

# Section 1

# Looking back

## Lessons for peace from Afghanistan's past

Section 1 of the publication explores lessons of conflict and peacemaking from Afghanistan's past as a way to better understand how departures from established, conflictual political paths might be possible today.

Afghanistan today differs significantly from many of the scenarios described in the different historical periods covered in this section. But there are nonetheless common themes that are as important today as they were previously. These themes contribute valuable insights into ways in which both an initial de-escalation of violence and a revised social contract might be reached – and how the derailment of either might be avoided.

Key *substantive* themes 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. Key *process* themes include the importance of establishing trust through active, tangible measures, the critical need to allow time for results to become apparent, the importance of broad-based consensus that reaches beyond elite settlement and the prioritisation of Afghan over external interests.

Opening Section 1, **Professor Thomas Barfield explores how the lack of space for peaceful dissent has fomented violent resistance in Afghanistan.** Afghan political culture has developed a highly centralised structure in which power is concentrated in an individual ruler, constraining scope for political opposition – although local power-holders have sought de facto ways to resist central authority. Effective reconciliation requires strengthening governance and creating a political system that can accommodate dissidents peacefully. Devolving

power to Afghanistan's regions could alleviate pressure on the centre. But decentralisation has proved politically challenging in practice, not least in the context of the ongoing insurgency in Afghanistan today, and would still leave the core conflict challenge of how to introduce effective opposition politics.

Recent political transition in Afghanistan has largely been shaped by the 2001 Bonn Agreement. **Dr Astri Suhrke reviews lessons from the Bonn process,** describing how post-9/11 core interests of the United States at Bonn in denying Afghanistan as a base for terrorism trumped political objectives to agree a functioning political system. Demilitarising Northern Alliance militias, justice or human rights were not priorities. While Bonn's iterative transitional framework included steps to broaden inclusion over time, armed factions represented at the talks have since entrenched themselves in power. Taliban were excluded from Bonn and subsequent opportunities to accommodate amenable Taliban were rejected. A central lesson is that prioritising Afghan over external interests is key to a peaceful and sustainable future.

Interest in political reform is not new in Afghanistan. **Dr Amin Tarzi provides unique insights into modernisation initiatives from the early 20th century led by Mahmud Tarzi.** Key factors undermining Mahmud Tarzi's reform agenda included: 1) imported reformist ideologies that were alien to most Afghans; 2) failure to engage influential landed tribal leaders or clergy with authority and legitimacy; and 3) limited influence of Tarzi's royal patron to impose changes domestically or garner support

externally. Some key impediments to change from the Tarzi era are still undermining modernisation today, in particular the inability of the government to promote reforms among rural populations and the fact that transformational politics are largely seen as an external agenda.

A similarly exceptional insider view is provided by **Heela Najibullah, who examines the fate of the Afghan National Reconciliation Policy (NRP)** – launched by President Najibullah in the mid-1980s as the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan approached. The NRP sought to negotiate an end to conflict with the *mujahidin* and to establish terms for a comprehensive political settlement. It combined traditional Afghan socio-political practices for consultation and decision-making with a pragmatic political strategy designed to build domestic support and international legitimacy. The collapse of geopolitical strategic interest in Afghanistan at the end of the Cold War meant that vital international support to the NRP programme dwindled, fatally undermining it. Today, there is (some) international support for reconciliation in Afghanistan, but the domestic political will to take a reconciliation process forward is lacking.

Misconceptions of the Taliban have complicated efforts to end the war in Afghanistan. **Felix Kuehn considers how better knowledge of the ways in which the Taliban functions can inform more effective peace policy.**

While the Taliban comprises distinct groups with different views on national and international policy, the core message of the central leadership has wide societal resonance: Afghanistan needs to return to law and order and the Taliban are here to dispense security and justice based on Islam. The movement's resurgence in the 2000s has mirrored their initial rise to power, facilitated by widespread public discontent with the new government. The Taliban's narrative of the conflict in Afghanistan is not an alternative history, but rather a missing piece of the larger puzzle of how to administer the country peacefully.

Ending this section **Professor M. Nazif Shahrani discusses non-Pashtun views of conflict and peace in northern Afghanistan.** Many non-Pashtun communities in the north see the war differently – not between the Afghan government and armed opposition, but between 'included' Pashtuns and 'excluded' non-Pashtuns. This outlook reflects broader ethnic divisions and centre-periphery splits derived from entrenched perceptions of a prolonged, Pashtun-led project of 'Afghanisation' to centralise power in Kabul. Western efforts to support the government are understood within the same worldview. A priority for effective transition from this perspective is to revise commitments to centralised authority enshrined in the 2004 constitution in favour of devolved decision-making to regional institutions.