

Brokering local settlements in Helmand

Practical insights for inclusion

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ABSTRACT

What lessons can be drawn from local settlements negotiated in Helmand Province for future peacemaking in Afghanistan – locally and nationally?

Experiences of sub-state settlements agreed in Helmand province in 2006 and 2010 have shown that even in the midst of very violent conflict, peace is possible in Afghanistan – and that local populations are prepared to take calculated risks to make it happen.

Examples of peacemaking from Musa Qala and Sangin districts offer practical insights into the mechanisms, brokers and strategic imperatives required to reach accommodations that can reduce violence and facilitate inclusion. All three case studies featured in this article ultimately collapsed.

But some common factors underpinned their short-lived success, which offer valuable, practical lessons for local peacemaking, in particular: identifying legitimate brokers; empowering local communities; honouring commitments; coordinating military and political strategies; and acknowledging the limits of central government support.

The case studies 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.

Local settlements struck in Helmand province – in Musa Qala district in 2006 and twice in neighbouring Sangin district in 2010 – provide concrete examples of the specific, practical mechanisms through which peace initiatives can be pursued in Afghanistan. While each of these accords ultimately collapsed, their temporary success provides valuable insights into the mechanisms and brokers, and the strategic imperatives necessary to forge future settlements.

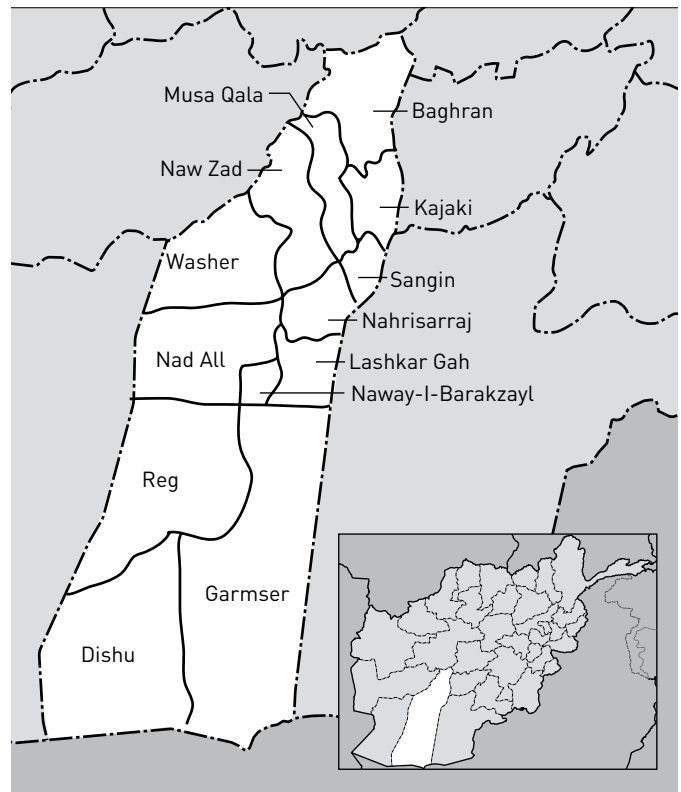
They highlight the readiness of different populations to take calculated risks in support of a revised, more inclusive social contract when government good faith and capacity are felt to exist. And while each of the three accords hinged on the successful identification and exploitation of local particularities, they also serve as useful case studies of some of the dynamics that any national-level settlement will inevitably have to grapple with.

Musa Qala accord

In 2006, Musa Qala was the site of increasingly violent confrontation between the Taliban and the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) – a conflict that overlaid a separate, albeit connected, struggle between the two predominant sub-groups in the area: the Hassanzai and Pirzai branches of the Alizai tribe. Predatory behaviour through the early 2000s by Musa Qala's Hassanzai district governor and associated commanders, who commandeered heroin-trafficking routes and extorted taxes from the local population, helped to tip victimised, frequently Pirzai, tribesmen into common purpose with the Taliban insurgency.

That September, however, a representative jirga of tribal elders in Musa Qala struck a 14-point written agreement with Helmand's provincial government, as described by Michael Semple, the European Union diplomat who helped broker the accord, in his 2010 report, *Reconciliation in Afghanistan*. Among other things, the deal provided that the Jirga would:

- » support the district administration, which would fly the Afghan flag
- » nominate 50 men to be recruited into the Afghanistan National Auxiliary Police to maintain security in the district centre, and that only these police would be allowed to bear arms in the district centre
- » along with the district administration, protect NGOs and civilian departments working in the district and assure the safe transit of national and international military forces
- » guarantee that the district centre would not be used for military operations against other areas



Helmand Province.

