expectation is that this examination will yield valuable lessons to inform future interventions by the international community in Afghanistan and various conflict hotspots around the world.

About “Reaching Out for Peace”

The project was initiated in March 2021 by Friedrich Ebert Stiftung Afghanistan, Afghanistan Public Policy Research Organization (APPRO), and Mediothek Afghanistan for Development and Peace Organization to contribute to the momentum for peace. The project was 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, Khost, and Kabul (Table 1).

Table 1: Nodes and Provinces

Node	Provinces
North	Jawzjan, Sar-e Pol, Faryab, Samangan, Balkh,
Northeast	Badakhshan, Baghlan, Kunduz, Takhar
Central Highlands	Bamyán, Daikundi, Parwan, Wardak
West	Herat, Badghis, Farah, Nimroz, Ghor
South	Kandahar, Helmand, Uruzgan, Zabol
Southeast	Paktia, Paktika, Khost, Ghazni, Logar
East	Nangarhar, Laghman, Kunar, Nuristan
Kabul	Kabul, Kapisa, Panjshir

In total, eight local forums for peace were held to engage Afghans at the community level on overcoming conflict through dialogue, exchange, and activism. As such, these local forums sought to encourage

active participation at the community level to build a shared vision for peace.

Format, Participants, and Panelists

The main goal for holding the local forums for peace was to facilitate free and open-ended dialogue among citizens and representatives from local authorities. Together, they should identify the local drivers of conflict, select the most important, and explore possibilities of overcoming these through unified action based on consensus.

The participants consisted of citizens from academia, male and female representatives from the private sector, youth, government employees, NGOs, and religious authorities. As much as possible, the panelists were drawn from local government authorities. Where there was an insufficient willingness by the local authorities to participate, non-government community leaders were invited to act as panelists.

Each local peace forum started with a short presentation by the organizers that underlined the deficiencies of Afghanistan's peace process and contrasted it to other, more inclusive peace processes in Northern Ireland and Colombia.

During these presentations, the Afghan peace process was described as not fully functional because it had started only as a dialogue between the United States and the Taliban and had excluded the Afghan government and representation from ordinary Afghans. In addition, apart from a cessation of hostilities between the United States and the Taliban, there was no comprehensive agenda for peace in the lead up to the February 29 agreement or later during the ill-fated "intra-Afghan" peace talks.

The presentation also pointed out that the peace process and intra-Afghan peace talks did not benefit from strategic guidance and direction from international stakeholders. At the same time, there was no effective mobilization for peace by civil society at sub-national levels.



Kandahar Forum for Peace, March 2021, Photo: © FES, MADPO, APPRO/ Alireza Kaihan

Regardless of these shortcomings, the Doha agreement had created an impetus for peace and an opportunity for ordinary Afghans to have their say about peace with the Taliban and what it meant for conflicts within their communities. Hence, the local forums were intended to create spaces for ordinary Afghans and local authorities to discuss and debate how to work toward sustainable peace by mitigating local conflicts.



Herat Forum for Peace, March 2021, Photo: © FES, MADPO, APPRO, Herat Top Film and Photo Studio

Participants were invited to compare the characteristics of conflict within their communities with those in Colombia and Northern Ireland. These include particularly the decades-long, widespread armed fighting, kidnappings and other gang-related crimes, poverty, injustice, lack of the rule of law, religious strife (Northern Ireland), drug trade and smuggling (Colombia), and widespread corruption (Colombia). The participants were also asked to identify specific drivers of conflict within their communities and possible ways of managing them through local efforts and joint initiatives.



