

INTERIM TRANSITIONS SERIES



Towards Peaceful and Plural Politics in Afghanistan

Rethinking approaches to Afghan peacemaking
in the wake of the Taliban takeover

*Report of a consultation with veterans of pre-August
2021 reconciliation efforts*



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of EDINBURGH



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RESOURCES

This research was produced by Mawlvi Atta ur Rahman Saleem and Michael Semple, working with Conciliation Resources and the PeaceRep consortium. It is an initial study for further research to inform the design and support for future peacemaking in Afghanistan towards peaceful and plural politics.

A year after the Taliban seized power, the conflict in Afghanistan continues. The Taliban have invoked religion and their military victory to justify imposing their esoteric brand of authoritarian rule. But under the Taliban's Islamic Emirate, Afghanistan has experienced an economic and humanitarian crisis, denial of human rights, diplomatic isolation and a mass exodus. The Afghan conflict continues, both in the sense of armed resistance to the Taliban and in the sense of Taliban dependence on force to impose their authority. Disturbingly, despite the globally significant ongoing conflict in Afghanistan, there has been no concerted attempt to revive the peace process which collapsed along with the Republic in August 2021. The current report represents an effort to give a voice to experienced Afghan peacemakers, as they make sense of the challenges facing Afghanistan under Taliban rule. They reflect on lessons learned in previous rounds of the peace process and consider options for the achievement of sustainable peace and a durable political settlement in the new context.

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This research is an output from the Peace and Conflict Resolution Evidence Platform (PeaceRep), funded by UK Aid from the UK Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO) for the benefit of developing countries. The information and views set out in this publication are those of the authors. Nothing herein constitutes the views of FCDO. Any use of this work should acknowledge the authors and the Peace and Conflict Resolution Evidence Platform.

Thanks to Rick Smith of Smith Design Agency for proofreading and production work.

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Key Findings

Veterans of the Afghan peace process observed the following:

- ▶ The challenge of a revamped peace process is to create a credible path towards an inclusive settlement as a viable alternative to a Taliban military dictatorship or intensified armed conflict between the national resistance and the Taliban.
- ▶ The collapse of the Republic was brought about by the Taliban successfully exploiting the weakness of the government's leadership, disunity within the Republic's political elite and US mishandling of its exit.
- ▶ After sustaining heavy casualties in the campaign against the Taliban, the Afghan National Defence and Security Forces (ANDSF) largely stood aside and did not resist the final stages of the Taliban offensive. The Taliban takeover of Kabul should not be misread as indicative of elite or popular support.
- ▶ The Taliban Movement has imposed its rule by force, and has made no concessions to the popular will.
- ▶ The Taliban in government have pursued their version of tribal-ethnic politics. Three of Afghanistan's four major ethnic groups (Tajik, Hazara and Uzbek), which together account for a majority of the population, have been excluded from power. Power within the Taliban government is monopolised by Pashtuns. But a majority of Pashtuns also are excluded from power, because positions of responsibility are only given to clerics judged loyal to the movement.
- ▶ The Taliban are driving a new phase of conflict by opposing pluralism and pursuing a de facto policy of ethnic domination.
- ▶ Organised military resistance to the Taliban in the early months was limited to Ahmad Masood's National Resistance Front in Panjshir Valley and to Daesh.
- ▶ The generation of political leaders who negotiated the Bonn Accord and their extensive network of allied commanders, former officials and supporters should also be considered as a conflict stakeholder likely to resist Taliban efforts to consolidate. But resistance to the Islamic Emirate is throwing up a new generation of leaders which traditional leaders will have to accommodate.

- ▶ Afghan women have made a significant contribution to civic resistance to imposition of Taliban rule. Despite Taliban intolerance of dissent, intensified civic resistance is likely to be one of the factors which eventually pushes the Taliban to embrace a political settlement.
- ▶ Afghans keenly monitor the international stance vis-à-vis the Taliban. International refusal to recognise the Taliban boosts Afghan confidence in the possibility of return to an inclusive, representative system.
- ▶ Achieving pluralism in the form of a political system which protects fundamental rights and grants a stake for all ethnic groups in the state and allows Afghans to choose their representatives, is a pre-requisite for sustainable peace and stability. The fundamental rights to be protected must include universal political rights, no gender discrimination and the rights of all Muslim sects.
- ▶ The revamped peace process will have to be designed ensuring that progress is possible without granting the Taliban a veto over the process, as they can be expected to oppose any process which questions their monopoly on power.
- ▶ The key tasks in the early phases of the revamped peace process will involve giving voice to popular demands for self-determination and building a consensus around a redesigned inclusive system of national government, which can guarantee rights and pluralism and be acceptable to the populace.
- ▶ Negotiation among the conflict parties is anticipated in the latter phases of the revamped peace process and will focus on achieving agreement on transition to the new inclusive set-up and permanent end to the armed conflict.
- ▶ Advancing the peace process will require the formation of a new body, competent to convene stakeholders and conduct popular outreach. This should be institutionalised as a 'national commission on consensus and peace', loosely modelled on the 2002 Commission to Convene the Emergency Loya Jirga and based in an appropriate neutral location.