- » supervise the collection of local revenue, propose spending plans to the provincial government, and help keep district schools open.

As Semple notes: 'The unwritten clause of the accord was that its provisions would apply within a five-kilometre radius of the district centre'. Although the public narrative of the events that led to this agreement is sparse, it is understood that local elders held talks with local Taliban commanders, who saw benefits to alleviating the threat of serious conflict and agreed to call off attacks within the five-kilometre zone.

Although initially successful, by early 2007 the accord had begun to disintegrate, stymied by criticism from spoilers in Kabul, the appointment of a less sympathetic provincial governor, and the failure by the government to deliver development and security support. In February, an ISAF air strike killed a local Taliban commander outside the five-kilometre zone. While this strike did not breach the letter of the accord, by killing one of the commanders involved in maintaining it, ISAF destroyed a major incentive to uphold the agreement. Taliban fighters subsequently re-entered and occupied the district centre, and were only expelled by a major coalition (ie ISAF-Afghan) operation in December. Nonetheless, the Musa Qala accord had, for a brief moment, shown that engagement between the provincial administration and local tribes could extricate a population centre from the surrounding conflict.



Sangin accords

In neighbouring Sangin district, tribes of the Upper Sangin Valley (USV) twice struck deals with the local government, pledging loyalty in return for a revised social contract. First, in May 2010, leaders of armed groups nominally aligned with the Taliban-led insurgency offered to reconcile with the government, pledging their full cooperation. In a letter addressed to local government officials, eight prominent commanders invited ISAF and Afghan forces to move freely in the USV and to build patrol bases in their lands. They asked that the government provide small-scale development assistance to help local communities, and promised both their acceptance of government authority and an end of hostilities between local fighters and the coalition.

The same USV leaders also agreed to help remove all improvised explosive devices and to encourage local men to join the local police, while requesting protection from reprisals by the Taliban leadership. An integral part of the dynamic was the accord's anticipation of a revised, more inclusive social contract – one that addressed local needs in return for political reconciliation. This was in contrast to a prevailing situation through the early and middle parts of the decade when a narrow, predatory elite monopolised economic rents and engaged in abusive behaviour, spurring resentment.

In the weeks after USV leaders offered this deal, insurgent attacks on British and Afghan forces fell by 80 per cent. Nonetheless, despite the clear potential that the accord provided as a strategic victory, the British Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) in the provincial capital of

Lashkar Gah evinced little interest in it. According to British civilians supporting the Sangin district governor, the coalition's focus on central Helmand that summer, a decision to hand over responsibility for Sangin to US forces, and previous US criticisms over the Musa Qala accord, led PRT officials to deliberately drag their feet. And without PRT backing there was little prospect of delivering the development support the USV leaders had requested. The opportunity lapsed, therefore, with USV leaders and local government officials losing credibility in the process. In August, a drone strike targeting a local commander helped seal the accord's demise.

In the autumn of 2010, however, the Sangin district governor and his British advisors began cultivating a local Sufi leader called Agha Badar, who was highly regarded by the USV communities, and who subsequently agreed to support efforts to revive a reconciliation agreement. A number of factors helped breathe new life into the political outreach, including Badar's involvement, the good reputation of the recently appointed district governor and continued local antipathy towards the Taliban supreme leadership. A new accord was finally reached between USV commanders and the Afghan provincial government in December 2010, and witnessed by US Marine Corps and PRT representatives.

The deal stipulated that:

- » local commanders and coalition forces in the USV would cease hostilities

- » USV commanders and their communities would acknowledge government authority in their lands
- » USV communities would, with coalition support, resist any intrusions by external Taliban fighters
- » Afghan and international forces could establish joint patrol bases along the route of the main road through the USV, on which coalition forces would have complete freedom of movement
- » Afghan government officials helping to deliver public works would have access throughout the USV
- » USV leaders would send representatives to sit on a district *shura*, or council.

Side negotiations also saw Afghan officials promise to start project delivery immediately, while local commanders pledged to direct fighters under their command to volunteer for the local police. The deal was less inclusive, in terms of the USV communities committed to it, than the earlier accord, with Norzai tribesmen as well as Popalzai and Ishaqzai groups around Jushalay, Mian Rud and Mazak peeling away. Nonetheless, it provided a framework for reconciliation and continued engagement between local tribes and the Afghan government.