Mazar-e Sharif Forum for Peace, April 2021
Photo: © FES, MADPO, APPRO

The venues, provinces covered in each node, dates, and the number of participating men and women are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2: Local Peace Forums

Venue	Node	Date	Participants
Kandahar	South	15/03/21	41 m, 29 w
Herat	West	29/03/21	33 m, 27 w
Mazar-e Sharif	North	05.04/21	38 m, 26 w
Badakhshan	Northeast	24/05/21	35 m, 35 w
Jalalabad	East	31/05/21	36 m, 24 w
Bamyan	Central Highlands	09/06/21	51 m, 34 w
Kabul	Southeast	08/07/21	21 m, 6 w *
Kabul	Kabul	02/08/21	36 m, 24 w

* The low number of participants was due to traveling to Kabul from the various provinces in this node and the third wave of COVID-19 raging in Afghanistan

The project's wide geographical scope was intended to capture a wide range of views on the local drivers of conflict and the prospects for resolving them at the community level. The number of participants at each local forum ranged between 60 and 100. While these numbers are not statistically representative, care was taken to select participants and panelists from a cross-section of the population in each of the seven nodes.



Badakhshan Forum for Peace, May 2021, Photo: © FES, MADPO, APPRO/ Jalil Poya

The selection of the participants for these forums was more akin to selecting focus group participants whose input, while informed, was not intended to be representative of the total populations from which the participants were drawn. In each forum, the participants were asked to identify the main issues that affected conflict dynamics in their communities.



Bamyan Forum for Peace, June 2021
Photo: © FES, MADPO, APPRO/ Jalil Poya

Once the participants reached a consensus on the central issues, each was discussed in groups tasked to identify the drivers of these issues, what needed to be done to address them, and how respective actions and efforts could create conditions for sustainable peace. The findings from the first round of local peace forums were shared with participants and the wider public through policy briefs, media reports, and video documentation.

The second round of forums to reach a consensus on how to work toward inter-and intra-community peace could not yet be con-

vened due to the collapse of the Ghani government in Kabul and the ensuing uncertainty, particularly for former government officials and civil society, and media activists.



Khost Forum for Peace (held in Kabul), August 2021, Photo: © FES, MADPO, APPRO



Kabul Forum for Peace, August 2021, Photo: © FES, MADPO, APPRO/ Alireza Kaihan

Findings from the Local Forums

Local peace forums were held in Kandahar (South), Herat (West), Mazar-e Sharif (North), Jalalabad (East), Bamyan (Central Highlands). Also, two forums were held in Kabul, one to capture the southeastern node provinces of Paktia, Paktika, Khost, Ghazni, and Logar, and the other to capture the Kabul node consisting of Kabul, Kapisa, Panjshir.

The participants and panelists present at the various forums were asked to state what they expected of the then ongoing intra-Afghan peace process how any outcomes of the peace process would affect the key issues that drove various types of conflict in their communities. The remainder of this

section summarizes the findings based on the responses during the forums.

Expectations About Peace

Apart from the peace forum for the Khost node, there was clearly expressed optimism about the intra-Afghan peace process. The majority of the participants and panelists expected that a peace agreement between the Islamic Republic government and the Taliban was possible and would bring many benefits and some risks. The participants of the Khost peace forum were most apprehensive about an agreement with the Taliban because of longstanding factional/ideological differences between and among the negotiating sides that would continue beyond an initial peace agreement.

Benefits

The most widely anticipated outcome of the peace process was a cessation of or a reduction in armed conflict and violence. The subsequent physical safety would be conducive to increased productive economic activity and trade, creating employment opportunities in urban and rural areas alike. Similarly, relative peace would increase access to essential services such as health and education.

Also anticipated in the aftermath of peace was a return to the rule of law and the elimination or significant reduction in endemic corruption. Both would improve the quality of essential public services such as health and education. Criminal gangs operating in all major cities of Afghanistan would be kept in check and punished severely under a complete or partial Taliban rule.

Unlike other forums, the participants of the Nangarhar forum anticipated that after a peace agreement with the Taliban, women would have more freedom in access to education. They argued that increased access would occur as the Taliban would impose the rule of law, ensuring enhanced security of women in public spaces.

Also, in Jalalabad, some participants expected that there would be a fairer

distribution of resources among the community members after a peace agreement.

In Khost, despite doubts about the negotiations, most expected that for peace to be sustainable and meaningful, it would result in positive outcomes. Among them, they listed a significant reduction in violence, a diversion of resources from the security sector to public service provision, return to the rule of law, improvements in infrastructure and socio-economic conditions, increased access to essential services, and a reduction in unemployment, displacements, and corruption.