Introduction

The current report is intended as an initial contribution to the process of making sense of the Taliban takeover and its implications for peacemaking in Afghanistan. The research tapped into the expertise of a select group of Afghans to provide some insights for policymakers on priority actions to chart essential pathways towards peaceful and plural politics in Afghanistan. The overriding question is: in the light of the profound changes in Afghanistan since the Taliban takeover, what needs to be done to get the country back on course towards sustainable peace? Responses from the Afghans consulted in the study provide some of the answer of what a reworked peace process might look like. However, this limited consultation will have to be built upon if there is to be a comprehensive rethink of Afghan peace in the light of the changed context.

The Taliban capture of Kabul on 15 August 2021 and subsequent re-imposition of their Islamic Emirate as the national government did not just collapse Afghanistan's internationally recognised Islamic Republic but precipitated the collapse of the country's peace process. This had revolved around negotiations with Taliban representatives in Doha and efforts to agree an inclusive transitional administration to govern Afghanistan after the US withdrawal. The institutions which had serviced the Doha-focused peace process, including the republican negotiating team, the Ministry of Peace, and the High Council for National Reconciliation, were all wound up as the Taliban took over.

The Taliban moved rapidly to impose their authority in all administrative districts of the country and Afghans enjoyed a significant reduction in armed conflict relative to the insurgency period. However, there has been no serious Taliban attempt to accommodate any stakeholders outside their movement. Instead, the Taliban offered selected figures guarantees of security in return for submission to the authority of the Emirate. Most political figures chose to flee rather than accept guarantees which lacked any collateral, although some Shia politicians were advised by the Iranian authorities to stay and give the Taliban the benefit of the doubt.

The Taliban proceeded to build up their security forces and task their intelligence organs on the basis that they expect sustained military resistance to their imposition of one-party rule. The Afghan conflict remains unresolved. This is the uncomfortable political legacy of the US-led process, which generated an agreement between the US and Taliban, but not an Afghan settlement.

Those consulted in the study considered the conflict ongoing and regarded the reduction in armed violence in the aftermath of withdrawal of US forces as likely to be a temporary lull which the Taliban would be unable to sustain in the absence of a more inclusive settlement. The Taliban's brazen approach of denying the entire population political rights and upsetting Afghanistan's delicate ethnic power balance risks triggering another round of severe civil armed conflict. Furthermore, by imposing an administration which neither Afghans nor the international community can cooperate with, the Taliban have made it even more difficult to tackle Afghanistan's enduring economic, social and environmental challenges.

Methodology

The study draws on the expertise and perspectives of Afghans who were involved in the pre-15 August peace process to make sense of why the Republic collapsed and explore the challenges and opportunities around achieving sustainable peace in the new context. The analysis draws upon a consultation with senior Afghans who worked in or were associated with the Islamic Republic's peacemaking institutions. The consultation was led by former deputy of the High Council for National Reconciliation (HCNR), Mawlvi Atta ur Rahman Saleem.

Those who contributed their perspectives include members of the Republic's negotiating team, members of the HCNR and High Peace Council,¹ senior figures in government, members of parliament, journalists, academics, clerics and other reconciliation experts. The profile of the interviewees is included in the appendices. Interviewees included men and women and figures from all the major ethnic groups. Most had relocated to countries in the region since the Taliban takeover. Most insights in the report are drawn from interviews with the 26 selected peacemakers, while the report authors, Mawlvi Saleem and Professor Michael Semple, have contributed the overall analysis and recommendations.

The consultation represents a first attempt to update Afghan peacemaker perspectives after the failure of the US-led peace process. It confirms that former peacemakers believe that only a concerted peace process can bring about the transformation of the political system required to address root causes of conflict and achieve sustainable, inclusive peace and stability. Although some of those consulted had served as ministers or elected members of parliament, they generally considered their political identity to be 'peacemaker' rather than protagonist, as their most prominent national role pre-August 2021 was in decision-making, negotiating or commenting on peace.

The interviewees are generally referred to as 'peacemaker' in the report. The 26 figures consulted by Mawli Saleem included men and women, a range of ethnicities and even two senior former Taliban figures. However, in terms of ethnic and political linkages there was a preponderance of non-Pashtuns, and some of the ideas they presented, such as an emphasis on the need for decentralisation, tend to reflect political discourse in northern Afghanistan. One of the follow-up actions should be to triangulate the results with groups that can articulate the peace politics of the Pashtuns and of the south, as well as tapping into the perspectives of potential new-generation leaders and those parts of civil society and the women's movement which have retained a role after the US withdrawal.

Lessons from the collapse of the Republic for the future of peacemaking

The way in which the Republic collapsed rapidly has profound implications for any future peace process. In the first place, the collapse came about due to failures of the Republic's leadership and its external backers, rather than any increase in political support for the Taliban. The Taliban's successful insurgency campaign depended on mobilising and arming a section of the Sunni clergy to challenge the republican authorities. Although Taliban tacticians recognised the importance of not alienating people in areas where they operated, no part of the campaign depended on seeking or demonstrating the support of the civilian population. Thus, while the Taliban takeover was followed by a significant reduction in violence, the movement imposed a national administration which lacked popular consent and legitimacy.

