
Peace Policy: Solutions to Violent Conflict, November 2022

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Peace Policy

SOLUTIONS TO VIOLENT CONFLICT



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Is Peacebuilding Possible in Afghanistan?

by an Afghan peacebuilder with 23
years of experience in Afghanistan



Afghanistan needs a new political process to prevent a renewed phase of armed conflict

by Aref Dostyar

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Afghanistan Requires a National and Regional Dialogue Based on the Principle of Inclusivity

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Human Rights Defenders and the Future of Multi-ethnic Democracy in Afghanistan

by a Senior Human Rights Defender
from the Shia Community



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Is Peacebuilding Possible in Afghanistan?

by an Afghan peacebuilder

When the Taliban took over Kabul in August 2021, the Taliban asserted that the war was over and that they now had control of the entire country. But just a year into Taliban control, an armed opposition front is taking shape, albeit only in a few provinces.

Some travel around Afghanistan has become safer, increasing access to many communities. However, a range of factors has made communities more vulnerable to internal conflicts, grievances, and divisions. There is widespread hatred towards the regime, but also towards Pashtuns, as a majority of the Taliban come from this ethnic group. The Taliban have consistently ignored the promises they made in Doha with the U.S. and have brushed off all calls for a broad-based participatory government. Based on experience with peacebuilding in Afghanistan over the last 23 years, including during the previous

Taliban regime, this article explores the challenges and opportunities for peacebuilding in Afghanistan under the Taliban regime.

The Taliban approach is to use force and torture not only against the armed opposition groups but also against their own local commanders who challenge them and against those raising their voices for basic rights and to those who might criticize the Taliban for their governance, nepotism, discrimination, and corruption at the community level. A growing fear of persecution exists among the population if they speak out on issues of corruption. For example, the Taliban will not tolerate

public concerns that some Taliban at the district and provincial level are selling acutely needed humanitarian aid in the market and sometimes allocating humanitarian aid to Taliban soldiers rather than the public.

For the Taliban, the terms “peace” and “peacebuilding” are militarily and politically loaded. Using this terminology enrages Taliban leaders. Most of the Taliban leaders and members know little about social peacebuilding between groups. Therefore, anyone planning peacebuilding efforts in present-day Afghanistan must first go through many rounds of discussion and explanation with the Taliban, both in Kabul and at the district level, if they plan on implementing projects of this nature.

Civic space for individuals and groups to voice their concerns and interests has shrunk under the Taliban to the level of non-existence. Dissatisfaction and criticism of Taliban policies are seen as acts of sedition and could be severely

punished. Therefore, one has to be careful about what peace initiatives are feasible at the present time. Anything at the national level is difficult, though small community-based peace initiatives could still possibly be carried out.

NGOs are required to sign a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) for each project with related ministries. This has turned into one of the most difficult tasks in project implementations, even if the project is humanitarian or development in nature. In the case of peacebuilding, there is no specific ministry or department to approach for an MoU. NGOs would need to use different terminology for peacebuilding programs in order to get an MoU. Furthermore, NGOs will need to have detailed discussions with authorities in Kabul to educate and convince them of the objectives of the program. However, in the current context, a number of small and dispersed programs, with a coherent strategic vision at the national level, would work better than one large national-level program. A national peacebuilding program will invite Taliban scrutiny, not only from the related ministry but from the intelligence department, which could put the program and NGOs' staff at risk.

Community-based Peacebuilding and Governance

The current lack of a coherent, locally adapted strategy for the distribution of humanitarian aid is contributing towards significant harm at the community level. Almost all Afghans are eligible for emergency aid during the current intense food shortage and economic crisis, yet aid organizations either have little time or are unwilling to work with community structures in aid delivery.