In Badakhshan, many felt that if a peace agreement were reached with the Taliban, the economic conditions would improve, there would be much less corruption, and social cohesion would increase. However, these changes would depend on the integration of the Taliban into Afghanistan's system of governance and the degree to which the Taliban would agree to the spirit of Afghanistan's 2004 Constitution.

Risks

There were numerous concerns about what a peace agreement would bring to various communities in all forums, among them:

- Limits on social, economic, and political liberties, particularly for women, minorities, and youth
- A general reduction in international development assistance
- Impunity for the many that had committed war crimes over the years
- Difficulties in integrating ex-militants into civilian life
- Authoritarian rule with little or no room for dissent
- Limits on forms of cultural activities and freedom of the media
- Weakening of civic engagement
- Lack of access to information
- Dismantlement of democratic structures of government
- Strengthening of patriarchal social norms with the likely increase in domestic violence against women.

Regardless of the type of peace agreement, several fundamental drivers of conflict such as ethnoreligious and linguistic animosities, land and water issues, widespread food insecurity, and persistent poverty would likely continue for many years to come. Combined with generational animosities and conflict trauma, these factors would create insurmountable challenges for the post-peace government.

The participants of the Nangarhar venue for eastern provinces expressed concerns about the possibility of armed conflict continuing unabated between a fully or mostly Taliban government and the dissenters within the ranks of the Taliban or outsiders such as the Islamic State of Khorasan. The latter have been particularly active in eastern Afghanistan.

Drivers of Conflict

Widespread Poverty and Weak Economy

Poverty and unemployment have been both a consequence and a source of conflict. Decades of war and displacement have destroyed agricultural irrigation infrastructure, loss of agricultural know-how, inadequate transportation infrastructure, and loss of market access. Periodic droughts and the resultant displacement have compounded these conditions.

Widespread poverty and a weak economy combined with the longstanding and ongoing conflict and uneven distribution of scarce resources have deprived Afghanistan of equitable utilization of its natural wealth of minerals and agricultural potential. In addition, the many years of dependency on outside assistance have significantly reduced the willingness for self-reliance and resulted in institutionalized rent-seeking behavior at all levels.

A small minority with links to powerholders has enjoyed total impunity and benefited from the significant amount of international aid for the country's reconstruction since 2001. The fact that powerholders continue

to benefit from the war economy, investing more in illicit and destructive rather than licit and productive economic activity, was raised during the forum discussions as a significant barrier to creating conditions for peace.

Deprivation from opportunities and lack of prospects have forced many, particularly among youth, to join the ranks of armed dissent. Many of the participants stressed that the link between widespread poverty and economic hardship on the one hand and armed conflict on the other was poorly understood. Any progress toward sustainable peace would only be possible if the general economic conditions and productive and sustainable employment prospects were ensured. Therefore, a peace agreement would need to have explicit provisions for creating alternative livelihoods, including the demobilized fighters.

Efforts to address economic issues should be based on understanding and strengthening the agricultural value chains, particularly in securing additional domestic, regional, and international markets for Afghan goods. The key to increasing trade internally and externally is strengthening and expanding transportation infrastructure, which would require external assistance and investment. More effort should be made to engage with the wealthier diaspora and encourage them to invest in the country and increase its productive capacity.

The value chain approach should also be applied to creating human capital. While the number of the educated among the young has increased substantially since 2001, Afghanistan's labor market has not sufficiently expanded to absorb this vital addition to the labor force. Several participants pointed out that since most Afghans are young and have become educated since 2001, specific efforts should be made to find employment for the young and educated. Without provisions to accommodate the recently educated, many younger generations would view the years invested in education as wasted.

Another factor contributing to a weak economy and causing social tensions has been

the uneven distribution of the benefits from international assistance. A significant proportion of all international funds have gone to a few influential individuals and their networks. Combined with extortion and corruption and a lack of accountability, the infrastructure built with international funds often tends to be sub-standard and unevenly distributed among different communities. These inequities would likely increase tension and undermine inter-community peace.

