



AFGHANISTAN



Unblocking progress towards sustainable Afghan peace

Results of a consultation with Afghan peacemakers, April 2023



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This research was produced by Mawli 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.

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Key Findings and Recommendations: Elements of a new peace process

Afghanistan needs a new peace process to achieve an inclusive and stable future. The current situation of the Taliban Islamic Emirate is exclusionary and inherently unstable, and there is no meaningful channel to negotiate change with the Taliban leadership. Ideas for how Afghans can start to build support for a peace process are presented below.

Peace process in three phases:

- ▶ Formation – designing future inclusive, democratic institutions
- ▶ Transition – negotiating with the Taliban over cooperation with the peace process
- ▶ Implementation – reconciliation; economic recovery; consolidation of new institutions

Peace narrative – normalising the idea that peace requires an inclusive political system to take over from the Islamic Emirate.

National peace architecture – Establish an independent National Commission comprising influential and impartial figures to manage the peace process.

National Dialogue – The National Commission would convene a National Dialogue to include representation of all provinces, ethnic groups, classes, women and young people.

Peace process goals and principles – drafted consultatively by the National Commission, eg: accountable elected government; inclusion of women and men, and all ethnic groups.

Preparing a post-Emirate political system – Afghans can begin designing institutions, norms and codes, and getting broad buy-in for these.

National resistance – The renewed peace process should seek a modus vivendi with the Afghan resistance fronts.

Taliban engagement – Formal international dialogue can stress that restoring normal relations requires an accountable, inclusive government. Informal dialogue channels allow flexibility for some Taliban leaders to cooperate with the peace process.

Pressure on the Taliban to cooperate with the peace process can come from Afghan political organisation and civic action. International support can link lifting sanctions with cooperation with the peace process.

Afghan civic resistance – Afghan community leaders who defend communities' interests through local politics need to be included in the peace process and architecture.

Aid diplomacy – An independent aid inspector could promote good aid practice, help ensure aid reaches vulnerable populations, and expose Taliban manipulation of aid.

Regional involvement – Regional states should be encouraged to withhold normalisation of relations with Afghanistan until transition takes place, to engage with peaceful resistance and to cooperate in the roll out of the peace roadmap.

Introduction and Methodology

The current paper is intended as a contribution to thinking about what should be done next in support of Afghan peace, in the light of up-to-date analysis of the Afghan conflict and assessment of peace efforts to date. The analysis presented here is drawn by the authors from two consultations with Afghan peacemakers and Afghan opinion formers, completed in March 2023. Some fifty Afghans, mainly located in Afghanistan and countries of the region, participated in the consultations, conducted virtually.

Participants included former members of Afghanistan peace and reconciliation councils, negotiation team members, knowledgeable former government officials, and civil society activists and intellectuals with experience in previous phases of the peace process. The in-depth interviews solicited panel member views on a range of options for pursuit of peace in Afghanistan, based upon the idea of enshrining democratic pluralism in any future political system. The interviews were divided into sections, allowing for the pooling of all responses on key themes. In addition to the main panel members, other key informants contributed selectively to some themes.

Discussions were wide-ranging, covering analysis of the current state of governance and conflict in Afghanistan, the conflict actors, the conflict's trajectory, and possible lines of action for a revived peace process. The final analysis represents the two authors' synthesis of and conclusions from the consultations. Most observations capture what some or all of the participants expressed. Where the perspective is specifically that of the authors, we have pointed this out.

The consultation was in essence a conversation about peace processes, reflecting on the abortive peace process which ended with the Taliban capture of Kabul in August 2021 and imagining a new peace process informed by the experiences of the Republican period and the reality of the restored Islamic Emirate. The many respondents who were intimately involved in the pre-August 2021 peace process conveyed eloquently their sense of rupture. The way that all sides handled the US military withdrawal undermined the Doha-focused peace process before it could deliver a comprehensive settlement.

The conversation thus addressed the preparations, the rethinking and retooling which would be required to transition from one peace process to a new and different one. To some observers, seeing the Taliban ensconced in power, the approach might seem overly visionary. But the conversation addressed the question of what can be done now in realistic terms. The intellectual tradition of such an approach is 'cathedral thinking', which has been invoked by Greta Thunberg among others. It rationalises both embracing grand vision and embarking on the practical first steps while uncertainty prevails over how long it will all take or how some of the challenges will be addressed.

Observations

Assessment of the Islamic Emirate

The Taliban have successfully consolidated their hold on the Afghan state and the country's territory. However, the Islamic Emirate has become progressively more narrowly based, as the Taliban have used successive rounds of purges to remove remaining Republican-era civilian or military personnel from state positions. Meanwhile, Taliban governance has become more erratic as its leader Haibatullah Akhundzada has tried to concentrate power in Kandahar and has in the process undermined the authority of the ministries in Kabul and disrupted key institutional processes such as the annual budget approval.