In the second place, among the factors which caused the collapse of the Republic, peacemakers highlighted the deep political contradictions in republican governance including hyper-centralisation, the lack of effective controls on the abuse of power and a breakdown in the ethnic social contract. The role of the presidential office in weakening the democratic character of the Republic was a recurrent theme. They reckoned that by 2021 the Republic's government suffered from a legitimacy deficit because of the history of problematic elections. But power remain concentrated in the presidential palace, where a small team monopolised appointments and other decision-making, and failed to bring national political figures on board to mobilise for the defence of the Republic. A senior respondent referred to the presidential office before the collapse as a 'government within a government'.

In general, interviewees described a catastrophic failure of national decision-making and leadership of the war effort, which were enabled by flaws in the structure of government, and which made attainment of peace impossible. Peacemakers blamed corruption and incompetence in the presidential palace for disrupting support to the embattled ANDSF and undermining ANDSF willingness to stand and defend the Republic. Several of the peacemakers claimed that the effectiveness of the ANDSF in the final years was undermined by ethnic favouritism in processes such as appointments and compulsory retirement. There was general agreement that return to a more inclusive political system would have to be at the heart of any meaningful peace process. But in demanding ethnic inclusion and new checks on the abuse of power, peacemakers wanted to address both the flaws of the final stages of the Republic and the exclusiveness of the Islamic Emirate.

The critique indicates that a constitutional conversation among non-Taliban will be as important to any new peace process as negotiation with the Taliban. Although peacemakers critiqued both the Islamic Emirate and the final version of the Republic, this should not be misconstrued to suggest that the Taliban takeover simply maintains a continuity of unrepresentative rule. Despite the dangerous concentration of executive power in the Republic, the broader institutional infrastructure of the Republic and liberal freedoms ensured that all ethnic groups still had a stake and there was political space for opposition pushing for change.

All of this has been suppressed by the imposition of the Emirate. A constitutional conversation would address the big questions around what a reformed republic should look like, for example how to build consensus around an approach to decentralisation, distinct from the question of how to integrate the Taliban into Afghan pluralism. Peacemakers recognised that the challenges of pursuing pluralism and ethnic inclusion have been confronted in several other conflict-affected countries and were keen that any Afghan process should be informed by relevant comparators.

Most peacemakers mentioned as external factors in the Republic's collapse the mishandling of the US-led peace process and unconditional military withdrawal, factors which have been widely cited in public debate. In negotiating directly with the Taliban, the US undermined Afghan government authority and boosted Taliban confidence. Peacemakers who had been in Doha described how the Taliban representatives were emboldened by their dealings with the US. The terms of the withdrawal agreement allowed the Taliban to pose as victors over a superpower and the rightful inheritors of Afghanistan. This had a knock-on effect in undermining ANDSF morale and allowing the Taliban to co-opt collaborators in the republican ranks. But the US was not alone in helping the Taliban to project themselves as a government in waiting. Regional powers, Russia and China all hosted Taliban representatives, accorded them protocol and helped the Taliban shed their former image as a terrorist organisation shunned by respectable states. In addition to the effect of the peace process on morale, some peacemakers cited the practical impact of the withdrawal on ANDSF capabilities, especially the abrupt limiting of air support. Sustained Pakistani support for the Taliban was of course also mentioned.

These factors have been widely cited in the public discourse. However, two other key points were notable in the peacemakers' perspectives. They described the final capitulation as almost pre-ordained, in the sense that a succession of ANDSF units withdrew or surrendered their positions because they thought that this is what was expected of them, and they had received neither orders nor supplies to resist. Similarly, when former Northern Alliance leaders briefly tried to rally to the defence of northern cities, they did not receive the required supplies and concluded that the presidential team was not seriously committed to supporting them.

Numerous peacemakers interpreted these developments in ethnic terms. They claimed that security strategy had been informed by ethnic considerations and that there was deliberate under-investment in the defence of non-Pashtun areas. They claimed that, as the Taliban final advance proceeded, Pashtun officials or ANDSF commanders were open to approaches from their fellow ethnics in the Taliban, which led to the capitulation of areas which the local population and ANDSF ranks were otherwise ready to hold. Whatever its merits, the ethnic interpretation of the collapse of the Republic indicates the importance of an ethnically inclusive and equitable approach to further peacemaking.

While most peacemakers considered the Republic's downfall an unintended consequence of failed policymaking, a minority concluded that the process was more deliberate. They claimed that the US administration consciously sabotaged the defence of the Republic and brought the Taliban to power. Some claimed that the Afghan President deliberately colluded in the Taliban takeover, motivated by ethnic considerations (on the logic that it was better to handover to Pashtun Taliban than to empower Tajiks and Uzbeks to resist them). Such deterministic explanations are a feature of Afghan political discourse.

Whatever the validity of the explanations, any future reconciliation process must take account of the point that those who were on the republican side feel they were betrayed from within, and this will affect the dynamics of any process in which they are involved. Some of the interviewee perspectives can clearly be considered partisan. However, they speak for significant constituencies within Afghan politics and thus matter in the formulation of strategies and policies. The depth of feeling around the ethnic dimension to the collapse means that ethnic relations will have to be addressed explicitly rather than, as often in the past, left unmentioned.

