Introduction

The ongoing violent conflict in Afghanistan is not a war that can be won militarily; there must be a political process with support from Afghanistan’s civil society to reach an enduring peace.

There have been numerous attempts at peace negotiations between the United States and the Taliban that have fallen short because they excluded key stakeholders, ignored the drivers of violent conflict, failed to take a whole-of-society approach, and addressed the need for compliance and monitoring of peace efforts. Any political agreement must ensure democratic fundamental principles are integrated, including human rights, gender equality, and inclusion, and legitimate stakeholders must be included in the process. Additionally, any agreement must address the drivers of violent conflict and include a third-party monitoring system and enforcement mechanism.

Investing in a Sustainable Peace Process

The U.S. government has held numerous bilateral talks with the Taliban, but the Afghan government and civil society actors the United States and the international development community have supported over the past two decades have been largely excluded. The exclusionary nature of peace talks raise concerns about the legitimacy and sustainability of any potential agreement. Moreover, the exclusion of democratically elected stakeholders and civil society representatives risks undermining democracy promotion efforts and the investment of taxpayers over the past two decades.

The Afghan government, led by Ashraf Ghani, also hopes to end years of violent conflict with a durable peace, stabilize a difficult security situation, and enable economic growth. Additionally, the Afghan government wants to ensure the protection of the 2004 Constitution which embraces democracy, human rights, and equality for women. Special Representative Zalmay Khalilzad called it, “one of the most enlightened constitutions in the Islamic world.” The Consultative Loya Jirga convened by President Ghani in April 2019 gathered more than 3,200 representatives from across Afghanistan who agreed on a framework of 23 points for negotiation including prioritizing the constitutional democratic order and the rights of all Afghan citizens.\(^1\) Therefore, any political agreement must ensure fundamental principles already established in law, including gender rights that sustain democratic values and human rights.

Previous attempts at negotiations have suffered from several shortcomings, and the exclusion of key stakeholders is one of the most glaring problems. Current deliberations exclude women and youth, and these groups are critical to ensuring “durable peace.” Research has shown that women’s inclusion in conflict prevention and resolution is critical to the sustainability, durability, and overall success of peace processes.\(^2\) After Afghan women were excluded from the first round of the most recent peace talks in February 2019, they began organizing with their

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\(^{1}\) https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/the-end-of-the-jirga-strong-words-and-not-much-controversy/

\(^{2}\) https://www.cfr.org/interactive/womens-participation-in-peace-processes
international partners to gain a seat at the negotiating table. Given significant investments in inclusive civic education, today more women and traditionally under-represented groups have a voice in shaping their future – and are willing to take on the Taliban to ensure the government does not backslide into a repressive regime.

In February 2019, for example, hundreds of women convened in Kabul for a women's jirga organized by the First Lady's office and local women's organizations following a nation-wide movement to identify key priorities, red lines, and demands of the peace process. Afghan women leaders, including the first female ambassador of Afghanistan to the United States, Roya Rahmani, also called for an inclusive peace process. Recently Ambassador Rahmani stated, “Inclusivity means real representation: not just elites getting a seat at the table.” She added: “Being at the table is a means, not the end.”

Women’s organizing in Afghanistan has resulted in significant actions. The U. S. Women, Peace and Security Act of 2017 recognizes the importance of women’s inclusion and mandates gender inclusion in all of the U.S. government’s peacebuilding and security operations. In June 2019, 77 members of the U.S. House of Representative signed a letter to Secretary of State Pompeo urging him to promote women’s meaningful leadership and cooperation in peace negotiations in Afghanistan. In August of 2019, the Afghan Women in Negotiation (WIN) act was introduced to the House of Representatives by Representatives Ann Wagner, Bill Keating, Lois Frankel, and Joe Wilson. The bill would “require a report on the participation of Afghan women in negotiations and dialogue relating to the Afghan peace process and a strategy for post-conflict engagement by the United States in Afghanistan,” with the goal of addressing the “critical role women have played in advancing peace, stability, and democracy in Afghanistan and reaffirms U.S. policy to ensure Afghan women have the support and opportunity to meaningfully participate in the ongoing peace negotiations.”

The Alliance for Peacebuilding supports the passage of the WIN Act as a means to codify the role of women in peace negotiations within U.S. Afghanistan policy, but also advocates for its meaningful implementation.

The inclusion of youth and minorities is also imperative to the success of any peace agreement or process in Afghanistan. As one of the youngest nations in the world, youth under the age of 25 make up 63.7% of the population in Afghanistan. Including the youth of Afghanistan in any peace process and agreement is critical to ensuring long-lasting peace to serve multiple generations who have only known war and conflict. Meaningful inclusion of youth sets a precedent for their participation in the country’s affairs and empowers them as a proactive voice of opposition to violence. Decades of violence in Afghanistan has also led to the persecution and marginalization of ethnic and religious minority groups. Their inclusion in the peace process and acceptance in broader civil society is essential to the protection of their human rights and would provide an opportunity for them to have an equal voice in national affairs and any reconciliation processes.