Politically literate Afghans have increasingly concluded that the Taliban's chaotic approach to governance means that their Islamic Emirate is unlikely to survive for long. We regard it significant that influential Afghans now do not consider the Emirate an inevitability. But it is also important to remember that before 9/11, Afghanistan was stuck in a protracted war, with the first Emirate holding onto most of the territory. We conclude that whether this second Emirate endures depends on multiple actors. Its survival chances are increased by Afghans waiting for the foreigners to take initiative, by the neighbours betting on the Taliban, and by the lack of a credible Afghan leadership.

Afghans living under the Taliban's second Emirate have articulated numerous grievances about the movement's problematic approach to governance. Ethnic chauvinism is rife in the administration. There is widespread corruption, particularly in allocation of contracts and tax assessments, despite claims to the contrary. The leader takes a theatrically ideological stance by arbitrarily imposing rules on women's education, work and mobility and on men's dress, beards and hairstyle, and sporadically encouraging corporal punishment. Most Afghans, including many Taliban, consider the Taliban's rules to be alien customs contrary to the true spirit of Islam. The movement precipitated an economic crisis by deterring trade, aid and investment but has tried to pass on the cost to the private sector through onerous tax demands. (Although not acknowledged in Afghan popular discourse, there are some positives in the Taliban's economic management. They have successfully funded a national budget from domestic revenue without relying on unsustainable foreign assistance. They have adopted a somewhat business-friendly stance.)

Arbitrary detentions, summary executions and enforced disappearances are widespread and go unpunished. They are mainly conducted by the Taliban's security service, which targets former members of the Republic's security forces, those suspected of criticising or opposing the regime and civil society figures. In the process the Taliban have exploited the biometric database of Afghan National Defense and Security Forces personnel to identify and harass them as potential opposition. Taliban security forces practise extortion through arbitrary demands that citizens hand over weapons or cash.

There is no freedom of speech, and the media is censored. The regime is hostile to Afghanistan's modern education sector and is interfering in the curriculum and attempting to use schools and colleges for indoctrination. Predictably, 'vice and virtue squads' have been revived and have become increasingly intrusive in harassing citizens over compulsory attendance at congregational prayers and compliance with an arbitrary moral code. The Emirate is engaged in systematic expropriation of property, including confiscation of assets of designated members of the opposition and revival of controversial claims over state land.

Insecurity has continued in the form of armed crime and the Islamic State–Khorasan Province terror campaign. Taliban allow foreign militants from Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and other jihadi groups to move around, heavily armed and with armoured vehicles, while pretending they are not present. Non-Taliban complain that they are treated with contempt and that Taliban consider themselves superior to law-abiding citizens because they claim to have waged jihad. The Taliban practise a sort of chaotic authoritarianism in which a movement of armed men and clerics uses the state's repressive apparatus to maintain an exclusive hold on power and privilege.

As widely observed, there are deep internal divisions in the movement, with rival factions among Kandaharis, easterners, northerners and the group around the supreme leader. These differences contribute to the dysfunctionality of the Emirate. But they do not indicate that splits or policy changes are imminent as the Taliban leadership is well practised in closing ranks to maintain unity under the doctrine of obedience to the Amir.

Pragmatic Taliban and the fate of engagement strategy

During the multiple rounds of intra-Afghan dialogue before the Taliban takeover and indeed in the early days of the restored Emirate, members of the Taliban Political Commission gave reassurances that the Taliban in power would respect international norms and commitments, show moderation and reconciliation in domestic politics and refrain from forcing Afghans to live by Taliban rules.

In the event, the Political Commission failed to deliver on any of its reassurances. In retrospect, these can only be understood as deliberate deception, aimed at international players and fellow Afghans alike. They were part of the movement's strategy to encourage the US withdrawal and deter resistance to the takeover. After the takeover, instead of dialogue and reconciliation, the Taliban have demanded that all other political groups submit to them and swear allegiance to their Amir. In some of their public communications, Taliban spokesmen have repeated their diplomatic lines from the Doha talks, claiming to have endorsed peace and a commitment to peaceful resolution of differences. But the reality of the Emirate actions, described above, exposes the hollowness of Taliban claims of being open to compromise. In power, the Taliban have remained committed to suppressing criticism and opposition and imposing their authority by force.

Ongoing intra-Afghan contacts confirm that some within the Taliban leadership are genuinely concerned about the direction taken by the Islamic leadership. Former members of the Political Commission and cabinet-level figures such as Mullah Baradar, Mawlawi Yaqoob and Khalifa Seraj have all, in their own way, been critical of the Amir's exercise of untrammelled power, the harsh policies towards women and the Emirate's failure to win international acceptance. However, these internal differences of opinion have had no practical impact on the Taliban's conduct. Taliban pragmatists have consistently prioritised maintaining their positions and privilege within the Emirate over acting in line with their conscience.