Rethinking conflict stakeholders, including assessment of the veteran leaders

Specification of the conflict actors has become more difficult than in the pre-2021 phase of the conflict when this could be reduced to the leaders of the Republic and the Taliban. Several peacemakers considered that Ahmad Masood and his National Resistance Front should be acknowledged as a party to the conflict. They have been active militarily, present themselves as the most organised element of the forces which previously operated under the umbrella of the Republic and are the only Afghan party to have held formal negotiations with the Taliban since the collapse of the Republic.²

The generation of political leaders who headed the 2001 Bonn Process are known collectively, in Afghan political discourse, as 'leaders', having led the political-military parties which conducted the 1980s jihad against the Soviets and the 1990s civil war. The 'leaders' continue to exert considerable influence across Afghan society and are able to mobilise networks which draw on decades of affiliation to their parties or factions. There is a strong ethnic and geographic element to those affiliations, as each of the 'leaders' appeals firstly to his Pashtun, Tajik, Hazara or Uzbek fellow ethnics. None of the 'leaders' directly commands a formal military force. However, their extensive networks include the local power brokers and new generation of commanders who fought in the ANDSF, who are expected to take up arms against the Taliban if a sustainable end to the conflict cannot be found. Our knowledge of these networks enables us to imagine the fault-lines of a possible future civil war.

There were two strong positions on whether the 'leaders' are likely to play a meaningful role going forward and whether they thus still deserve to be considered a conflict party. Half of the peacemakers considered that the 'leaders' are bound to play a role. The reasoning was that Taliban intransigence can only be overcome by society-wide mobilisation and armed resistance. The 'leaders' are the main figures who have the political and social capital to conduct this mobilisation, in particular within their ethnic constituencies.

However, those who acknowledged an ongoing role for the 'leaders' attached certain caveats. Firstly, the 'leaders' suffered severe reputational damage from their association with the corruption of the Republic and its failure to resist the 2021 Taliban offensive. The closer they were perceived to be to former president Ashraf Ghani and power in the final stages of the Republic, the more tarnished their reputation.

Peacemakers expect a sort of inter-generational coalition to emerge – ie the 'leaders' should expect a role but not a monopoly, as an emerging new generation of commanders is lining up for the struggle against the Taliban. Highly motivated mid-level commanders from the ANDSF who have quietly regrouped in neighbouring countries are a key pool for the new generation resistance leadership. One peacemaker envisaged a sort of organic emergence of conflict leadership – 'anyone who manages to gather a body of fighters around him and to take and hold territory will become part of the new resistance leadership'.

A smaller bloc (5 of the 27 interviewees) envisaged no role for the 'leaders' in the conflict and any peace process, because they thought the damage to their reputations was irreparable and they have lost any remaining popular support. However, even these peacemakers foresaw resistance to the Taliban and expected the process to incubate new leaders.

The current phase of the conflict differs from most previous phases because there is relatively little open violence – but there is latent violence and obvious potential for return to widespread armed conflict. Peacemakers were therefore willing to consider unorthodox conflict parties. Several reckoned that the sustained women's protests, held in defiance of the Taliban clampdown, qualified women activists as a conflict party. In an interesting formulation, a former negotiator argued that the 'Afghan people' should be considered as a conflict party, because the Taliban had deprived them of their rights and were actively involved in suppressing them. The peacemakers pointed to both women civil society activists and their social media savviness, and women who have emerged at the head of spontaneous protests, including during funerals of Taliban victims. The peacemakers considered that women are asserting their credentials as a party through continued on-the-ground activity, rather than just in diaspora or elite circles.

It is notable that the peacemakers did not consider that other remnants of the Islamic Republic structures remain as credible players. They basically wrote off those politicians who emerged through Kabul-focused patronage and the electoral process. Most of the establishment which prevailed in Kabul until August has effectively vanished. As far as the peacemakers were concerned, only those who had a popular base outside the Republic's Kabul politics remain credible political-military actors.

Of course, Daesh also gets a mention as a relevant conflict actor. Some saw the irony that Daesh proved more robust than the western-backed circles.

Taliban performance in office and citizen aspirations

There was unanimity among the respondents that the Taliban have failed to deliver on the Afghan people's aspirations. The peacemakers highlighted three broad areas of Taliban failure as a national administration – security, the economy and governance. The two former Taliban in the group credited the Islamic Emirate with having restored security. Other peacemakers commented that a profound sense of insecurity now prevails, and violence is trending upwards, so the Taliban have failed even to deliver security. Even the former Taliban acknowledged that the movement had precipitated the collapse of the economy.

Some other peacemakers considered that the Taliban had been fundamentally delegitimised by needlessly imposing economic hardship on so much of the populace. The largest number of peacemakers observed that Taliban governance was fundamentally at variance with people's aspirations, as Taliban represent only their movement, are accountable to no one, have imposed alien values, upset the ethnic power-balance, and excluded women. In essence, the Taliban have 'taken the Afghan people hostage'.