The ideal approach to address this issue would be a "triple nexus" of coordinating humanitarian aid, development, and peacebuilding. Currently, there are few efforts to foster development. Yet, aid agencies working in Afghanistan today are not linking aid with peace to help develop cohesive communities. At minimum, aid agencies must "do no harm" and avoid undermining existing intergroup relations. If development aid does not appear in the near future, humanitarian aid should be distributed simultaneously with and through peacebuilding processes. The best way to implement peacebuilding would be through a partnership between peacebuilding, humanitarian, and development-focused NGOs to reduce Taliban suspicion of peacebuilding projects. By packaging peacebuilding along with vital aid delivery, it will appear more innocuous to Taliban officials.

International aid agencies desperately need Community Development Councils (CDCs) to partner with NGOs and for transparent aid delivery at the community level. Afghanistan's National Solidarity Program (NSP) had helped to create CDCs across the country and operated as formal/informal community governance structures. CDCs should not be used as an aid conduit, but rather as community structures and governance bodies that are proactive on issues required to promote cohesive communities. Unfortunately, this has not been the case with aid to Afghanistan up until now. Even the implementing partners of the NSP program who are still active in the areas where they had supported local development prior to the Taliban takeover have abandoned the CDCs and created other structures more suitable to their projects.

Community elders can play an important role in peacebuilding to

reduce ethnic divisions in areas where different ethnic groups coexist. They can serve as living examples to show peacebuilding in practice in their communities by trying to reduce the tensions created by previous warlords and further exacerbated by the Taliban. Peacebuilding led by community elders could not only reduce conflicts on aid distribution, land, and water rights, but also promote harmony among different ethnic and tribal groups. This is particularly important now in the face of the exacerbated divisions created by warring factions and now further entrenched by the Taliban.

There are a number of Afghan local civil society organizations (CSOs), with a majority working in provincial centers. Afghan CSOs are active in promoting peace and demonstrating accountable governance. Some are experienced in effective advocacy with the government departments pre-August 2021. Civic space for such local civil society organizations has shrunk and so has the funding for local civil society groups. Some of these groups have developed their capacity over the last 20 years. Funding and support could help to mobilize these CSOs for promoting peace and good governance in their communities.

These groups could have a check and balance role on the CDCs or any other structure the donor community is considering partnering with for the distribution of humanitarian or development aid. Interactions with the Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA) might be challenging for them, but CSOs can at least keep community elders accountable and reduce tensions that are already created by unfair aid distribution. Peacebuilding efforts could help to develop the capacity of CSOs for peaceful conflict resolution, basic advocacy skills, and efforts to promote transparency and peace at the community level.

Campaigning against the forces sending divisive messages

Another type of successful peacebuilding effort for Afghanistan could take place in the digital sphere. Social media is full of hatred and divisive messages among Afghanistan's ethnic groups, particularly among the diaspora. Pashtuns are particularly targeted because most of the Taliban regime are Pashtun. CSOs, particularly youth groups, can at least raise their voices and can launch campaigns to prevent the hatred some people spread on social media. Young leaders from all ethnic groups could be mobilized to stop the warring factions using ethnicity as a battle cry to recruit soldiers. This strategy could be more effective in provinces with diverse ethnic groups to showcase community-level social bonds and promote coexistence.

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Afghanistan needs a new political process to prevent a renewed phase of armed conflict

by Aref Dostyar

Several [armed opposition groups](#) launched [attacks](#) against the Taliban in multiple provinces over the last year. While these groups may be in their initial stages of formation, the number of [casualties](#) they have inflicted on the Taliban is enough to meet the definition of an [active conflict](#) according to Uppsala University's Conflict Data Center.

In other words, the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan did not result in the settlement of a decades-long conflict in the country. Conflicts do not end simply by one party gaining the upper hand, nor by foreign parties opting out with a hasty exit.

Ending hostilities in Afghanistan requires active efforts on the part of Afghans and the international community. Local, regional, and global stakeholders in Afghanistan should launch a new political process to prevent a full-scale recurrence of violence and aim to build lasting peace.

Why should the Taliban take part in a political process?

During their two-decade-long military campaign, the Taliban anticipated their victory in returning to power through NATO's withdrawal from Afghanistan. Their [deal](#), signed with the United States in February 2020, affirmed their belief in the possibility of a forceful overthrow of the Islamic Republic government.