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Additional shortcomings historically include the lack of confidence-building measures such as reductions in violence. When negotiations have occurred, the discussions have failed to engage the causes of violence. Since narcotics and criminality are significant drivers of violence, any settlement must address these factors as well. Stability and building “positive” peace require a reduction of crime and systemic support of the army, police, and intelligence services. Additionally, warlords and related corruption will derail attempts to build unity and federal legitimacy. After years of violent conflict, the Afghan government should prioritize genuine settlement with all armed groups who have “legitimate grievances.” It will require building on the Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) efforts for former combatants, including a well-crafted rehabilitation plan that takes account of the psycho-social or economic needs of ex-combatants who wish to return home and re-enter society along with immunity to the prosecution of crimes committed. Additionally, it will require vetting of those who join the national armed forces.

The Afghanistan peace process also occurs in a complex geopolitical context, with regional actors such as Pakistan and Iran playing essential roles. An effective settlement must acknowledge and address the role of Pakistan and other international actors in fueling conflict between the Afghan government and the Taliban. An effective settlement must acknowledge and address the role of Pakistan and other international actors in fueling conflict between the Afghan government and the Taliban and Pakistan's role in destabilizing the region by continuing to support, train, and resource militant groups. It should also build on the positive vision for regional stability and prosperity enhanced through economic linkages, as developed through ongoing processes including the Regional Economic Cooperation Conference (RECCA) and Heart of Asia processes.9

Most importantly, any peace agreement developed will need monitoring and enforcement mechanisms established by third-party monitors by the international community. While this U.S. administration has made it clear it intends to remove its troops and is already drawing down troops,10 the United States still has a significant role in Afghanistan to ensure a positive trajectory in order to safeguard its national security interests in the region.

Investing in Afghanistan's Civil Society & the Foundations for a Democratic Future

Over the last 18 years, massive strides have been made on women's rights, girls' education, and maternal and child health. There has also been important progress in the economic, education and health sectors. Government policies have continued to support low inflation, improved revenue collection, and a limited fiscal deficit.11 However, a sustainable peace will require greater access to services, security, and access to a growing economy that includes opportunities for its youth.

Considering the significant investments in rebuilding and stabilizing Afghanistan, local civil society actors believe there is much at stake in the peace process. Since 2014, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID)-funded Afghanistan Civic Engagement Program

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(ACEP), implemented by a consortium led by Counterpart International, has worked with civil society organizations, activists, and key government stakeholders to establish the foundation for a democratic, prosperous, and stable future for Afghans. To date, the program has provided 5,690 civic and voter education workshops to hundreds of thousands of Afghans, mobilized communities in more than 2,600 community, district and provincial level dialogue sessions to improve service delivery, and it has trained 136 male and female youth under its Emerging Civil Society Leaders (ECSLs) program. In a 2018 Counterpart International survey of ECSL alumni, 87% of respondents indicated they became more active in their communities. ECSL alumni now serve in Parliament and regional peace councils and have gone on to coordinate local peacebuilding efforts – from developing radio programs on reconciliation to hosting public debates in universities that promote critical thinking. In addition, ACEP has strengthened local media, particularly in its efforts to improve access to information. The program has also tapped into radio and mobile technology to reinforce social development values. To date, more than 3,040,000 mobile users have received messaging on women's rights and other human rights.

ACEP has also supported civil society networks to pursue policy advocacy in the areas of the National Budget development, Family Law reform, elections and other areas. Notably, the program has supported women-focused policy development and advocacy through the establishment of a Men Supporting Women's Rights (MSWR) working group to advance women-focused advocacy initiatives. In 2018, for example, the MSWR reviewed the Cybercrime Law of Afghanistan and submitted gender-sensitive recommendations from which relevant ministries expressed a commitment to work towards incorporating the recommendations into the Law. The MSWR working group has also engaged with the High Peace Council to advocate for women's role in the peace process.

As a result of these activities, Counterpart International has observed a steady maturation of the civil society sector, including an improved enabling environment for CSOs, more effective CSO-led advocacy and government oversight, and increased public trust due to improved service provision by CSOs and the corresponding positive media coverage of these efforts.12

In conclusion, the path to a sustainable peace process and long-term peace and reconciliation must ensure the Afghan Constitution is upheld and political stability is maintained that protects and advances women’s rights, is based on regional cooperation, and provides an international monitoring and enforcement mechanism. Without these provisions and the international community investing in a sustainable peace process based on best practices, the chances of a long-term peace process being fully implemented will be negligible, and the result will likely be chaos. Additionally, a sustainable peace will require greater access to services, security, and to a growing economy that includes opportunities for its youth.

Furthermore, failure of a durable peace agreement will negate the sacrifices of tens of thousands of multi-national forces, including over 2,000 fallen U.S. service members; add to the death toll of tens of thousands of Afghan civilians since 2001; and invalidate trillions of U.S. taxpayer dollars invested in Afghan security and development, once again compromising U.S. national security.

About the Alliance for Peacebuilding

The Alliance for Peacebuilding (AfP) is a membership network of over 119 organizations. Our members include some of the world’s largest development organizations, most innovative academic institutions, and the most powerful peacebuilding groups. We bring together coalitions in key areas of strategy and policy to elevate the entire peacebuilding field, tackling issues too large for any one organization to address alone.

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Further Readings