Minimizing inter-community tensions, preventing conflict, and working toward sustainable peace would require decision-making on allocating scarce resources and international assistance through local governance structures to plan and oversee the implementation of infrastructure projects. Additionally, community projects should be designed based on prior assessment of needs at the local level to ensure relevance and utility and avoid misunderstanding and tensions among different population segments and communities.

At a higher level, members of parliament would need to advocate for need-based assistance for their communities and account to their communities about their activities and challenges on an ongoing basis. Similarly, media could play a more significant role in ensuring transparent communication about the state of development and infrastructure projects, challenges, and opportunities. Both media and members of parliament would benefit from working more closely with civil society organizations, particularly in documenting the views and expectations of ordinary citizens and conducting oversight for various projects being implemented.

While international aid would continue to support the most vulnerable, the national and international implementors need to be more accountable to their actual and potential beneficiaries. The participants insisted that the government and its international donors should place a stronger focus on building industrial and transport infrastructure while support for agricultural activity needed to be sufficiently adaptive to accom-

modate coping with external events such as droughts and floods.

Regarding land-related conflicts, some suggested that agreements based on customary law had to be recognized, formalized, and recorded. Others insisted that effort should be made to improve management of and access to water resources in rural areas while supporting sustainable agricultural activities.

In parallel, improvements need to be made in agricultural production through upgrading irrigation systems, mechanization, quality control, and packaging. In urban areas, productive and ongoing economic activity needs to be strengthened and expanded through wider use of technology, increased access to markets, and increased quality.

All the above efforts would need resolve and drive at the highest governmental and international levels.

Governance

The ruling elites have typically benefited from the general impunity granted to the most powerful. There are no mechanisms in place to enforce transparency and accountability. Youth and women are typically excluded from local decision-making processes at all levels, from within the family, to the neighborhood, close community, and upward to institutions of governance at higher levels. Institutionalized patriarchy, reinforced by conflict and disorder, is the primary driver of bad governance.

Strong sentiment was expressed during the peace forum in Mazar-e Sharif for local empowerment to resolve local community conflicts. However, local empowerment and engagement are difficult because local officials such as governors continue to be appointed from Kabul. 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.

Structurally, the local election of officials could increase interest by ordinary community members in becoming involved in resolving local issues. Participants further insisted on strengthening a culture of inclusive consultation at the community level.

Many see education as a primary vehicle to address poor governance by promoting a vision of society based on justice and merit. However, using education as an instrument of social and cultural change necessitates collaboration between experts with extreme and religious views and those with moderate and less extreme views.

Lawlessness

Systematic non-compliance with the law was underlined as a significant source of conflict in different communities, mainly when the very authorities in charge of enforcing the law broke it. Widespread nepotism and corruption within the justice system have created a judiciary strongly affiliated with the interests of influential individuals, which adversely affects citizens' confidence in government institutions in general. To many ordinary citizens, the powerful, abusive, and corrupt government officials have become a self-serving elite with no interest in serving the needs of the public or fulfilling their public mandates.

During the peace forums in Kandahar, Herat, Jalalabad, Bamyan, and Kabul, direct references were made to the extremely weak or the nonexistent rule of law as a critical driver of community-level violent conflicts. Multiple and interrelated factors were identified as the drivers of widespread lawlessness.

First, despite numerous interventions by international agencies, donors, and the government to increase awareness about the benefits of a formal rule of law, formal legal provisions and general awareness of Afghanistan's legal framework remain low, particularly in the more remote communities. However, in areas with awareness, a widespread tendency is not to use the formal justice system.

Second, a tendency to resolve conflicts through force, including armed violence. This is due to the many years of conflict and lawlessness having legitimated behavior outside the law and peaceful conflict resolution.

Third, there is a widely shared view that many government officials abuse the law and do not act according to it in their interactions with the public. This has created a general distrust of government officials among citizens. A recurrent statement during the peace forums was that administrative corruption and widespread nepotism had estranged citizens from the formal justice system. Citizens generally expect to be asked for bribes when dealing with formal justice officials. Because of this distrust, many prefer religious authorities or traditional dispute resolution mechanisms, considered swifter and less corrupt.