Now, however, the Taliban face a different set of challenges. They have failed to provide effective governance and revive the collapsed Afghan economy. They are also unable to protect the population against the deadly [attacks](#) of the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant-Khorasan (ISIL-KP).

There is active and growing civil opposition within Afghanistan and fervent advocacy against the Taliban by Afghans living abroad. Under pressure for [harboring](#) al-Qaeda's al-Zawahiri, who was eliminated by a U.S. drone strike in Kabul in July, the Taliban regime is far from being delisted from sanctions, let alone being recognized as a legitimate governing body by the international community.

Hard-pressed by several simultaneous pressures which will remain and perhaps intensify under current circumstances, the Taliban have two options: continue on their pathway of suppressing rivals and the general public, or enter into negotiations with other Afghan factions to settle the conflict and construct a sustainable and inclusive government.

But if there is not yet a particular group that can pose a serious military challenge to the Taliban regime, who could they negotiate with even if they chose a different path?

Mapping stakeholders for inclusion

The former army is disintegrated, and ex-government officials have lost the public's trust. The mujahideen groups who are positioning themselves politically are considered warlords. The older generation has a history of escalating conflicts and

corruption, and the new generation has no history that proves their leadership capability. Aside from no track record or a lack of credibility, these groups also have not united with each other.

Identifying stakeholders to participate in a political process at local and national levels is complicated but not impossible. Lack of credibility is not unique to non-Taliban factions. The Taliban regime faces a challenge that is worse than other known stakeholders. After all, if a regime that partners and provides safe houses for globally designated terrorists should be part of a political process, then it becomes hard to argue against the inclusion of other factions.

Perhaps the general rule should be to include all sides in such a process. An inclusive process, however, does not necessarily mean that each of the dozens of political parties in Afghanistan's recent history will be physically present at the table. But every possible ideology should have representation. One way this process could work is for emerging and old political parties, civil society organizations, women, youth, and armed opposition groups to organize themselves around categories of shared visions and each category nominates representatives.

The regimes and governments of Afghanistan, and those who contested or backed them, can be grouped into four broad factions representing different ideological visions for the country: modernists who constitute most of the new generation of Afghan leaders, fundamentalists such as the Taliban and their likes, conservatives like the jihadist groups, and moderates who have

separated or never joined the other three groups but have not yet coalesced into their own group.

In summary, an important step to pave the way for a political process is for Afghan factions to organize around particular visions and develop a mechanism to identify their representatives. This will exert political pressure on the Taliban to consider peace talks. Additionally, the existence and persistence of organized groups will make it harder for the global community to shy away from supporting a path toward peaceful settlement of Afghanistan's conflict.

Vision for peace

It is important that these groups develop a coherent vision for peace in the country and the steps to reach it. Two mutually reinforcing objectives include agreeing to improve the lives of Afghans so that everyone may live with dignity and peace and launching an inclusive process to prevent another cycle of a full-fledged armed conflict.

The Taliban are unrealistic to operate under the assumption that other forces will accommodate their exclusive hold on power and that the people of Afghanistan will tolerate violence carried out by the regime.

If there is one thing the highs and lows of cycles of armed conflict in Afghanistan teach us, it is that there is no such thing as lasting victory without compromise. The Taliban's present claim to power is precisely the reason now is the best moment for them to reach out to all sides and actively seek to prevent another full-grown armed conflict.

This is the time to either launch and complete a coordinated and inclusive political process or allow the momentum toward recurrence of mass scale violence to determine the fate of Afghanistan—yet again.

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Afghanistan Requires a National and Regional Dialogue Based on the Principle of Inclusivity

by Nilofar Sakhi

The withdrawal of US troops and immediate takeover by the Taliban in August 2021 marked a radical transition from Afghanistan's status as a republic to an Islamic Emirate system.