This observation has important implications for strategies of peace-making. For over a year, many diplomats and some Afghans believed that positive engagement with the Taliban would deliver the political space for peaceful progress towards a broad-based set-up. This strategy has now run its course as those Taliban leaders who seemed open to the idea of a comprehensive settlement have been overruled by those in the leadership who are determined to maintain a power monopoly come what may. At some stage in the future those Taliban pragmatists may have a role to play in negotiating the transition to an inclusive political system. But this is only plausible after the balance of power has again shifted decisively away from the Emirate, a change in which the Taliban pragmatists will play no role.

Resistance fronts and popular responses to Taliban rule

Popular sentiment among Afghans remaining in the country and in exile, cutting across all ethnic groups and regions of the country, has turned against the Taliban, driven by the range of grievances cited above. Although the 2021 takeover did not in any sense depend upon popular consent, many Afghans harboured expectations that the Taliban victory would at least end violence, restore security and enable them to get on with their normal lives.

Quiescence in the face of the Taliban takeover was also driven by the rank failures of the Republic – corruption, in-fighting and a sense of detachment of the leadership from the populace. While popular sentiment has moved decisively against the Islamic Emirate, there is evidence that the population strongly favours avoiding a return to large-scale armed conflict and still hopes for a peaceful transition to whatever follows the Emirate. Furthermore, immiseration of the population – the fact that a majority of Afghans are preoccupied with the struggle for survival – combined with the Taliban's extensive and effective repressive apparatus, act as powerful deterrents to any anti-regime movement or uprising.

There are exceptions to the general pattern of quiescence in the face of Taliban rule. Traditional Afghan civil society, in the form of community or tribal elders, often working alongside groups of ulema, act as the main interface between communities and the Emirate authorities. The elders try to represent their communities' interests and try to curtail some of the Taliban intrusions in their areas, for example by standing guarantee to secure the release of detained locals. In places considered as rebellious, the Emirate authorities have mounted military operations, in the face of which the elders have been powerless. But elsewhere elders are often successful in obliging Emirate officials to listen to them and, to some extent, take account of local concerns.

In the second year of Taliban rule there are also some signs of isolated clashes between exasperated groups of civilians and Taliban forces. The token opium eradication operations have been a particular flashpoint, as communities protest at the lack of alternative livelihoods schemes or compensation. Taliban attempts to assert control over state land or their backing for Pashtun settlers in land disputes in northern Afghanistan have also caused localised tensions and conflict.

None of this so far amounts to an uprising and Taliban security forces typically move quickly to reassert control of conflict-affected areas. However, the Taliban's failure to win community support and the existence of large numbers of alienated and unemployed former security personnel, both in their home areas and in Iran, constitutes a potential threat to continued Emirate control of the rural areas. During 2022, conflict between the Emirate and the Resistance mainly took place in Panjshir, Baghlan (especially Khost and Andarab), Takhar (especially Warsaj) and Badakhshan provinces. The Taliban also undertook a major operation against Hazaras led by Mawlvi Mehdi in Balkhab, Saripol Province.

The organised opposition to the Islamic Emirate includes the Tajikistan-based National Resistance Front (NRF), the Turkey-based Supreme Council of National Resistance (SCNR) and the low-profile Freedom Front. Afghan peacemakers have a nuanced assessment of the role of these entities. During 2022, the NRF, under Ahmad Masood, was the most militarily active of the resistance, running a guerrilla campaign centred on the Panjshir valley and Baghlan's Andarab valley, with forays into neighbouring provinces.

The Taliban responded with full force, staging what amounted to a military occupation of the inhabited parts of Panjshir and operations against the resistance fighters in the mountains. By the end of the year, the Taliban had imposed heavy casualties on resistance forces in Panjshir and Andarab and successfully suppressed an NRF attempt to take territory in Badakhshan. The reverses significantly impacted morale and led many opponents of the Emirate to question the ability of the NRF to stage a viable military campaign.

The SCNR is headed by a collective leadership which includes the most prominent of the surviving powerbrokers associated with the Tajik, Uzbek and Hazara ethnicities of northern and central Afghanistan. There is overlap with the NRF. The SCNR spent 2022 agreeing an organisational structure, building its ties to other groups, adopting a political programme and doing communication work. But above all the council was biding its time: waiting to see if the international community would facilitate negotiations with the Taliban; waiting for at least one of Afghanistan's neighbouring countries to offer a more permissive environment for the resistance; and struggling with personality clashes among the main Tajik leaders. Many exiled members of the SCNR and their supporters on the ground have concluded that launching a military campaign is their only route to achieving an inclusive political system and have become frustrated with the traditional leaders' delay. Although the peacemakers acknowledge the role of effective political and armed resistance in taking the conflict to a point where negotiations and a political transition are possible, doubts remain over whether the resistance fronts as currently constituted can deliver on this.

Humanitarian assistance and Afghan perspectives on international action

After the US withdrawal, the main international actors committed to sustaining humanitarian assistance in anticipation that the economic collapse driven by the Taliban takeover would render much of the population vulnerable. In the absence of a political process, humanitarian assistance has become the main internationally supported programme in Afghanistan. This assistance has helped to mitigate effects of the economic collapse and has become globally one of the largest operations for lead agencies such as the World Food Programme (WFP) and United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF).