Following the pattern established earlier in the year, however, failure to deliver on the project by the government and its international partners soon undermined the agreement. USV leaders struggled to retain credibility with their communities as none of the small, low-cost infrastructure projects that had been planned in negotiations actually materialised, such as repairs to irrigation canals. At the same time, the US forces now responsible for security in Sangin repeatedly destabilised the deal, confronting USV communities in a clear violation of the spirit and at times the letter of the accord. Indeed, hostility among some senior US commanders towards any accommodation with local fighters led one British official to suggest that the US Marine Corps leadership in Helmand 'could not identify a peaceful solution, developed by civilians, as a victory'. Meanwhile, government and coalition support for a local police force, formed from reconciled fighters, never happened. Before long, external fighters sent by the Taliban leadership found that they could intimidate USV leaders with impunity. Agha Badar was shot and wounded by the Taliban, and later imprisoned by US forces. By late summer 2011 the deal had collapsed.

Lessons from the accords

Despite the ultimate failures of all three accords, each was briefly successful, dramatically reducing violence and showing that even in remote corners of rural southern Afghanistan, Taliban supremacy is no foregone conclusion. They also point to several simple yet critical

lessons that have relevance far beyond the narrow context of northern Helmand.

Recognise that good brokers can play essential roles in peace mediation but have ambiguous identities.

By definition, the best intermediaries have sets of contacts and a pattern of movement that can make them appear suspicious from a counterterrorism perspective. Their value as brokers is linked directly to their access to and influence over significant figures on opposing sides of a conflict. In the Musa Qala instance, elders on the tribal jirga were able to parlay their influence over local Taliban fighters into a settlement. In Sangin, the district governor, district elders, and later Agha Badar, played a key role in negotiations, with Badar ferrying letters between parties. In August 2011, however, Agha Badar was arrested by US forces and detained for almost two years on account of his association with insurgent leaders – the very quality that made him such an effective go-between. Depth of local knowledge and suppleness of thought are crucial attributes for any international actor seeking to decide whether or not to back a potential broker. Equally important is the calibre of that actor's Afghan advisors.

The Sangin examples showcase how the outcome of negotiations can hinge on the personal characteristics of key brokers. It was the appointment of a new district governor to Sangin in March 2010 that made both Sangin accords feasible. Unlike his predecessors, Muhammed Sharif became a trusted figurehead able to bridge tribal divides on the strength of his personal integrity. Following his appointment, USV leaders sought to meet with him, and the subsequent small-scale delivery of projects (pre-2011) were agreed in face-to-face meetings between community leaders and the district governor. The role of Sharif's British advisors, Phil Weatherill and John McCarthy, as well as that of another British civilian, Andy Corcoran, were also critical, with their deep well of detailed knowledge and diplomatic savvy helping to side-line spoilers who might otherwise have been able to undercut the second accord.

Empower local communities. The foundation of the three accords outlined above was the establishment of a revised social contract between local tribes and provincial government. It is a testament to the absence of the government in any meaningful form that these revised contracts amounted to little more than a basic form of engagement, in which the provincial government provided a modicum of basic services and security support in return for political allegiance. The contracts were notable as much for what they prevented as for what they provided, namely freedom from the predatory behaviour of discredited local elites.

Honour commitments punctually. The Afghan government and its international partners should recognise that streamlined delivery mechanisms that bypass the capacity issues faced by the Afghan government as well as the bureaucracy of the international development apparatus should be established before the conclusion of any future deal. Arguably the biggest failure by the Afghan government and its coalition partners in both Musa Qala and Sangin was their inability to deliver tangible benefits to the local communities engaged in the accords.

Semple has observed of the Musa Qala deal: 'The Afghan government and international support structures are too chronically cumbersome to deliver quick impact projects or capacity-building assistance to a challenging environment like Musa Qala ... Projects remained bogged down in bureaucratic delays and support to the auxiliary police was inflexible ... Whereas there was a need to enhance the prestige of the tribesmen working with the accord, the handling of the follow-up by the government and international community seemed calculated to undermine them.'

“ **Projects remained bogged down in bureaucratic delays and support to the auxiliary police was inflexible.** ”

Much the same could be said of the two Sangin accords. While uncoordinated military action – a drone strike first, and later the arrest of a key intermediary – may have signalled the end of both the Sangin accords, it was the failure of the PRT and the provincial government to uphold the government's side of the deals that ultimately undermined them. Although the small, quick, cheap rural infrastructure projects promised to local communities under the terms of the accords wore the veneer of development work, their primary function was actually to consolidate the grassroots political outreach that had led to the accords in the first place. Delivered through the district government, they were intended to demonstrate government credibility, force USV leaders to engage with the district governor, burnish the prestige of the USV commanders who had switched allegiance to the government, and highlight the inability of the Taliban to deliver anything similar. Quick delivery was essential. Other considerations, such as quality of workmanship, or strict observance of administrative process, were not.