With this transition, the Taliban maintains the perception that peace has replaced their ongoing war. While radical transitions did not bring positive peace, a temporary reduction of violence has occurred despite unresolved political and social conflicts. The presence of authoritative and religious hardliners has ushered in [a new era of human rights violations](#), including marginalization, widespread discrimination, and atrocities against women and ethnic groups.

The types of insecurities faced by people in Afghanistan provide a context for and are crucial in defining national and local peace. Different groups of

people, including the privileged and political classes, often have different narratives of peace. These differing perspectives represent disparate constituencies throughout the country.

In reflecting on the past year and the years that led up to the Taliban takeover, one thing is clear: there was an overarching flaw in the nature of the Doha process and its [agreement](#). At the same time, bringing the Taliban to the negotiation table and accepting their demands at the early stages of negotiations exponentially empowered one party of the armed conflict and allowed the Taliban to gain momentum on the battlefield. The Doha process collapsed without political settlement and failed to create consensus among Afghans through Intra-Afghan negotiations. This failure, along with other political factors, resulted in the Taliban's forceful takeover.

Now that Afghanistan is an Islamic Emirate ruled by

the Taliban [void of domestic and international legitimacy](#), a new phase of resistance, armed conflict, and social and economic crisis has arisen. This has caused political instability, exacerbated ethnic tensions and economic crises, and raised the level of concern among Afghanistan's neighbors due to the spillover across borders of violence and insurgency and the influx of refugees. Under these circumstances, the country needs a new political process to reignite an intra- and interstate dialogue and negotiations leading to political settlement and reconciliation

For the political process to demonstrate inclusivity, create consensus, and produce outcomes that lead to stability, there must be conditions for social and economic development in place. This process needs to give voice and agency to every community and enable all interested groups to engage and participate in the discourse about how their society should be ruled. The platform for such a process can also address contentious issues among various factions of Afghan society and reduce the magnitude of political uncertainty. The people of Afghanistan want peace and stability. Still, there has not been a political process to deliver it. It is deeply concerning that Afghanistan does not have an effective political process to address people's grievances and create conditions for reconciliation.

International partners of Afghanistan assume that development aid is the solution to the current economic crisis. While Afghanistan undoubtedly needs money and resources, it is important to remember that social, economic, and political development are strongly interlinked. Development aid will not produce desirable outcomes without a consistent plan for addressing all these issues and when implemented under the shadow of an unstable political system and weak institutions.

To attain peace and stability, the new political process should be based on the principle of inclusivity, which in Afghanistan involves two fundamental issues: domestic and regional processes of inclusion. A domestic process contextualized for Afghanistan could enable conditions that address the grievances of people from different parts of society and instigate dialogue about a political system, governance, and institutions favorable to all Afghans. The second fundamental issue, initiating a new regional negotiations process that requires inclusion of countries in the region with economic and security interests.

Internal Process for Intrastate Negotiations

In Afghanistan, ethnicity is often the basis for political polarization and mobilization. Utilizing a policy that isolates specific groups is likely to divide the population along ethnic lines and create a narrative of "the other" as the enemy. Afghanistan's ethnic identities and groups are fundamental to the country, and each has clear interests and a strong agency. The common interests of these groups cause collective mobilization, which could lead to unarmed or armed resistance. The current de facto government's [lack of representation](#) has marginalized non-Pashtun ethnic groups, fueled ethnic tensions, and widened the gap between Pashtun and non-Pashtun citizens. Ethnic groups seek national-level political representation, and instability inevitably grows if that representation is denied. The inability to address ethnic crises causes political instability,

insurgency, and widespread resistance.

Therefore, an intra-state political process should include dialogue about an appropriate political system for the country based on the principle of inclusion. There has been an ongoing debate among Afghans around the nature of governance in Afghanistan and determining a path towards a political settlement. For instance, some believe that a centralized system of governance would best hold the country together and prevent factions and outside interference. Others have argued that a centralized political system was attempted and failed to bring the nation together or address economic disparities and provinces' economic and political needs. This approach to governance has caused grievances as basic needs have gone unmet and specific populations experience isolation and marginalization. However, there is growing recognition that a decentralized system can create a balance of power across regions and address each group's needs and grievances.