Fourth, impunity granted to perpetrators of abuse and those with power contributes to the general perception that connections or willingness and ability to pay bribes to buy protection are fundamentally necessary to get justice. Powerholders benefiting from the war economy, the failure to curb criminal activity, the impunity of those with connections within the government and local criminal elements, and abuses committed by armed units and militias have delegitimized the government.

Fifth, a key factor contributing to the violent escalation of disputes over land and water is 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 of the land ownership situation 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 widespread absence of land documentation.

The above multiple and interrelated drivers have forced ordinary citizens to resort to traditional means of resolving local conflicts and bringing criminals and perpetrators of abuse to justice. Customary justice mechanisms, while expedient, are usually inequitable and tend to be patriarchal.

Addressing this systemic absence of the rule of law would require a complete overhaul of the justice system to ensure the independence of the formal justice system from special interests and encourage the public to use the justice system for peaceful resolution of conflicts. To this end, there needs to be a commitment at the highest level to curb the proliferation of weapons and disarm militias serving the interests of private groups or individuals.

Corruption

The widespread administrative corruption is closely related to deficiencies and inequities in the justice sector. There are instances of corruption and nepotism in the daily life of the citizens, particularly those dealing with governmental entities. Corruption and nepotism derail law enforcement, affect appointments and recruitment in public institutions, and curtail the efficiency and efficacy of public services. Administrative corruption also terrorizes the weak and the defenseless and sustains lawlessness.

Many participants pointed to administrative corruption as one of the critical determinants of political instability. They explained that corruptive and nepotistic practices in government offices cause distrust and reputational damage among citizens and the civil service.

For many, holding a public office is considered as a strategy to accumulate wealth through extortion and other acts such as grabbing rather than a position to serve fellow citizens.

Corrupt behavior by those in power and operating through favoritism based on kinship and ethnic affiliation has increased the divide between citizens and officials while heightening tensions within communities.

Aid provided to corrupt institutions and individuals further aggravates grievances among the victims of corruption by creating additional opportunities for corrupt government and non-government officials to misappropriate resources away from the most vulnerable within their communities. Youth, minorities, and local businesses were listed among those most affected.

Corruption also prevents skilled professionals from entering the civil service and discourages them from securing licit livelihoods.

Numerous legal provisions and agencies have been put in place to address systemic corruption soon after 2001. However, corruption has increased unimpeded, and the distrust between the citizens and the government has increased. Accountability in the current conditions would entail regular and effective collaboration and coordination between local government representatives and civil society organizations.

At the administration level, serious and transparent effort needs to be made to implement the existing legislation by setting up clear mechanisms of accountability and transparency. Implementation of the legislation would require a judiciary that is empowered to take precise and swift action to prosecute corrupt practices.

Civil society can play an essential role by monitoring the functioning of government institutions. To do so, its oversight role needs to be recognized and protected, while its findings from monitoring anti-corruption efforts need to be taken seriously and acted upon. Among the first steps that civil society and the formal justice system need to take are strengthening and enforcing measures against tax evasion and devising a system to register assets of government officials.

Another suggestion was to limit interpersonal contact in transactions by digitalizing administrative procedures, thereby reducing opportunities for requesting bribes. However, such measures would be subject to increased digital literacy and increased availability and access to digital media.

Radicalization and Extremism

There was concern among the participants about the spread, to varying degrees, of extremist ideas in communities across the country. This increase was attributed to social fragmentation and limited social interactions between different strata in the community. Radicalization can also occur at unmonitored religious schools (madrassas), with young men particularly vulnerable to fundamentalist and extremist ideas. This vulnerability was attributed to a general scarcity of social and cultural life combined with a lack of economic opportunities, particularly in remote areas.

Addressing extremism would require joint educational, cultural, and religious measures. Many felt that the Ministry of Hajj and Religious Affairs (MoHRA) should take a leading role in providing guidance and effective monitoring of the currently poorly regulated madrassas.