Several interviewees reflected on recent experience, observing that Taliban rule has been more arbitrary than monolithic, so that even in Taliban terms there has been no rule of law – 'every Talib is a law unto himself'. Furthermore, they have shown no interest in or aptitude for developing a recognisably Shariat-based approach to government, which has robbed them of any Islamic legitimacy. Peacemakers concluded that attempts by the Taliban to maintain this system by force, or by external powers to accommodate the imposed system, will simply result in a continuation of the conflict.

Observations on civic action

Peacemakers took heart from the beginnings of civic action. Most took pride in the persistent women's demonstrations. They cited demonstrations in Panjshir in December 2021 and Maimana in January 2022 as examples of expression of popular aspirations for change. They also noted the work of human rights defenders in documenting abuses and social media activism as further examples of civic action. Peacemakers expected this civic action to intensify but noted the growing Taliban determination to suppress it, using violence as necessary. Civic action and the Taliban response are already raising strategy questions, acknowledged even at the level of the United Nations Security Council. International actors have struggled to reconcile their engagement with the Taliban on humanitarian assistance issues with their impulse to push back at Taliban suppression of civic action and to engage with budding civic resistance.

Taliban and pluralism

The emerging consensus among peacemakers was that the Taliban are resolute in their opposition to pluralism and are wedded to the idea of maintaining their political monopoly. Members of the movement treat their control of the Afghan state as due reward for two decades of opposition to the United States. They invoke the idea of jihad as their claim to legitimacy in dominating the state. The Taliban reject the idea of elections because 'they disturb social harmony'.

Only one of the peacemakers credited some in the movement with supporting the idea of associating other Afghan groups with power. Several peacemakers interpreted Taliban resistance to pluralism in ethnic terms, according to which Taliban imposition of their movement as a governing party was a mechanism to ensure that the Pashtun ethnic group could dominate the state. However, the ethnic perspective is only one aspect of the critique of Taliban suppression of pluralism. Peacemakers also acknowledged that the Taliban power monopoly also marginalised whole swathes of Pashtun society, including women and those identified as modernisers. In that sense, there seems to be potential for multi-ethnic support for the restoration of pluralism.

Leverage and incentives for Taliban to join a peace process

Peacemakers concluded that, at present, the Taliban are wedded to the idea of consolidating their hold over the state without any need to accommodate other political forces or address the ethnic imbalance in power. In the absence of meaningful leverage over the Taliban, the movement is unlikely to engage in serious negotiations. As long as the Taliban do not feel under pressure, any engagement or limited accommodation they undertake are likely to be aimed at legitimising their rule rather than transitioning to a set-up in line with national aspirations.

Peacemakers identified three sources of potential leverage over the Taliban that may open them to eventual accommodation: diplomatic leverage, civic action and military pressure. They considered the withholding of diplomatic recognition as a key element of leverage and the idea of tightening targeted sanctions was also raised. Rightly or wrongly, most peacemakers expected concerted diplomatic action, from western powers and the region, to oblige the Taliban to embrace a political settlement.

Alongside diplomatic action, peacemakers counted on peaceful civic action to generate pressure on the Taliban to bow to national aspirations and move towards political compromise. The logic was simply 'when thousands come out into the streets, the Taliban cannot resist'. But they also noted the Taliban's willingness to use force against peaceful protestors, meaning that any campaign of mass civic action will be fraught with danger.

Peacemakers considered armed resistance the least attractive source of leverage over the Taliban. However, they saw an expansion of armed resistance and further intensification of armed conflict to be almost inevitable because of the Taliban's track record of imperviousness to diplomatic pressure and indifference to the population's suffering. The likelihood of return to generalised violence argues for urgent investment in a revamped peace process. Thus, the majority view was that resumption of a national-level peace process in pursuit of a political settlement was necessary to provide an eventual route out of the conflict. But a period of armed conflict and restoration of stalemate might prove unavoidable in the meantime. Part of the urgency of mapping out a new peace roadmap relates to the need to provide an alternative vision of the way forward, other than armed Taliban hegemony versus armed resistance.

Implications of international engagement with the Taliban

There was a consensus among peacemakers that how western powers and the region engage with the Taliban is critically important for the evolution of Taliban policies and the future trajectory of the conflict. But there was a range of opinions over what effect international engagement has had to date and whether it is likely to help the Taliban to consolidate or push them towards compromise.

A significant bloc (7 of the 27) of the peacemakers were deeply pessimistic about the prospects for engagement because they considered that countries engaging with the Taliban are accommodating them and boosting the Taliban's confidence in a manner dangerously akin to what happened during the talks led by former US Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation, Zalmay Khalilzad. The engagement sceptics considered meetings between international delegations in Doha, Kabul or elsewhere to amount to 'a slippery slope towards recognition' and a 'betrayal of the Afghan people'. They worried that western powers would narrowly define their interests (counterterrorism and prevention of migration) and reach a pragmatic deal leaving the Taliban in power, with the population disenfranchised and immiserated.