But there is constant tension between the aid agencies and their partners on the one hand and the multiple levels of Emirate authorities on the other over control of distribution. Some portion of assistance is misappropriated. Taliban discriminate against groups they deem disloyal and therefore undeserving of aid. The Taliban use the distribution of humanitarian aid under their control and administration to strengthen the loyalty of their fighters and gain popular support. Meanwhile the Taliban bans on women working in aid agencies and accessing secondary and tertiary education have compounded the situation by making it difficult to manage aid programmes responsibly and more difficult to attract funding. Peacemakers are concerned that the humanitarian assistance regime helps to subsidise and prolong Taliban rule. Furthermore, the Taliban have exploited it to feed their victory narrative, either portraying assistance as tribute paid by the defeated powers or citing international assistance as evidence that they are en route towards normalised relations (and thus securely in power). Afghan peacemakers repeatedly complained that US Treasury-endorsed regular transfer of cash dollars to the Afghan banking mechanism, to fund UN operations, is instrumentalised by the Taliban to claim that they have tacit US backing (and thus resistance is futile).

Afghan peacemakers' and popular perceptions of the role of international actors in the run-up to and after the collapse of the Republic are conflicted. On the one hand they blame the US and allies for fatally weakening the Republic and strengthening the Taliban, which together helped precipitate the collapse. Peacemakers in particular complain that they engaged in the Doha process in good faith, on the understanding that there would be substantive negotiations and an agreed transition to a power-sharing administration. For them, part of the story of the Taliban takeover is that the international community 'stood aside and let Afghanistan fall'.

But, despite this experience, there is still a widespread expectation that the international community, which Afghans most often assume will work through the United Nations Security Council and its mission in Afghanistan, will play a role in helping to deliver an outcome akin to what was hoped for in the Doha process – an agreement between free Afghans and the Taliban on an inclusive political system. Those optimistic about an international or UN role hope that the international community will bring sufficient pressure to bear on the Taliban to join talks, and that the UN will then facilitate and mediate political negotiations.

The authors assess that peacemakers tend to over-estimate the extent of leverage which any international actor may have over the Taliban, or the likelihood of internationally backed meaningful negotiations in the near future. However, this belief that international actors could broker a resolution if they really wanted to is an influential one and worthy of note.

The peacemakers remain concerned about the influence of regional actors in the conflict, in particular Pakistan. They assume that Pakistan remains the state with most influence over the Taliban and therefore assume that leverage exerted by Pakistan would be a straightforward way of bringing the Taliban to the negotiation table. They note that all regional powers have refrained from recognising the Taliban but are concerned that if the conflict continues the regional powers are apt to revert to a competition over spheres of influence within Afghanistan. The authors observe that regional powers have tended to behave cautiously on Afghanistan since the Taliban takeover, supporting neither Taliban nor the resistance and, so far, largely holding back from the kind of competition or proxy war witnessed in previous rounds of the conflict.

Potential peace actors and the Afghan political class

The collapse of the Republic has been widely attributed, at least in part, to the failure of Afghanistan's political class to seize the opportunities presented by the Bonn process. However, this political class is much broader than the handful of problematic jihad-era leaders or the political entrepreneurs who thrived during the Republic. Elements of the political class retain a role in representing their constituencies and could potentially play a role as peace actors. Challenges facing them in the current context include the lack of any convening process or institution, active suppression within Afghanistan, being scattered across the region, the need to disassociate themselves from the self-serving national leadership clique and the need to transition from the patronage culture of the Republic. These notwithstanding, the Afghan political class has a role in driving and smoothing the transition to a post-Emirate, plural Afghanistan.

The section of the Afghan political class most relevant to a potential peace process consists of figures who have exercised influence over or represented organic constituencies and who have retained their influence and popular base in the post-Republic period. This political class is ill-defined, but its members are identifiable. It includes some (not all) of the elected representatives from the Republic parliament and provincial councils, leaders and officials of political parties, those former senior officials and military commanders who had a popular base, and influential figures from civil society and the clergy. Many of them have relocated to the countries of the region, while some remain active within Afghanistan.

Many members of the political class are linked to the two main resistance groups, but there is no consensus that the resistance groups are ready to present a credible alternative to the Islamic Emirate. The challenge in mapping the political class is that many figures who were prominent under the Republic are no longer relevant to the politics of peace-making after the Taliban takeover. Those who lost relevance have included office holders who were solely dependent on state patronage in the Republic and had no popular base, as well as many who have been irretrievably discredited by abuses, misappropriation and governance failures. Adding to the challenge, although the political class is highly interconnected, it is unstructured – no extant institution brings together effective members of the political class.