More generally, government institutions, with limited reach outside of district centers, were mainly considered incapable of addressing the general concerns of the population and the specific challenge of the rise in the spread of extremism.

Proliferation of Armed Gangs

Networks of criminal gangs are involved in the production and smuggling of drugs and the trafficking of goods and people. Security forces have been largely ineffective in maintaining order and controlling the activities of criminals. Many communities have a strong perception that there are close links between armed groups, including the insurgency and government officials. In addition, the formal justice system is fully captured or highly compromised by criminal elements.

The participants and panelists were concerned about widespread ownership of weapons among the population due to government security forces' inability to ensure citizens' security, with local communities arming themselves for protection.

To overcome this situation, measures will need to increase mutual trust and foster collaboration between security sector institutions and local community representatives. Local elders and youth organizations would need to be mobilized within communities to agree on how to proceed in containing armed gang activities.

Drug Economy

The drug economy's importance in the region as a source of livelihood for rural communities and a resource for the insurgency was underlined as a primary source of destabilization and conflict. The Western region of Afghanistan is the second largest poppy-producing region in the country and a smuggling hub due to its strategic location along the border.

Drug production in all forms would only be curbed through the availability of comparable income alternatives. Also, addressing the threats posed by the drugs economy would require community buy-in, created through joint efforts of local authorities and religious leaders and supported through institutional efforts in anti-narcotics.

Mosques could play a more central role in engaging poppy growers and convincing them to switch to alternative crops such as saffron. Participants also called for sustained efforts to inform the public about the health risks of drug use, including through the education system.

Kinship-related Strife

Given the high number of targeted attacks against Shi'a communities in recent years, particularly in Kabul, there are fears that members of minority communities are likely to fall victim to discriminatory measures and practices under a government that excludes religious and ethnic minorities. A sectarian government is likely to increase the rifts between communities and compound the pre-existing divisions, providing incentives for local leaders to prioritize their own ethnic and confessional groups over others.

Conflict and violence within communities are seen as underpinned by divisions based on ethnicity and religion. Participants from Herat, where targeted violence against members of the Shi'a community has increased in recent years, stated that powerholders exacerbate these divisions because they profit from continuing the conflict. Powerholders, including political parties, are typically biased toward serving their own immediate families and kin at the expense of all others. A high-level peace agreement will not translate into the peace within communities if kinship-related divisions are not addressed as part of the peace process.

Some participants felt strongly that addressing divisions within communities would require active engagement with religious scholars. One example provided from Herat was the Herat Council of Islamic Brotherhood, established in 2016, which had successfully prevented violence from further escalation in several instances. The Council brings together Shi'a and Sunni Hanafi religious scholars to discuss and debate ways toward religious unity.

Different opinions were expressed about the role of elders in resolving conflicts at the community level. Some saw elders as important stakeholders with the capacity to defuse tensions, while others considered them as members of a generation that had brought about division and destruction.

Addressing deep-rooted divisions based on ethnicity and religion requires a combination of measures focused on education and structural reform within the political system. Interest in becoming an active member of an inclusive civic community should be a central feature in early and secondary education. At a structural level, there should be legal provisions forbidding the manipulation of ethnic and sectarian identities for political ends.

To prevent and resolve kinship-related strife locally, participants insisted that the community elders and religious leaders should play a more central role in addressing the entire community's needs and, when necessary, resort to mediation by neutral third parties.

Inadequate Education

There continues to be insufficient access to education while the quality remains low. In addition, education is insufficiently used to raise social awareness, paying particular attention to such fundamental issues as identity-based prejudices and gender-based discrimination. The limited access for women and girls to education also remains pervasive throughout the country.

Like other sectors, the education system is riddled with corruption, e.g., reports of ghost schools and teachers, and ethnic and religious strife, e.g., which language to use for teaching – particularly between Dari and Pashto – and what branch of Islam to use as the reference point for discussions of religion. The recruitment system for teachers is also prone to nepotism, with many teachers being hired based on connections rather than skills.

