Section 2
Looking forward

Peace initiatives

Section 2 of this publication looks at priorities for peace initiatives in Afghanistan, which can represent critical junctures to move away from violence and towards a different political future.

Peace initiatives need to be carefully planned and managed to seize opportunities appropriately and engage different constituencies – armed and unarmed – with an interest in their evolution and outcomes. The global political climate and the regional landscape have both shifted recently for Afghanistan. The economy is growing and the broad consensus on the military stalemate between the Taliban and the government places emphasis on talks towards a new political settlement.

Discussions of peace initiatives for Afghanistan have tended to lack practical detail, however. Themes covered in Section 2 look to flesh some of this out. These include: elements of a political settlement – priorities for peaceful progress; women’s participation; perspectives on peace options presented by different Taliban caucuses and by its Political Office in Qatar; integrating military and political strategies; brokering local political settlements; lessons of local peacebuilding; and options for international support for a political process.

Agreeing a new social contract is key to peace in Afghanistan. Michael Semple examines the fundamental issues that need to be addressed and the prospects for these being renegotiated successfully as part of a peace settlement. Fundamental issues include, among others: security, respect and basic needs for combatants and victims; property, economic rights and the illicit economy; the structure of government and consolidation of electoral democracy; and ethnicity, social inclusion and equality of opportunity. Impediments to progress include a severe lack of trust in formal processes and agreements, and the dual system of governance in Afghanistan – with the government running the main population centres and the Taliban much of the countryside. A single, comprehensive peace agreement to agree a new social contract is unlikely. A more viable alternative would involve an incremental, phased approach that builds confidence over time. Early agreement on a pause in the fighting is the best way to facilitate a sustained process of dialogue and reform.

Leaders of five Taliban caucuses provide their perspectives on possibilities for a peaceful political future for Afghanistan, in conversation for Accord with Anna Larson. Groups are roughly differentiated by region but are otherwise anonymous. All groups currently self-identify as Taliban and belong to the central Taliban movement, although some have expressed the desire to become autonomous from it. Conversations occurred in person in early 2018 at an undisclosed location outside of Afghanistan as part of wider talks with a group of high-level actors representing several countries, including Afghanistan and the United States, about the de-escalation of violence and potential for reconciliation with the Afghan government. Taliban representatives were senior commanders or influential local leaders. Topics include what the Taliban are struggling for, caucuses’ relationship with the ‘main Taliban’, political vision for Afghanistan, possibilities for agreement with the government, and democracy and Islam. Views between the caucuses differ, but an attempt has been made to summarise common positions in the statements.

Debate around women’s role in peace processes is especially intense in Afghanistan. Sippi Azarbaijani-
in the midst of very violent conflict, peace is possible in Afghanistan. The peace deals in Musa Qala and Sangin districts ultimately collapsed. But some common factors that facilitated their short-lived success offer practical lessons for the future, in particular: identifying legitimate brokers; empowering local communities; honouring commitments; coordinating military and political strategies; and acknowledging the limits of central government support. These local examples offer further insights for national-level settlements – that there are opportunities to shift perceptions of the conflict sufficiently to widen political commitment for reconciliation, and to build popular appetite to negotiate a revised and more inclusive social contract.

Jawed Nader and Fleur Roberts provide further insights into the potential of local peacebuilding to contribute to inclusive peace in Afghanistan. Local peace councils have played essential roles in resolving disputes and supporting justice, working with traditional jirgas and shuras to fill gaps in the formal justice architecture. Religious actors’ influence also has a key function to mediate local conflicts. Neither of these institutions should be idealised. But linking up with NGOs in joint peace initiatives has brought mutual benefits, for example in enhancing women’s involvement, and has helped to multiply gains in preventing local violence. Community-based peace initiatives can help connect local agency to formal peace structures and processes – for example local peace councils sharing conflict analysis and mitigation planning with provincial and high peace councils. This would also help to ground national peace architecture, which at present is widely perceived as remote and ineffective.

A political solution to the armed conflict between the Afghan government and the Taliban must be Afghan-led. But international support is essential to build momentum and resilience. Ed Hadley and Chris Kolenda explore how international partners can provide effective support for a political process in Afghanistan. There is a compelling moral and practical case to convince Western allies to use their collective leverage to persuade conflict parties to engage in talks. A viable approach must acknowledge the multi-tiered realities of the war, operating nationally, bilaterally and regionally, and also the incremental political logic of conflict resolution, working through a step-by-step process from informal dialogue and confidence-building, to military de-escalation and formal negotiations. Lessons from past peacemaking efforts stress the need for: 1) a peace process necessitating a long-term commitment; 2) strategic prioritisation, to coordinate activities towards a common political goal; and 3) third-party facilitation, excluding external states currently operating in Afghanistan.

Ambassador Douglas Lute reflects on how US political and military strategies could be integrated to support a peaceful political settlement in Afghanistan. Contrasting interpretations of stabilisation led to a flawed US strategy to degrade Taliban and build Afghan capacity to use force. The efficacy of the 2009 military surge was undermined by deploying troops to the wrong areas for the wrong reasons, and by a lack of complementary political action. Decision-making at key moments of political-military tension was often driven by US domestic political priorities. Inconsistency was exemplified by the killing of Taliban leader Akhtar Mohammad Mansoor in 2016, rather than seeing him as a potential interlocutor in dialogue. Ultimately, the US leadership struggled to make an explicit statement that the primary means to be used in Afghanistan were political, not military, and that the military was required to support political action.

The Taliban’s Political Office in Qatar has a potentially significant role to play in any peace process in Afghanistan. Spokesman for the Taliban Political Office, M. Suhail Shaheen, provides a statement for Accord on the Office’s perspective on pathways towards a political solution to violent conflict in Afghanistan – for a negotiated end to the violence and inclusive governance. The statement discusses prospects for negotiation as the best means to end the war in Afghanistan and resolve issues peacefully, and addresses key challenges such as foreign occupation and different frameworks for dialogue with both Washington and Kabul.

Julius Cavendish draws lessons for future peacemaking in Afghanistan from local settlements negotiated in Helmand Province in 2006 and 2010. These show that even in Afghanwar and Kabul.