Moreover, the ongoing ban on women's political participation and the denial of the agency of half of the population has raised serious concerns, both nationally and internationally, about the Taliban and their de facto authorities. A political process must also include women's meaningful participation to address the concerns of women in Afghanistan.

Afghans have been debating the country's political process for years. More than ever, it is urgent that this process is based on consensus and results in an inclusive government and political system that consists of people from across provinces and ethnic groups who can see themselves represented in all levels of participation. Any ongoing dialogue must be time sensitive and result in a comprehensive agreement. It is possible that such a process could enable conditions for reconciliation. A political process should not only be a place for deal making between parties but also provide open space for people to have in-depth discourse about the type of state and system in which they want to live.

A domestic political process should create the level of discourse needed to settle significant differences about the nature and approach needed to establish good governance and address Afghan's fundamental differences. Ideally, it would lead to a nationally representative administration, with political positions distributed among different parties, and it would address the political imbalances among different groups in Afghanistan.

External Process for Interstate Negotiations

The next crucial step to engage is an effective political process is to establish external, interstate negotiations and utilize a consistent regional diplomatic platform to provide countries in the region a place to engage in dialogue and address their economic and security concerns and interests. Historically, countries in the region have used proxies inside Afghanistan to address their own security concerns and compete with one another for their interests. Regional processes have been attempted, such as the [Shanghai Cooperation Organization](#), [Heart of Asia](#), [Troika Plus](#), and one-time forums organized by countries in the region, particularly Dushanbe, Moscow, Delhi, Tehran, and Islamabad. However, none of these processes produced effective outcomes because they failed to address

the core political and economic issues of the regional actors. In some instances, countries have been altogether excluded, as was the case for India and Iran during Troika Plus.

Excluding any regional country from the negotiation and dialogue process will likely result in an agreement that the excluded party will sabotage. An inclusive process is necessary to address regional parties' interests, discuss core political concerns, and negotiate economic and security issues. If regional actors' interests are taken care of, they will not need to involve Afghan actors and proxies inside Afghanistan. A consistent regional platform that includes all concerned actors, results in clear agreements, and removes proxies from the equation could lead to real political settlement among Afghans.

Conclusion

Afghanistan's international allies and partners should commit to a comprehensive political process and identify a country or the United Nations to facilitate the external process by initiating a regional negotiation for peace and security involving the United

States, Pakistan, China, Iran, India, Russia, and Central Asian states. Meanwhile, an internal political process must commence with a new generation of Afghans, representatives of political parties, ethnic groups, religious minorities, civil society and community representatives who demand consistency, continuity, investment, and an outcome based on consensus. Acknowledging that the process could be time-consuming and that past attempts at political processes have failed should not undermine the urgency of commencing this essential process.

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Human Rights Defenders and the Future of Multi-ethnic Democracy in Afghanistan

by a Senior Human Rights Defender from the Shia Community

Minority ethnic and religious groups and women in Afghanistan have led the movement for democracy and human rights. Discrimination and violence against these groups in Afghanistan are not new. But under the new Taliban regime, they suffer the most.

The human rights situation in Afghanistan and surrounding countries is dire. This article reports on human rights violations identified in research by the Afghanistan Human Rights Coordination Mechanism, a consortium of national human rights-oriented civil society organizations (CSOs) and international organizations. It was established in response to the emerging challenges faced by human rights defenders (HRDs) after the Taliban takeover in Afghanistan in August 2021. The article looks toward a future of multi-ethnic democracy to improve the human rights situation.

Under Taliban rule, minority groups in Afghanistan are experiencing systematic discrimination based on their gender, ethnicity, language, and religion. The Taliban are Sunni Muslims and have a long history of persecuting minority religious groups including Hindus, Sikhs, and Shiites. The Taliban are mainly from the Pashtun ethnic group and speak Pashto. Minority ethnic groups include Hazaras, Tajiks, and Uzbeks, many of whom speak Dari. There have been reports of extra-judicial killings of minority groups all around the country. The Taliban are killing members of

minority groups, in particular the Hazaras and Tajiks, each day. The Taliban have excluded women from all public roles and restricted girls' education beyond grade six.