Persistent insecurity in many areas has meant that many families decide against sending their sons and daughters to school due to fear of them becoming intended or collateral victims of armed attacks and skirmishes. Teachers are also affected by insecurity, with many deciding against being posted to relatively insecure areas.

Addressing the many challenges of the education system is unlikely until there is a marked improvement in security conditions and a lessening of armed conflict.

The participants suggested that communities and civil society organizations needed to intensify their efforts to raise awareness about the importance of education for boys and girls and increase the number of girls attending school. In these efforts, communities and civil society organizations would be more likely to succeed if their efforts were coordinated with and supported by local elders and religious authorities.

Key Findings

Six main findings emerge from the previous section's analysis of the forum proceedings.

First, given the prominence of the Doha negotiations in mainstream and social media, it was difficult for the participants to stay focused on identifying the main drivers of localized conflicts, what needed to be done to address them, and conditions for sustainable peace could be created. In exchanges on conflict resolution and peace at the community level, the main point of reference by the participants and panelists was the intra-Afghan peace negotiations in Doha. This is a strong indication that much hope was placed on the Doha negotiations resulting in an end to the conflict at different levels.

Second, related to the first finding above, a key challenge mentioned during all forums was maintaining the panelists' focus on the local factors and actors that could play a role in resolving local conflicts. The panelists generally tended to focus on external factors, such as the meddling of foreign countries in Afghanistan's internal affairs or the role of Afghan "foreign agents" spreading extremist ideas, rather than on the specific community-level issues raised by the participants.

Third, there appeared to be a tendency among government officials, intellectuals, and civil society to focus on the more general and high-level issues rather than specific, localized issues. There was also a tendency to use dialogue and debate during the forum discussions as an opportunity to compile a list of demands to be met by higher-level actors, be it the government or international donors.

Fourth, the vast majority of the participants made a clear link between peace and economic development. While addressing the many economic challenges that Afghanistan faces is a secondary, post-peace necessity, the fact that this linkage was made strongly suggests that an agenda for peace would need to contain provisions and plans on how to address economic issues in the longer term.

Fifth, there was a prominent concern about the consequence of peace with the Taliban for women's rights and human rights more generally. This concern also suggests that a

comprehensive agenda for peace at any level must have explicit provisions for protecting the fundamental rights of men and women.

Sixth, concern was expressed during all eight local forums about divisions within communities based on kinship alignments of the local powerholders. Some feared that if these divisions were not resolved, nepotism would continue and result in corruption and localized kinship-based violence – with or without a peace agreement with the Taliban.

Conclusions and Ways Forward

Sustainable peace for most participants meant food security, economic stability, and decent working conditions. 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.

Hopes and expectations of stability were largely seen as a function of a successful outcome from the Doha negotiations. However, it was also clear that the participants had severe doubts about the negotiations bringing an end to armed violence.

Unless a negotiated deal between the two main warring parties was reached, the prospect, as seen by many, was one of further breakdown of social cohesion and a rolling-back of some of the significant rights-based gains made since 2001.

The focus of most participants on the Doha negotiations had a significant bearing on the meaning of "peace". Some understood it as a deal between politicians and warlords at higher levels rather than as an end to the conflict. However, the participants' observations about social, economic, and structural drivers of tensions and conflict at the local level reveal that sustainable peace would require more than a deal at the highest level between warring parties.

Systematic and systemic engagement to address the underlying drivers of inequity, inequality, and poverty is crucial in ensuring that

social and societal tensions are diffused and that a political agreement would address these drivers.

Endemic corruption and a lack of the rule of law ran through all the issues raised during the local peace forums. A continuation of corruption and a lack of the rule of law will paralyze economic development, distort opportunities for citizens, feed into political manipulation of interest groups, prevent accountability and transparency in governance, and undermine confidence in formal institutions of governance. Many local conflicts were described as resulting from the connections and collaboration between criminal networks, local politicians and strongmen.

Some saw the failure to address the drug economy as the result of insufficient attention to the economic plight of rural communities who often have no choice but to rely for subsistence on relatively lucrative and ecologically resilient poppy cultivation, processing, and trafficking.