Considerations in a new phase of the peace process

Afghanistan remains an unresolved major conflict with global dimensions and with potential to slide into another round of open armed conflict. The peace process as it was structured until 15 August 2021 has ended. Although the UNSC and regional players have consistently called for a broad-based Afghan government, the routes pursued towards it thus far are stuck. The Islamic Emirate authorities have not shown any willingness to engage in meaningful intra-Afghan negotiations and there seems to be no plausible path towards normalisation of external relations. A peace process is certainly required, and it should include new lines of action which can be pursued even while the Islamic Emirate is unwilling to compromise.

At the heart of an alternative approach would be the acknowledgement (already implicit in UNSC resolutions calling for inclusive government) that sustainable peace is only attainable after the dismantling of the Islamic Emirate. Although the path towards this is not yet visible, an important focus for the renewed peace process should be prudent preparation for transition to post-Islamic Emirate inclusive government and institutionalisation of pluralism, incorporating lessons learnt from the Republican and Emirate periods. International strategy should thus incentivise transition to an agreed inclusive political system, rather than normalisation of relations with the Islamic Emirate.

Pluralism, combined with the idea of popular sovereignty, is the unifying idea which has emerged among the non-Taliban political class as the key attribute of a future political system within which sustainable peace can be attained. By this reckoning, attaining sustainable peace requires transitioning from the absolutism of the Islamic Emirate to functioning popular pluralism.

The Islamic Republic was, and the Islamic Emirate is, structurally flawed. They have been characterised by chronic governance failures, some different but some common to both, including a tendency towards excess centralisation and monopoly of power. Therefore, one of the key tasks for Afghans in implementing a new political system is applying lessons from successive failed state-building exercises.

Afghan men and women living under the Islamic Emirate must be linked to the peace process throughout. Community groups and traditional civil society should assert their right to local decision-making in cultural affairs and community development, and their voices should be incorporated in the broader peace process. Taliban officials find themselves constantly negotiating informally with communities at all levels, which determine which Taliban policies can be implemented. Local peacebuilding can inform and build momentum for peace and boost popular legitimacy.

Some Taliban seem open to cooperating with other political currents in a broad-based set-up, but the Islamic Emirate is functionally incapable of compromise. One example of its closed nature is the performance of the Returns Commission under Shahbuddin Dilawar. It has not achieved the return of anyone of any significance. The few middle-ranking republicans who did return did so to secure businesses and property, and their return did not see any meaningful engagement. They have not been offered any political role. The handful of returnees as well as republican figures who stayed and tried to work with the Taliban feel marginalised and excluded. It is important to design a peace roadmap which avoids granting a veto on progress to the Islamic Emirate but which may be able to secure some Taliban buy-in as the Emirate collapses.

The leadership of the Islamic Emirate has consistently resisted international efforts to convince them to accommodate international norms. Afghan peacemakers have concluded that the Islamic Emirate is fundamentally incapable of reconciling with international norms, or indeed with norms which a majority of Afghans would identify with.

Suggestions

Summary of an integrated approach to Afghan peacemaking

The suggestions below outline an integrated approach to 'unsticking' the Afghan peace process. They identify ways in which Afghans can strive for sustainable peace in the face of the Islamic Emirate's resistance to pluralism and a comprehensive settlement. The approach assumes that any viable peace process must be Afghan-initiated and led, but that appropriate international assistance can help Afghans overcome the formidable challenges. The suggestions are therefore heavily weighted to those which, even in the current difficult context, Afghans can initiate, rather than being obliged to wait for international action. We note that much of the old Afghan political class has lost agency and has allowed itself to become marginalised by pinning hopes on unrealistic expectations of a new round of international intervention.

The basic approach to unsticking is that Afghans committed to peace and freedom who retain a sense of their own agency should press ahead with designing and building broad societal support for a comprehensive settlement and thus boost the prospects that sustainable peace is indeed the outcome when regime change eventually takes place. The approach deliberately leaves open the question of how and when the Taliban will be persuaded to surrender their monopoly on power. Many Afghans, including some in the Taliban, have concluded that the movement's approach to statecraft is unsustainable. Therefore, it seems reasonable for non-Taliban Afghans to proceed with developing a peaceful alternative to the Emirate even in the absence of any meaningful negotiating channel with the Taliban.

Suggested elements of the integrated approach include civic action by communities within Afghanistan, a National Dialogue hosted in a neutral country, incubation of a new set of inclusive democratic institutions and a range of tools to build pressure on the Islamic Emirate to surrender its monopoly of power. This would culminate in an inclusive, neutral caretaker administration, charged with managing a one-year transition to democratic rule and the roll-out of reconciliation and the agreed new institutions.

Reworked peace roadmap

The peace roadmap envisages three main phases required to achieve sustainable peace. A range of actions are appropriate to each phase. The actions covered by suggestions below concentrate on the first phase, Formation. They clarify what can be done by pro-peace Afghans even before there is any buy-in from the Taliban to a process. Although suggestions are primarily for Afghan initiative, most initiatives offer scope for international support.