Others were more optimistic regarding the prospects for international engagement, largely because both regional powers and the west have withheld formal recognition. The optimists reckoned that non-recognition has sent a strong signal to the Taliban that they will remain an international pariah as long as they try to suppress political and social rights. They were happy to see international engagement with the Taliban as long as this is framed as pushing the Taliban towards political compromise. They distinguished two positive consequences from the non-recognition of the Taliban authorities. In the first place, non-recognition has encouraged the Taliban to exercise some self-restraint in their dealing with the population. It has forced Taliban to realise that they pay a significant economic price for trying to maintain their monopoly of power by force. Secondly, non-recognition of the Taliban's Islamic Emirate has encouraged Afghans in their aspirations to restoration of fundamental rights and inclusive government. Non-recognition has reassured Afghans that the current set-up is temporary, which provides a basis for pursuing an alternative. Interestingly, the peacemakers barely referred to the reasons that western governments have typically given for their Taliban engagement – support for the humanitarian intervention, security and evacuations.

Strategic options in reconciliation

Again, a substantial bloc (8 of 27) of the peacemakers favoured an integrated approach in any revamped peace process, ie one which would combine international engagement with the Taliban aimed at modifying their behaviour, a return to formal intra-Afghan negotiations and a stepping up of civic action or popular mobilisation to disabuse Taliban of the idea that they can just hang onto power by entrenching their Emirate. Other ideas for an integrated approach included a warning that the venue and mechanics of any negotiation must be reworked to avoid the bias in favour Taliban that characterised talks in Doha. There was some expectation that the UN might play a role in convening negotiations.

The key to success in the integrated approach as envisaged by the peacemakers was in using engagement to focus on the demand that the Taliban respect social and political rights, comply with international norms and obligations, and proceed to negotiations on the political system. Conversely, those involved in the engagement and negotiation have to challenge directly the Taliban's current idea that they can simply treat the state as the spoils of war. The process has to be structured to reinforce the idea that the current undiluted Taliban administration is temporary.

The peacemakers warned that if Taliban manage to use international engagement or intra-Afghan talks to legitimise their current Emirate, this will in effect help to prolong the conflict. Likewise, peacemakers felt that in the absence of leverage Taliban are unlikely to negotiate seriously on fundamental issues such as the nature of the state. They saw possible expanded civic resistance, along with international isolation and spreading Afghan armed resistance, as the only plausible sources of leverage over the Taliban.

Only one respondent, one of the former Taliban ambassadors, was optimistic that engagement with the Emirate authorities might by itself deliver incremental moderation in the policies and approach of the Emirate, without the need for the engagement to be backed up by mobilisation and external pressure.

There were also critics of engagement and negotiation who considered the tools fundamentally impotent in the face of the Taliban's inflexibility. The critics reckoned that as long as the Taliban style themselves as an Emirate they are bound to use any process to resist compromise and assert their power monopoly. The minority position thus favoured deepening the international isolation of the Taliban, while democratic Afghan forces directly challenge Taliban control of the territory.

Mapping Afghan men and women stakeholders in the new peace process (Afghan mediators)

Peacemakers noted that the previous years of engagement between the Republic and the Taliban have allowed the development of a large cadre of men and women with experience in peacemaking and mediation. Interviewees volunteered a range of options on both the criteria that should be used to inform the selection of Afghans to take forward the next round of mediation, and on individual candidates. Some favoured drafting in traditional powerbrokers such as the old 'Northern Alliance' leaders to negotiate directly with Taliban, on the basis that they have the political capital within Afghanistan's major ethnic groups to mobilise in support of any deal which might be reached. Several peacemakers pointed out that only those powerbrokers who emerged from the collapse of the Republic with some of their reputation and support base intact should participate.

The other options focused on identifying potential mediators who could work on consensus-building, developing a new peace roadmap and shaping the conditions for movement towards a settlement, on the basis that such mediators would be separate from the negotiators or the conflict parties. Ideas for criteria for selecting such mediators included: they should have good public standing; they should be representative of Afghanistan's ethnic diversity; they should include academics, civil society and women; and they should include only those politicians who have cultivated a reputation as bridge-builders, including some who enjoy the confidence of the Taliban, and they should have retained influence or a reputation in Afghanistan since the collapse of the Republic, and should not have acquired a reputation as having irresponsibly abandoned the country.

On the question of availability of women mediators, peacemakers confirmed that there is a reasonably large pool available, including former legislators, civil society figures and women religious clerics, as part of the legacy of efforts in recent years to encourage women's participation in peacemaking.

Refreshing the vision of sustainable and inclusive peace

Peacemakers saw no prospect of achieving sustainable peace and stability under Taliban rule and within the framework of the Islamic Emirate. The peacemakers were adamant on this point, although it is not fully reflected in international discourse. Just how widely held is this pessimism around the Islamic Emirate is worthy of further investigation.

In the meantime, the significant elite group consulted in this study reckoned that they spoke for most Afghans in asserting that the continued Taliban power monopoly was incompatible with attainment of peace and security in Afghanistan. This is a fundamental point. Several distinct aspects of the experience of absolute Taliban power led peacemakers to conclude that sustainable peace and stability required a further political transition. They observed that the current relative lull in armed conflict provides an opportunity for a managed and peaceful transition. They warned that once armed conflict escalates again, delivering any meaningful political process will become more challenging.