Citizens have had a clear stake in peace and conflict resolution but are disempowered, institutions of the former government have had interest and influence in effecting peace but were held back because of corruption and fear of reprisals from local powerholders, and academic institutions have had an interest in peace but have been disempowered due to lacking resources and access to powerful actors.

Actors with the most potent influence in addressing local issues have shown low motivation in engaging in conflict resolution. A repeated example given was local religious leaders – including those residing in Taliban-controlled areas – with much influence within their communities but little or no interest in facilitating peace. Other actors with strong influence and low interest were the perpetrators of the local conflicts and included the local powerholders and drug lords.

Inequitable access to scarce resources is widely recognized as a driver of tensions, criminality, and general distrust in the gov-

ernment's capacity to provide for its citizens. A significant risk that exacerbates lack of access to resources, particularly land and water, is climate change. Climatic shocks have affected Bamyan, Daikundi, Parwan, and other provinces, where reduced river flows due to lower rain and snowfall have resulted in lower agricultural production, increased risk of food insecurity, and, ultimately, internal displacement.

Despite the former administration's failings, most participants appeared to want more rather than less government. However, a state that is less centralized and more accountable to its citizens at the local level provides public services to all and is directly involved in infrastructure and development projects.

Throughout the forums, it became clear that for many, the formal negotiations in Doha could not be reconciled with the intensification of conflict around the country, spearheaded by the Taliban militias, while the Taliban negotiators were holding direct discussions with their Afghan counterparts.

Beyond security, the main characteristics of sustainable peace prominent during the forum discussions were access to justice, access to quality education for all, and economic stability. Addressing these issues would require structural changes in the mode of governance – more consultative government institutions, robust accountability mechanisms, and a government committed to directly providing services to citizens.

Some of the worries expressed during the peace forums about the rights of women, youth, minorities, and civil society, more generally, being eroded or removed by a post-peace government, remain despite assurances issued by the Taliban government. In retrospect – and given the takeover of Kabul by the Taliban on August 15, 2021 – it is perhaps not surprising that there was a high degree of resignation and pessimism during the Kabul peace forum held on August 2, 2021, concerning the outcomes of the intra-Afghan peace negotiation process.

Conflicts involving former fighters and other armed actors remain a significant risk. Concerns regarding the social re-integration of Taliban fighters also remain with no indications by the Taliban government about how it intends to address this issue. Conflicts between former fighters and civilians risk feeding into inter-community strife.

By all accounts, a new government will have severely limited ability to provide the necessary resources to support economic development in the short and medium-term without support from the international community. Reliance on continued international assistance provides an opportunity for international donors to apply staggered pressure on the new government to acknowledge and respect at least fundamental rights, especially of minorities and women.

Policymaking for peace – to end armed conflict, overcome the narcotics industry, and remove opportunities for insurgency – needs to be based on lessons learned over the last twenty years and an analysis of actors, factors, and mechanisms that sustain the conflict. This will mean recognition that the concurrent wars on terrorism and drugs have both largely failed in Afghanistan.

Efforts by the international community to assist Afghanistan in overcoming its many so-

cial and economic challenges will be subject to the politics of coming to terms with the Taliban as the new rulers of Afghanistan. The international community has committed to providing humanitarian aid to Afghanistan despite the takeover by the Taliban. Humanitarian aid with funding from the international community is provided through international non-government organizations.

Despite this indirect link between the international donors and the Taliban government affected by the actions of international humanitarian organizations, many Western governments continue to struggle with formal recognition of the Taliban as the government of Afghanistan. This hesitation is even though the US awarded *de facto* recognition to the Taliban through direct negotiations in the Doha process and signed the "Agreement to Bring Peace to Afghanistan" with the Taliban on February 29, 2020, unanimously endorsed on March 10, 2020 by the UN Security Council Resolution 2513 (2020).

International commitment to peace for Afghanistan necessitates an acceptance by the international community that the Taliban has won the 20-year war and is likely to remain in power in Afghanistan for the foreseeable future. Difficult as this may be, it is the first logical step towards peace in Afghanistan.

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