1. Formation: this phase includes a range of initiatives to design future inclusive, democratic institutions and governance conventions and to mobilise support for them. Pressure on the Taliban will be ramped up, although meaningful negotiations are unlikely.
2. Transition: depending on political developments, this phase may include a period of negotiation with Taliban over the terms of their cooperation with the process, followed by the transitional government with a one-year term or more.
3. Implementation: a long phase of reconciliation, economic recovery, and consolidation of the agreed new institutions.

Peace narrative

The idea that sustainable peace will only be achieved when an inclusive political system takes over from the Emirate should become normalised. 'Peace dividends' and the ending of Afghanistan's isolation must wait until this happens. Projecting this idea would boost the legitimacy of Afghans working for an inclusive alternative to the Emirate and thus undermine confidence in the Emirate. There are multiple opportunities to communicate prospective benefits of the comprehensive settlement, the strength of consensus Afghan support for it, international endorsement and the inexorability of progress towards it.

Afghan civic resistance and 'bottom-up' peace initiatives

Community leaders across Afghanistan interface with the Islamic Emirate authorities and face arbitrary demands (eg to hand over taxes, arms, land, labour, prisoners) and interference in local affairs (eg the forcible imposition of rules and customs). Local leaders who defend their communities' interests, traditions and autonomy using the playbook of Afghan traditional local politics (negotiation, petitioning, lobbying, calling out, townhall meetings, non-cooperation, boycotts) should be considered as actors within the peace process. Their efforts should be documented and acknowledged. They should be heard, encouraged and networked. Efforts should be made to boost their status and bargaining power relative to the Emirate officials they challenge. They should be included in any national dialogue and eventual comprehensive settlement.

National peace architecture

To enable Afghans to demonstrate ownership of national-level initiatives within the peace process, a rudimentary institutional vehicle, entirely independent of the Islamic Emirate, will have to be established anew. Experienced Afghan peacemakers should come together and conduct consultations to build support for the launch of a 'Contact Group' or 'National Commission'. This body should be comprised of effective, well-connected but impartial figures capable of convening national political actors and local representatives.

The authority of the Commission will derive initially from the calibre of its membership and subsequently from its conduct and public dealings. Most members are likely to be veterans of the Republic-era peace and reconciliation commissions and negotiating team and all should be selected according to an agreed list of key competences. The peacemakers will start with a phase of programme development and identifying effective personalities before progressing to the phase of coalition building. Although the Commission may start work informally and virtually, its effectiveness will be enhanced when it is able to convene in person and formalise its status and proceedings.

National Dialogue and recovery of an Afghan civic voice

The Commission should convene Afghans capable of representing the diversity of Afghan society, to conduct a National Dialogue and thus fill the current representation and legitimacy vacuum. Participants should be selected to include all provinces, ethnic groups, classes, women, and young people. Provision should be made for specialist interest groups such as ulema, former mujahideen, military personnel, business figures, and technocrats, as well as representatives of civil society, and political parties and groupings.

The Commission will have to develop criteria which ensure that it includes Afghans with an ongoing role and relevance, overcoming some of the distortions of the Republican era in which for example English language skills or acceptability to a foreign donor counted more than connectedness in Afghan society. The dialogue may be launched virtually on a pilot scale, but the Commission should aim to locate it in a friendly and impartial Muslim country as soon as feasible, to unleash its full potential as a quasi-parliament.

The Commission should ensure that the perspectives of Afghans present in the country are well represented in the dialogue, even though the lack of free speech means that meetings will have to be held outside Afghanistan. A critically important aspect of the terms of reference or working culture of the Commission would be acknowledging and overcoming the Republican-era tendency for political initiatives to be clogged up by patronage relations. This was manifest in factionalism and giving posts to useless people and turning peacebuilding into an employment scheme for self-serving elites.

The National Dialogue will provide a platform for civilian representatives to articulate their concerns around the current situation, develop their vision of a peaceful Afghanistan and build consensus on the way forward. A key role of the National Dialogue will be to ratify agreements and plans for a future political system and safeguards, as well as to mandate diplomatic or negotiating delegations. The issue of a change in government structure, after achievement of a consensus, should be put on the agenda. In case of a decision to form a government in exile or the transitional administration, the National Dialogue could mandate members.

Peace process goals and principles

The National Commission should take the lead in drafting a set of objectives for the peace process and principles which delegates or participants would be expected to endorse. By reflecting key aspects of the intended end state, the objectives and principles are intended to ensure that the process resonates with the Afghan population and raises the ambition of participants. These objectives and principles should include priorities identified in the peacemakers' preliminary discussions, such as:

- ▶ The process should safeguard Islam's place as Afghanistan's state religion, affirm that as in the Republican era the legal framework will be Shariat-compliant and put an end to the way in which Taliban have abused the religion.
- ▶ No group should be able to claim a monopoly of power and the practice of forcible swearing allegiance to an unelected Amir should end.
- ▶ Government should be accountable to the people through elections with universal franchise, with safeguards to overcome the abuses which tainted elections of the Republican period.
- ▶ Citizens should be protected from tyranny, abuse of power and discrimination.
- ▶ The state at all levels should be inclusive of women and men and all ethnic and religious groups, with safeguards against discrimination.
- ▶ Public affairs should be in the hands of competent officials, with effective safeguards against favouritism and discrimination in recruitment to state employment and public office.
- ▶ All Afghan exiles should have an opportunity to return home.
- ▶ Afghanistan should recover its international standing by abiding by its obligations under international conventions and covenants.
- ▶ Security forces established should be disciplined and subject to civilian command and the rule of law, and all peoples of Afghanistan should be able to serve in it with equal status.