Conflict drivers inherent in current Taliban rule include the following:

- ▶ The unaccountable abusive and oppressive actions perpetrated by the Taliban in their efforts to suppress any dissent and enforce their exclusive vision for Afghan society are incompatible with any notion of peace. These abuses are systematic rather than exceptional and, despite claims to the contrary, abusers are protected within the command structure.
- ▶ The Taliban deny rights to sections of the population, in particular women and religious or sectarian minorities, in a way which seeks to roll back hard-won gains and reverse trends in Afghan society, something which is also incompatible with any notion of sustainable peace.
- ▶ The Taliban approach to ethnic relations activates a key driver of conflict. They have concentrated power and privilege in the hands of one ethnic group, Pashtuns – an approach which creates alienation and is bound to lead to conflict. Sustainable peace and stability in a diverse society such as Afghanistan are only possible when there is a sense of social justice, and all ethnic groups feel included. The peacemakers linked ideas of social justice to both ethnic balance, and gender rights and women's inclusion, perhaps driven by the need to distinguish Taliban and non-Taliban positions.

- By giving a monopoly of decision-making and positions in the state to members of a highly exclusive armed movement and its favoured religious scholars, the Taliban have deprived the vast majority of Afghans of all ethnic groups of a say in how they are governed. This is fundamentally opposed to the Afghan aspirations to independence, self-determination and the right to choose who represents them and how they order their lives, all of which are prerequisites for sustainable peace and stability.
- The Taliban have proven unwilling or unable to provide the environment in which the educated, professional cadre of Afghanistan feels safe to work. The Taliban Movement has thus proven itself incapable of the complex task of governing diverse, modern Afghanistan, with a young population of 40 million people. Sustainable peace and stability are unattainable while Taliban attitudes and the violence which they preside over drive hundreds of thousands of Afghans, including qualified cadres, to seek sanctuary outside the country. That violence is directed against former officials and security personnel, civil society, businesspeople and ordinary civilians, and includes detentions, killings and extortion.
- The Taliban have proven themselves chronically incapable of behaving responsibly in the conduct of regional and international relations. Despite their attempts at diplomacy, the Taliban are engaged in acts of provocation against all neighbours, which are likely to drive further instability.

Peacemakers concluded that the restoration of inclusive and representative government acceptable to the population was the key challenge in achieving sustainable peace and stability. Peace and stability are only attainable through a political transition to move beyond the Islamic Emirate, not through some form of accommodation allowing some categories to be included within the Emirate. They acknowledged that the Taliban aversion to compromise or inclusion and the limited reach of military resistance meant that there was no imminent prospect of such a transition. However, the widespread sense that the Taliban's own statebuilding project was already failing left them cautiously optimistic for the prospect of an eventual transition away from the Emirate.

There was an equally strong consensus that a revamped peace process should work towards an inclusive political system and broad-based government, acceptable to the population, which addressed the shortcomings of the Republic. This is one of the areas in which it was most important to apply lessons from the collapse of the Republic.

There was a consensus that return to inclusive government, acceptable to the population, is a sine qua non for peace and stability. This fairly broad group of Afghans at least are adamant that there is no point in trying to cut a peace deal within the political framework of the Taliban's Islamic Emirate. Meaningful inclusion is only possible after the abolition of the Emirate. In this sense, attainment of peace and stability depends on the failure of the Taliban's political experiment.

Peacemakers' ideas on some of the desirable features of a reworked inclusive political system included the following:

- ▶ Explicit arrangements to ensure Afghans of all ethnic groups have a stake in the state and opportunity to hold the highest offices of state.
- ▶ Executive power should be distributed and accountable, not concentrated in a single person or office.
- ▶ Meaningful decision-making responsibility should be given to elected representatives in the provinces or regions.
- ▶ There should be effective checks on financial corruption in all levels of government.
- ▶ Afghans should be allowed to choose and remove those who govern them.
- ▶ There should be no barriers to the full participation of women in political life.

These aspirations provide a possible basis for a set of principles on future government on which a peace process could build consensus. However, Afghan political debate on ethnicity has often been highly divisive. The peacemakers hoped to draw on experience and constitutional models of other countries with a diverse population. Proposals for decentralisation also need to be approached with due sensitivity because of the history of linkage between government structure and ethnic power. Calls for decentralisation can be misconstrued as attempts to weaken Pashtun power in the state. The draft principles for inclusive governance highlight the urgent need for a constitutional conversation, within the peace process, on how they could be realised in a transitional and permanent set-up.

Recommended lines of action

These recommendations are drafted by the report authors, drawing on the peacemakers' insights and suggestions. They are organised at international, national and local levels, as follows:

International level – diplomatic action in support of the revamped peace process.

The United Nations and countries which remain interested in Afghanistan should support a revamped peace process, at the heart of which is progress towards a broad-based transitional government acceptable to the population and a timetable for restoration of an inclusive political system.

Countries should withhold recognition of national authorities in Afghanistan until the agreed broad-based transitional government is in place. All international engagement with the Taliban and their Islamic Emirate should be framed as part of a revamped peace process. Engagement should be designed to incentivise the Taliban to cooperate with the peace process and avoid inadvertently helping the Taliban to consolidate in defiance of the peace process. Countries pursuing priorities around humanitarian assistance and security should reconcile these with their work on the peace process, for example by ensuring that Taliban do not capture or instrumentalise the assistance and use it to resist pressure towards a settlement.

