Introduction

Progressive peace for Afghanistan

Anna Larson and Alexander Ramsbotham – with thanks to Professor Michael Semple for substantive input, insights and ideas.

Dr Anna Larson is Senior Teaching Fellow in Development Studies at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, and before this worked as a researcher in Afghanistan. She has been writing on politics, democratisation and peace in Afghanistan since 2005, is co-author with Noah Coburn of *Derailing Democracy in Afghanistan: Elections in an Unstable Political Landscape* (Columbia, 2014), and holds a PhD in post-war recovery from the University of York.

Alexander Ramsbotham is Director of Accord and Series Editor at Conciliation Resources.

ABSTRACT

***Accord* editors Anna Larson and Alexander Ramsbotham introduce the publication, explaining its rationale, focus areas and structure.** They identify the need for a radical change in approach to move beyond peace rhetoric in Afghanistan through a progressive, step-by-step process towards political settlement, which builds stability, confidence and legitimacy over time. This would pursue two phased objectives: first, short-term – to reduce violence which inevitably involves a central role for the conflict parties, principally the Taliban and the Afghan government; and second, long-term – to achieve a more broadly inclusive social contract representative of all Afghans which is only achievable with involvement and ultimately endorsement across Afghan society.

This *Accord* is structured in three main sections. Contributors span a range of perspectives and insights of Afghan and international men and women from academia, the military, government, armed opposition and civil society, many with direct experience of conflict and peace in Afghanistan.

Section 1 looks back to historical lessons of conflict and peacemaking to understand how departures from established, violent political paths might be possible. Sections 2 and 3 look forward to possibilities for peaceful transition in the future, with Section 2 considering priorities for peace initiatives and Section 3 examining options for institutional change. In conclusion, the editors draw lessons from these different contributions and put forward recommendations for policymakers and peace practitioners.

Afghanistan faces two possible futures: an indefinite continuation of violent conflict, or incremental progress towards sustainable peace. Drivers of both scenarios are documented in the contributions to this *Accord* publication. Drivers of conflict include a well-established war economy, which fuels and funds violence. Both main parties to the war – the Taliban and the Afghan government – remain determined to fight on and have secured sufficient external backing to do so. Underlying the violence are persistent political disputes over how power is shared and how future reforms are configured. Potential drivers of peace include war fatigue among the Afghan actors, significant overlap between visions of a future Afghanistan espoused by many in the Taliban movement and pro-government Afghans, plus continued international interest in achieving peace. Virtually all parties acknowledge that war can only end through a negotiated settlement. There is no military solution.

President Ashraf Ghani's February 2018 offer to the Taliban of a political process provided a stark illustration of the dilemma inherent in Afghanistan's current position. Contributions to this *Accord* by different Taliban caucuses document that the idea of achieving some form of political status without either surrendering or rejecting their identity as Taliban has some resonance within the movement. But publicly the Taliban leadership has been sceptical of the proposal, and violent attacks continue. Pro-government Afghans are also split. Interest in seeing an end to fighting is offset by resistance to sharing political space or fear of compromises on human rights that a peace settlement with the Taliban is perceived to imply.

The way forward from rhetorical offers to actual engagement in dialogue and a reduction in violence has so far been elusive. Indeed, a persistent theme of the Afghan conflict is the glaring gap between words and actions – with both sides talking peace while intent on waging war. The resultant violent stasis has again intensified with the 2018 Taliban spring offensive, while the Afghan government and its international coalition partners remain committed to increasing military pressure on the insurgency.

Incremental peace

In order to move beyond the peace rhetoric a radical change in approach is needed. An incremental, step-by-step process towards political settlement offers a potentially more effective way forward, which builds stability, confidence and legitimacy in phases over time. This must pursue two objectives. First is the short-term objective of achieving a reduction in violence which inevitably involves a central role for the conflict parties, principally the Taliban and the Afghan government. And second is the long-term objective of achieving a more broadly inclusive social contract representative of all Afghans which is only achievable with involvement and ultimately endorsement across Afghan society.

Short- and long-term objectives are distinct but also interdependent. Creating conditions in which Afghans can renew their social contract first requires a reduction of violence. As Michael Semple describes in this publication, an incremental approach in which agreement is phased would allow for confidence-building over time to increase the parties' willingness to consider more ambitious measures or embrace compromise. The cessation of violence would represent the single most important action to build confidence and help launch dialogue on core substantive issues. Such an approach recognises the importance of rebuilding relationships between the parties in expanding the possibility of agreement. Rather than involving a single text such as the 2001 Bonn Accords, an incremental peace in Afghanistan might consist of a series of agreements sequenced from easy to hard, with agreed reforms and confidence-building connecting the parallel short- and long-term tracks over a period of years.