During the early Taliban rule in the 1990s, there were brutal attacks on minority groups and women. Between 1996 and 1997, for example, the Taliban massacred over 2,000 Hazara people in Kabul and Bamiyan. They carried out a similar massacre and forced migration of Tajiks from the north Kabul (Shamali) valleys. Another brutal genocidal attack on Hazaras took place in 1998 in Mazar-e Sharif, where more than 5,000 Hazara and Shiite minority members were killed in 48 hours of continuous Taliban attacks on their homes. Since the August 2021 Taliban takeover of Afghanistan, these minority groups and women leaders are experiencing increased levels of public discrimination



and are disappearing, being arrested, tortured, and assassinated. Afghan HRDs, especially women human rights defenders from minority groups, have been facing kidnapping, gang rapes and imprisonment, physical and psychological harm, defamation and house searches, arbitrary arrest and torture, and physical threats and violence against their family members by the Taliban. Local HRDs from regions such as Daikundy, Sar-e Pul (Balkhab), Uruzgan, Panjshir, Ghazni, and Andarab in southeast Baghlan are reporting ethnic cleansing, massacres, forced displacement, and war crime incidents that occurred in the past 12 months.

Other conservative groups such as Hezb-ut-Tahrir, Jamiyat-e-Eslah, warlords, and religious actors build on the Taliban's position against these minority groups. They view these minority groups as democratic actors in the country. In this sense, the struggle is between those who desire a multi-ethnic democracy that protects the human rights of all minority groups and genders and those who do want a country run by a small group of conservative men primarily from one ethnic group.

The state of lawlessness in the country has been a major challenge to the safety and security of vulnerable groups. The absence of a legal protection framework and protection structures is having a widespread impact on human rights and HRD protection in Afghanistan. Since the Taliban takeover, the civic space is strictly controlled by the Taliban, who have canceled the Constitution and turned to a radical interpretation of Islamic jurisdictions. The absence of a judicial system leaves no guarantee or space for citizens to exercise their social and political rights through protest, limits access to information, and controls the press.

Protection strategies for minority groups, women, and HRDs are also limited due to the deteriorating economic conditions in Afghanistan. Afghan HRDs are having a difficult time providing food for their families, and many are facing a loss of future work and financing prospects. The economic downfall of Afghanistan also precipitated a huge migration outflow, crowding asylum and resettlement prospects for HRDs due to the overloading of the foreign countries' asylum system.

A majority of Afghan HRDs in neighboring countries such as Pakistan, Iran, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Turkey report suffering psychological harm. These originate from harassment by the police, risk of forced deportation, and a lack of access to visas, visa extension, and other basic living provisions. Despite the lower risk of deportation and police harassment in Western countries, HRDs in exile also report high levels of psychological harm and face serious financial problems, as well as the uncertainty of the success of their applications for asylum and the complicated approval processes.

Within Afghanistan, HRDs report growing hostility against HRDs due to a rise in ethnocentrism, ethnic/religious/gender/age discrimination, increasing religious radicalization, and growing conservatism. This social context exposes HRDs to social ostracization, if not criminal punishment as their human rights backgrounds have been associated with treason, infidelity, spreading immorality, blasphemy, or apostasy.

A variety of policy recommendations emerge from this analysis

1. HRDs need access to immediate remedy and legal accountability for the atrocities committed by the Taliban and other armed groups against HRDs, minority groups, women, and people in the general population.
2. Vulnerable groups need access to protection services inside the country and access to internal relocation.
3. HRDs outside the country need a comprehensive coordination platform and network to have collective action and advocacy to address the rapid decline of international community support. This is particularly true for Women Human Rights Defenders and protestors.
4. Afghans need to continue articulating the promise and possibility of a multi-ethnic democracy with a non-centralized system emphasizing local governance.

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