Active role for the United Nations

The United Nations should respect the widespread expectation among the Afghan population and political class that it will continue to play a role until the achievement of sustainable peace. It should find appropriate ways of supporting Afghan initiatives, in Afghanistan and the region, to achieve peace, reconciliation and accountable, inclusive government.

Creating a culture of peace

There should be a broad-based initiative to promote a 'culture of peace', rooted in Afghan traditions and current reality, which deepens support for the pursuit of peace by addressing respect for human dignity and popularly accessible ways of understanding human rights, freedom, reconciliation, tolerance, celebration of diversity, healing and routes out of hatred, violence and war. A broad coalition of Afghan cultural figures and civil society should be actively involved in the initiative. The Commission and other institutional actors should seek to influence the culture of peace initiative to enhance participation in and support for their roadmap activities.

Incubating the post-Emirate system

There is a need for Afghans to prepare a post-Emirate government and political system which is more inclusive, accountable and effective than the Republic and incorporates lessons from chronic failures of governance in both the Emirate and Republic periods. The task includes both technocratic and political elements – designing institutions, norms and codes which enshrine democratic pluralism, and obtaining agreement on them. If, over time, the Islamic Emirate's hold over territory and population slackens, there will also be a need to address governance in the areas it vacates. The spirit of the institutional renewal initiative should be public service rather than pursuit of power. Development of the blueprint of a better governed Afghanistan provides an opportunity for some of the talent developed in the Afghan public sector in recent years to remain focused on public service and preparing the foundations of accountable institutions for the future.

The process of incubating post-Emirate institutions is likely to be distributed – ie, taking place in several locations, without a single parent body. The SCNR has aspirations to develop shadow departments, independent initiatives are possible, and the Commission may provide a convenient umbrella for some of this work. Operating under any of these umbrellas, appropriately qualified and experienced Afghans should form sector-focused national committees, with priorities being agriculture, education, health, national security and governance. These national committees would advise international aid actors within their field of competence, monitor Taliban practices, facilitate whistleblowing from inside Taliban-controlled departments, assemble evidence for lessons learned exercises and develop new national guidelines and draft policies. A key focus for the governance committee should be the development of innovative safeguards against corruption, discrimination and favouritism, as these have been key elements of governance failure in both the Republic and the Emirate. National committees should also conduct contingency planning and prepare to provide technical and administrative support to areas where the Islamic Emirate no longer operates as they emerge.

The link between the committees and the National Dialogue is important. The committees should refer their draft guidelines and policies to the National Dialogue for review and endorsement. The governance committee would be a priority for the Commission to sponsor, as it could in effect operate as a shadow 'administrative affairs department', with an overview of the civil service. During the peace process Formation phase, the institutional renewal process could proceed initially without buy-in from the Taliban. But it would be a key subject of negotiation with the Taliban in the Transition phase.

Political and military organisations of national resistance

One of the key challenges for Afghan peacemakers is to integrate their consensual efforts with the political and military campaigns of the resistance fronts. Given the Islamic Emirate's determination to maintain its power monopoly and refuse meaningful negotiations, the resistance fronts seek to play a historic role in challenging the Emirate. The structure and strategy of the resistance fronts are likely to continue to evolve, as they grapple with the challenge of rolling out a military campaign which many had hoped to avoid. Peacemakers, acting through their Commission, should seek a *modus vivendi* and division of labour with the resistance fronts and other effective political groups. A logical allocation of roles would be for the resistance fronts to be recognised as legitimate conflict actors, who endorse the peace process objectives and principles, uphold international humanitarian law (IHL), participate in the National Dialogue and align with the institutional renewal process and preparation for an orderly transition.

Responses to popular uprisings and armed resistance

The peacemakers should consider and respond to the changing and unpredictable circumstances in Afghanistan and the diaspora, especially spreading of the civic or armed resistance. The current plan should be reviewed and updated periodically. Many of the anti-Taliban forces who have stayed on in the country and many of those who have taken refuge in Iran are actively preparing for an expansion of popular armed resistance, with the aim of intensifying operations in Pashtun-majority areas and expelling the Emirate from some non-Pashtun territory. They are acutely aware of their military weakness vis-à-vis the Taliban and the slowness of traditional Afghan leaders to mobilise support.