But initiatives to reduce violence must be linked to a more transformative agenda in order to broaden their legitimacy and appeal. The terms on which de-escalation measures are agreed should not close down space for more inclusive transition and institutional reform subsequently. Heela Najibullah in this publication describes a multilayered approach to negotiating with armed opposition groups in Afghanistan in the late 1980s which combined practical efforts to establish local non-aggression or peace protocol pacts with a pragmatic political strategy to build domestic support and international legitimacy. International actors can play a role to help ensure that progress in violence reduction includes commitments to an inclusive settlement in the longer term. Ed Hadley and Chris Kolenda in this publication lay out some options for international support for a phased and multi-level political process in Afghanistan.

Evidence from past peace processes in Afghanistan and elsewhere shows that settlements agreed among battlefield elites do not inevitably progress to address the root causes of the conflict, which can contribute to a return to violence. Christine Bell et al. writing in 2017 assert that the success of peace agreements to resolve immediate violence has not been matched by longer-term commitments to broader reform such as relating to tackling gender exclusion. In fact, peace agreements have tended to lead to uncertain and often impermanent peace and political stalemate. Astri Suhrke in this publication describes how the Afghan armed factions represented in

the 2001 Bonn talks were able to establish themselves in positions of power and how such privileging of 'warlords' with records of serious human rights abuses led to the securitisation of the post-Bonn new order that blocked the advancement of stability and justice.

Sustainable progress towards peace also requires balancing centre–periphery or national–sub-national priorities for reconciliation. M. Nazif Shahrani in this publication explains how many non-Pashtun communities in northern Afghanistan see the war not between the government and the armed opposition, but between 'included' Pashtuns and 'excluded' non-Pashtuns. Factionalisation within the Taliban, alienation of many Taliban caucuses from the central leadership and increasing internal frustration with the armed campaign further suggest the potential of more localised peacemaking options – for example engaging responsive Taliban regional groups and local governance structures in joint violence reduction initiatives.

Previous sub-national peace efforts in Afghanistan have shown early signs of success but have ultimately been undermined by active resistance from the centre. Julius Cavendish in this publication describes how local peace settlements agreed in Helmand in 2006 and 2010 were effective in realising short-term reductions in violence as well as some level of renegotiation of the local social contract. But the fact that the settlements were established outside any national peace framework meant that not only did national authorities fail to follow through on locally-agreed commitments, but state institutions like the National Directorate of Security actively opposed efforts to implement them. All these local settlements ultimately collapsed. Local peacemaking in Afghanistan has also fallen foul of resistance by Taliban central leadership. For example, government reconciliation and reintegration programmes that effectively sought to 'buy-off' local Taliban fighters on terms akin to capitulation were seen as a threat by central leadership and failed to gain significant traction.

Practical steps

An incremental approach to peace in Afghanistan could start locally, reducing violence from the ground up. This responds to the fractured nature of the insurgency and the high levels of violence in Afghanistan, as well as the inclination towards de-escalation demonstrated by some Taliban caucuses, as described in this publication. It can also build on momentum of the recent groundswell of pro-peace local activism such as the Helmand Peace March Initiative. Practical steps could include reciprocal measures for de-escalation towards ceasefire, locally-agreed provisional peace zones in which the terms of a more permanent ceasefire can be renegotiated, tangible dividends and guarantees to convince local armed

Box 1: Peace and elections

Translating peace rhetoric into concrete gains for both short-term violence reduction and a longer-term renegotiation of the social contract will require strategic navigation of the existing political landscape – ensuring, for example, that potential spoilers within and outside the Afghan government do not have the opportunity to derail progress towards either. The forthcoming electoral cycle, with parliamentary polls scheduled for October 2018 and presidential elections in 2019, presents a key moment for such disruption by these spoilers – by preventing participation, thus undermining government legitimacy; or by manipulating the electoral process towards the further entrenchment of their own interests.

While it may be too late to incorporate elections formally into any national-level peace process, it will be important to mitigate the efforts of spoilers as far as possible. One way in which to do this in the short term would be to use parliamentary and then presidential elections as pilot opportunities for commitments towards the de-escalation of violence in certain designated areas, alongside greater international commitments towards candidate vetting, electoral monitoring and fraud prevention. These measures would represent active steps on the part of the Afghan government and international partners towards filling the substantial trust deficit that exists between Afghan citizens and the institutions and donors that orchestrate elections.