National level – action by Afghans to prepare a new peace roadmap and take practical steps towards restoration of an inclusive government acceptable to the population and achievement of sustainable peace and stability.

Afghan mediators should complete the consultation initiated in this study by engaging with fellow mediators, political representatives and citizens competent to represent the diversity of Afghan society. The consultation should refine and flesh out the principles of inclusive government and reconciliation, and an updated peace roadmap, incorporating perspectives from across Afghan society. Such an exercise would distinguish issues on which there is already significant consensus and those on which there is not, so that these can be factored into the peace roadmap. As Afghan political elites remain relatively well networked and have largely adapted to the challenges of being dispersed in-country, in the region and beyond, organising such a consultation poses no insurmountable challenges.

A National Commission for Consensus and Peace should be established in a secure and neutral location, to advance the peace roadmap, prepare for restoration of an inclusive political system and give voice to citizens' concerns in the interim. It should be supported by the United Nations and countries which remain engaged on Afghanistan. The Commission should include veterans of the Taliban who have some standing in the movement and an ability to connect with other Taliban. Likewise, the composition of the Commission should ensure that it is able to elicit the cooperation of the traditional leaders and the opposition to the Taliban. The Commission's role should include activities on the ground in Afghanistan and should not be confined to its base outside the country.

The National Commission's role should include:

- ▶ Conducting a national dialogue on future government arrangements, reconciliation, inclusion and rights. The dialogue should be facilitated, include participants from across Afghan society, draw on best available evidence and seek realistic compromises to accommodate a broad range of Afghan perspectives.
- ▶ Representation – including developing a network of credible representatives, competent to represent the interests of all parts of Afghan society.
- ▶ Witnessing the suffering of the Afghan people in the current phase of conflict. Expose ongoing rights abuses, oppressive behaviour and obstruction of the peace process.
- ▶ Engaging with the conflict parties, including the Taliban, national resistance, and all active armed groups, to seek undertakings on avoidance of civilian harm, commitment to cooperation with peace process and tolerating civic action.
- ▶ Mobilising resources, including receiving pledges of support and cooperation from across society and internationally.
- ▶ Engaging with clerics and scholars to obtain their perspectives on reconciliation and the political system and enlist their support for advancing the peace process.

- ▶ Economic action – developing plans for rapid recovery, sound public finance and transition to a sustainable national economy. Receiving pledges for support in implementation.
- ▶ Communicating the commission's work and vision and of progress of civic action.

Local level – civic action by Afghans on the ground in Afghanistan to pursue reconciliation and build the local foundations of a peaceful democratic society.

Through civic action for peace, Afghans assert their autonomy in improving the lives of their communities outside the control of armed groups or unrepresentative authorities. Civic action initiatives may include local disputes resolution and justice, coordination of social assistance and humanitarian aid, local security and crime prevention, monitoring of government, cooperative natural resource management and representation to authorities.

Part of the brief of any National Commission should be to connect with such initiatives so that they can be included in national dialogue and help shape the emerging inclusive political system.

There is scope for some international support and encouragement of civic and local initiatives. However, important considerations will be the risk that Taliban treat activists' international links as evidence of hostility to the Emirate and the risk of perverse incentives – any resources would have to be used in a way which does not suppress the organic quality of civic action, or insulate activists from their core constituency.

Annex 1 – Profile of peacemakers who participated in the consultation

Previous most relevant role	
Member of High Peace Council or High Council for National Reconciliation	7
Member of a negotiating team	3
Minister Deputy Minister or Wali	6
Other government official	5
Member of Parliament/Senate	1
Member Constitutional Monitoring Commission	1
United Nations official	1
Journalist or author	3
Total	27

Gender	
Male	24
Female	3
Previous Taliban affiliation	
Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan Ambassadors	2

References

¹ The HCNR took over from the High Peace Council as the national body leading reconciliation efforts. There was significant continuity of mandate and membership. However, the 2020 political deal between President Ashraf Ghani and his political opponent Abdullah Abdullah largely influenced allocation of leadership positions in the HCNR. Some peacemakers prefer to be remembered for their role in the High Peace Council, especially if they held a more junior position in the HCNR.

² The NRF leader Ahmad Masood has held face-to-face dialogue with the Taliban Foreign Minister Amir Khan Motaqi, hosted by Iran and with the Taliban deputy Prime Minister Abdul Ghani Baradar, hosted by Russia, as well as through representatives in Afghanistan.

About Us

Conciliation Resources is an international organisation committed to stopping violent conflict and creating more peaceful societies. They work with people impacted by war and violence, bringing diverse voices together to make change that lasts. Working across society, they connect community perspectives with political dialogue. Learning from peace processes around the world, they share experience and expertise to find creative solutions to violent conflict.

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PeaceRep is a research consortium based at Edinburgh Law School. Our research is rethinking peace and transition processes in the light of changing conflict dynamics, changing demands of inclusion, and changes in patterns of global intervention in conflict and peace/mediation/transition management processes.

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PeaceRep is funded by the Foreign, Commonwealth
and Development Office (FCDO), UK



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