Many uncertainties remain regarding the trajectory of active resistance – how far it spreads, the balance between established and new fronts, and whether a significant level of civic resistance takes place. Afghan peacemakers should track the evolution of both armed and civic resistance. They should identify effective actors, engage with them and encourage them to uphold IHL and align with the peace process, including where appropriate participating in the National Dialogue. Through this active engagement, the peacemakers can help mitigate the risks of a messy civil conflict.

Human rights protection and advocacy

Peacemakers should cooperate with the human rights community in support of ongoing efforts to hold egregious violators to account. Human rights defenders in Afghanistan face a hostile operating environment and therefore have to evolve ways of operating relatively safely. This principally involves reducing their visible footprint in Afghanistan while finding innovative ways of maintaining a presence throughout the country. Donors should support this reconfiguration of Afghanistan's civil society to enable them to continue documenting human rights violations by the Taliban and other conflict actors. Such violations should be raised in all appropriate forums and included on the agenda of competent national and international organisations.

Taliban engagement under the Emirate umbrella

Any party engaging with the Islamic Emirate should have modest objectives and low expectations. During the Inception phase, Afghans involved in the peace process will focus on intra-Afghan cooperation without reference to the Islamic Emirate, until such time as the Taliban are ready to contemplate surrendering their monopoly. It is understood that the UN and some donors will continue to use their well-established channels to the official representatives of the Emirate leadership for pragmatic near-term cooperation and conveying strategic messages. The main peace process related message should be one that the road map for ending Afghanistan's isolation and restoring normal relations involves the formation of an accountable, inclusive government and political system. However, no one should have high expectations from this channel as interlocutors are ultimately accountable to the Amir, who relishes his stance of no compromise.

Taliban engagement outside the Emirate umbrella

Taliban officials meeting with other Afghans or international diplomats in their official capacity tend to be fairly disciplined and to lack freedom to explore ideas which depart from Islamic Emirate policy. For now, the Emirate is opposed to any notion of a new comprehensive settlement. However, many Afghan peacemakers and the resistance fronts have cultivated informal channels of communication with figures in the Islamic Emirate. Several Taliban leaders have trusted confidants who can talk on their behalf. Peacemakers should use these channels to identify Taliban willingness to cooperate with the peace process and to note Taliban perspectives which can be fed into the National Dialogue. Ultimately, as pressure on the Taliban mounts and expectations of the survival of the Islamic Emirate fall, meaningful discussion with the Taliban on the terms of their participation in the transition may become possible.

Pressure on the Taliban to cooperate with the peace process

Ultimately, successful progress to the Transition phase depends upon the Taliban coming under sufficient pressure to oblige them to surrender the Islamic Emirate's power monopoly. Afghan actors, aligned with the peace process, can contribute to this pressure through the combination of political organisation, civic action and armed resistance. International actors should complement Afghan efforts through all ways and means available and by creatively focusing on points of Taliban vulnerability. International forums highlight the realities of Taliban rule and consistently call for cooperation with the peace process. For example, the UNSC can explicitly link sanctions to non-cooperation with the peace process. The existing travel ban on listed Emirate officials can be more rigorously applied. Sanctions can be invoked to block Emirate-sponsored mineral development, as all contracts now benefit the Emirate. Pakistan can be encouraged to block imports or smuggling of coal and minerals.

Taliban assets in Pakistan, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar and Turkey should be investigated and the authorities reminded of their obligations. There should be support for investigative journalism which exposes Taliban corruption and issues such as Iran Revolutionary Guard Corps trafficking links. The hold of officials appointed by the Republic or loyal to the resistance over Afghanistan's diplomatic missions is itself a helpful source of pressure on the Taliban. These missions should be treated as assets held in trust for the post-Emirate dispensation. Interested countries should form a coordination group to support the missions and ensure that they act in support of the peace process and international priorities.

Aid diplomacy

Donors should strengthen efforts to limit the Taliban's ability to misappropriate and manipulate aid. They should address the bad optics of the current US Treasury-authorised mechanism for providing liquidity to the Afghan banking system for humanitarian operations (this mechanism is widely and unhelpfully interpreted by Afghans as US support for the Emirate). Donor countries should appoint an independent aid inspector, responsible for promoting good practices in the delivery of humanitarian assistance in Afghanistan, fully empowered to call out cases of aid diversion by the Emirate authorities. Humanitarian actors should focus on reaching vulnerable populations while minimising opportunities for the Islamic Emirate regime to draw material benefit from assistance to Afghanistan. The inspector should also conduct public communications to assert the humanitarian nature of assistance and combat disinformation which has equated humanitarian assistance with support for or endorsement of the Islamic Emirate. Meanwhile, donors should tie resumption of development assistance to the peace process reaching the Transition phase.

The region

The US and donors should work with countries of the region to maintain a consensus that an inclusive political system replacing the Emirate is sine qua non for peace. On this basis the region should be encouraged to hold back on normalisation of relations with Afghanistan until the Transition phase, to contribute to pressure on the Emirate, to engage with the resistance and to cooperate in the roll out of the peace roadmap.

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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