In the longer term, following the presidential poll in 2019, the newly-elected president and international partners should commit to establishing a high-level consultative group on political reform, to be tasked with conducting nationwide consultations about the overhaul of the political system.

Commitment towards this kind of reform will be necessary to help substantiate President Ghani's offer to consider the Taliban a legitimate political actor. At present within the National Unity Government there is little space for formal political opposition – and as both Thomas Barfield and Amin Tarzi note in their *Accord* contributions, this has been the case historically also. If the Taliban are expected to see this offer as one worth taking up, the political system must allow for political actors of different ideological persuasions to have influence in government.

groups to engage in the absence of a broader Taliban commitment, or regionally tailored strategies to tackle local war economies – such as those relating to resource extraction and livelihoods.

Longer-term commitments to developing a more broadly inclusive social contract also need to make discernible progress on key issues such as relating to justice or women's political participation. Practical steps could include: developing a high level independent consultative group on political reform and renewal of the social contract, in which women's involvement is central; launching a National Peace Dialogue to address root causes of the conflict, involving consultations with communities; and establishing a Peace and Security Commission of senior national and international men and women members charged with ensuring that security sector reform efforts reinforce the peace process.

Support for President Ghani's February 2018 offer of a political process with the Taliban can help sustain momentum towards short- and long-term objectives for example by mitigating resistance from central leadership to local peacemaking. This also provides a policy platform for international engagement with a nationally-owned Afghan peace framework. Practical steps could include: international affirmation of President Ghani's offer to boost its credibility, accountability and resourcing; engaging branches of the central Taliban leadership in political dialogue and discussion of security assurances; supporting intra-Taliban dialogue to broaden cross-movement consensus on de-escalation and potential areas for mutual accommodation; exploring options for third-party mediation, such as identifying an appropriate mediator or establishing principles for talks; and developing tailored peace support structures such as a hybrid International Contact Group that includes both state and non-state actors as a way to link mediation tracks.

The incremental approach advocated here describes components of a domestic Afghan peace process. But violent conflict in Afghanistan has clear regional and global dimensions that need to be addressed head on. Diplomatic support for an Afghan peace process is key to coordinate external involvement, but more direct interventions are also likely to be necessary, such as efforts to isolate different Taliban caucuses' reliance on external regional economic and political support. The various practical steps for progressive political settlement in Afghanistan introduced here are developed in more detail in this publication's concluding chapter.

Structure of the publication

In order to provide a solid analytical foundation for practical peace options in Afghanistan, this *Accord* publication is structured in three main sections. Contributors to these sections span a range of perspectives, experiences and insights. They comprise Afghan and international men and women, many of whom have direct experience of conflict and peace in Afghanistan – from academia, the military, government, armed opposition and civil society. The breadth of contributors covers a diversity of views of how to move forward with Afghanistan's transition from war. What unites them is their commitment to see change come about and their suggestions for how this might happen – distinct as each of these may be.

> **"An incremental, step-by-step process towards political settlement offers a potentially more effective way forward, which builds stability, confidence and legitimacy in phases over time."**

Section 1 looks back to historical lessons of conflict and peacemaking to understand how departures from established, conflictual political paths might be possible. Afghanistan's history contains important insights into factors influencing the country's potential transition from war today. These include how regional and broader international interests in Afghanistan's stability have prolonged violent conflict, how political legitimacy has been secured by different leaders at different times, and how opposition to these leaders has been excluded – pushed to the fringes or into exile, and thereby potentially into violence. Themes explored in Section 1 include a history of political opposition in Afghanistan, lessons from the Bonn process, transformative politics in 20th century Afghanistan, experiences of the National Reconciliation Policy in the late 1980s and early 1990s, a Taliban history of war and peace in Afghanistan, and a non-Pashtun perspective of political violence in northern Afghanistan.

Sections 2 and 3 explore possibilities for peaceful transition looking ahead. Section 2 looks at priorities for peace initiatives, which can represent critical junctures towards a different political future. Peace initiatives need to be carefully planned and managed to seize opportunities appropriately, accommodating different constituencies – armed and unarmed – with an interest in

Box 2: Armed groups and peace in Afghanistan

This publication focuses on possibilities for a peace process between the Afghan government and the Taliban insurgency as the protagonists of the armed conflict in the country. But several armed groups are active in Afghanistan alongside the Taliban, while the Taliban itself comprises a number of sub-groups with varying levels of allegiance to the central leadership.