Yet, as had been the case in Musa Qala, cumbersome bureaucracy and a lack of strategic purpose across a multitude of Afghan and international agencies stalled

project delivery entirely. Until 2010, a degree of flexible, easily accessible funding had been available to the Sangin district governor through the UK Stabilisation Aid Fund. This relatively agile mechanism had allowed the British advisors supporting the district government to respond to emerging opportunities for political stabilisation without delay. From 2011, however, a change in the resourcing model and a series of sweeping cuts, with no compensatory mechanism put in place, starved the local government of funding at an acutely sensitive political moment.

Coordinate military and political activities. Throughout late 2010, military operations in Sangin frequently damaged reconciliation attempts, sometimes at critical junctures, despite the supposed primacy of political objectives. These included:

- » an August 2010 drone strike against a reconcilable USV commander – who survived, and subsequently informed district officials that the attempt against him marked the end of the first Sangin accord
- » constant operations by US military forces in late 2010 despite a central government edict banning such activity
- » a November 2010 drone strike that killed Sangin's shadow governor – who was widely viewed as reconcilable, who was aiding negotiations towards the second accord, and whose death had the effect of driving several constituencies away from the accord, when previously they had been prepared to back it.

This fundamental disconnect between Afghan and British officials pursuing a political deal on the one hand, and US warfighters on the other, was also evident in the contrasting narratives with which each described the second Sangin accord. Senior US commanders framed the deal as a surrender by Taliban-aligned fighters to the coalition rather than a compromise with honour – a depiction that many USV fighters found both insulting and inaccurate. At the same time, US commanders insisted on 'testing the deal', sometimes by contravening its terms: on one occasion by driving the length of the USV, and then shooting dead an irate but unarmed villager; by establishing patrol bases in territory well away from the main road; and by entering local compounds without Afghan forces in tandem.

Where political and military action was coordinated, however, as it had been in the build-up to the first Sangin accord, the results were effective. Most notably, the exercise of 'heroic restraint' by British forces through the first half of 2010 was viewed positively by local communities, and contrasted sharply with abusive behaviour by out-of-area Taliban personnel, whose actions

bred resentment and eventually led them to be perceived as occupiers – precisely as the district governor and his advisors intended. Meanwhile, military strikes against irreconcilable USV fighters strengthened the position of more amenable elements of the local insurgency.

Be realistic about central government support. Even when it is politically willing, the Afghan government's capacity to deliver is constrained. In Musa Qala, a lack of will was compounded by concerted efforts to undermine the accord by elements of central government. During the winter of 2006–07, the accord was the subject of an inaccurate, hostile briefing by the National Directorate of Security (NDS), which portrayed it as an affront to Afghan sovereignty that had turned Musa Qala into an insurgent haven. Divorced though this portrayal was from reality, the effect of the negative briefing was to undermine political support among senior Afghans and internationals, helping to doom any efforts to deliver the development programming or police training mandated in the accord.

While the Sangin accords never faced the same level of NDS hostility, they still lacked the benefit of genuine central government support. Line ministries failed to view the region as a strategic priority, maintaining few officials and police in the districts and neglecting to pay salaries – and so communicating a tone of general indifference. Meanwhile, the Afghan security apparatus

sought to project government authority through local security forces, such as the Afghan National Army, rather than the revised social contract envisioned in the accords. What political support existed was largely ineffectual: for example, President Hamid Karzai's edict against military operations in the USV in late 2010 was routinely flouted by US forces.

Recognise that local deals can nonetheless pave the way for a national settlement. For all their local particularities, district- and even sub-district-level settlements have the potential to create space for political settlements elsewhere. This is most evident in the way that over time different communities in Sangin expressed their support for the accords, showing a widespread and popular appetite for the revised social contract on offer. This was provided that the Afghan government and its international partners could demonstrate credibility and good faith through the delivery of development and security support. Furthermore, successful local deals have the potential to alter not just local realities but broader perceptions of the conflict, opening up more political space for deals elsewhere. And finally, with the long-term success of local deals ultimately requiring national backing, obtaining this degree of political commitment in and of itself sets the stage for reconciliation on a grander scale.