Antonio Giustozzi in a 2017 report describes how the organisation of the Taliban has become increasingly fragmented since 2007, as the original political leadership of the Quetta Shura has struggled to maintain control over various regional commands. The Quetta Shura has also been beset by internal power struggles and factionalisation. Ongoing fragmentation has meant that different Taliban *Shuras* began to develop along comparatively distinct trajectories, with varying degrees of militarism, internal cohesion or attitudes to reconciliation with Kabul.

Michael Semple and Theo Farrell also writing in 2017 go further, describing the Taliban movement as being 'in disarray', with several factions vying for power, varying levels of morale, alienation of many Taliban from their leadership and growing internal disaffection over the armed campaign. Aspects of these analyses are echoed in the perspectives of different Taliban caucuses presented in this *Accord*.

Islamic State in Khorasan (ISK) province is perhaps the most notorious armed group currently operating in Afghanistan. Islamic State (IS or *Daesh*) announced the establishment of ISK in 2015. Felix Kuehn in this publication describes how ISK grew out of growing friction among different *jihadi* and other militant groups. It has now developed into a significant rival of the Taliban, which has found itself in open conflict with ISK – although there are also instances of local collaboration between the two.

Devastating suicide bomb attacks in Kabul in early 2018 demonstrated the intent of ISK to derail democratic progress in Afghanistan and dissuade Afghans from participating. The level of indiscrimination of ISK violence holds some niche appeal among the most extreme elements of the Afghan insurgency and the fact that it can still inflict such damage on soft but prominent targets like voter registration centres means that ISK maintains serious capacity to spoil peace efforts. A May 2018 report by the United States Institute for Peace (USIP) listed three ways in which ISK could disrupt any peace process in Afghanistan: by attacking sensitive targets; by fuelling ethno-sectarian tension; and by presenting themselves as more committed to jihad than the Taliban.

While atrocities claimed by ISK show the group's capacity to cause harm and grab headlines, most commentators still question the level of threat that it poses to the Afghan government. Thomas Ruttig of the Afghan Analysts Network in an April 2018 interview with Himal stressed that ISK is strategically insignificant, confined to localised areas of particular Afghan districts primarily in Nangarhar in the east. Small groups that have declared their affiliation to ISK elsewhere in the country lack serious means or influence.

Many ISK are former Taliban who use the 'fear factor' of ISK affiliation opportunistically. But Ruttig's analysis stresses that ISK failed to exploit the opportunity to recruit large numbers of disgruntled Taliban following the movement's split after the announcement of the death of its founder Mullah Omar in 2015. Deep ideological and religious gaps exist between the two groups, and many of even the most ardent Taliban dissidents in 2015 refused to join ISK. ISK's lack of strategic strength means that they do not currently feature in any plans for peace talks.

USIP has suggested that the same dynamics that make ISK a potential spoiler may also provide common cause for the main conflict parties to support a peace process, as the Afghan and US governments and the Taliban have all have invested human and other resources in fighting ISK. Meanwhile, part of any de-escalation process with the Taliban will involve the movement verifiably dissociating itself from ISK and other armed groups opposed to a political process.

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. But discussions of peace initiatives for Afghanistan have tended to lack practical detail, and topics covered under Section 2 look to flesh some of this out. The topics 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 peace process.

Section 3 examines options for institutional change. Space exists in Afghanistan to diverge from past political patterns and choose new trajectories. For example, reformulating Afghanistan's political structure to facilitate broader inclusion and accommodate opposition

non-violently might offer a way to support sustainable stability and insulate Afghanistan against regional political change or interference. Forthcoming elections present opportunities in this regard – elections, while deeply flawed in Afghanistan, remain popular with the general public. Reform before the coming cycle is not likely, but a large-scale overhaul of the political system is overdue and a consultative process to initiate this could bolster the legitimacy of a newly-elected president. Section 3 covers themes of: inclusive politics as a path to peace; local perspectives on peace and elections from four provinces; reflections on peace and transition by significant Afghan figures; theses on peacemaking in Afghanistan; human rights, security and Afghanistan's peace process; and institutionalising inclusive and sustainable justice.

In conclusion, the editors draw lessons from these different contributions and put forward recommendations for policymakers and peace practitioners, fleshing out practical options for a progressive approach to peace in Afghanistan. More detailed descriptions of sub-themes, contributors and articles are provided at the start of each section.