

Navigating local and central dynamics

Peacemaking with the Taliban

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This article is a personal account of an ‘informal connector’ role, building relationships between the Taliban, the Afghan government and the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA). It recounts the story of initial personal contacts established to catalyse official dialogue between UNAMA and the Taliban, which developed across various tracks – peace, humanitarian access and the protection of civilians. The article considers the extent to which the different levels of engagement, spanning formal political leaders, local commanders and influential civilians such as tribal elders, fostered pathways to peace.

Since its overthrow in 2001, the Taliban has regrouped, launched an insurgency and assumed *de facto* control of a significant portion of Afghanistan, despite having no recognised role in the country’s governance or administration. For a long time, people have acknowledged the need to engage the movement in dialogue at a national level, in part to complement or to control relationships established locally. The Taliban, however, have been wary of external contacts. Engagement requires the establishment of trusted channels of communication.

Building early connections

In September 2011, the then UN Special Representative of the Secretary General (SRSG), Staffan de Mistura, asked me to organise a meeting between the UN mission and the Taliban. This was the first formal UN attempt at contact. I conveyed the message to Taliban Deputy Supreme Leader Mullah Akhtar Mohammad Mansour through a friend.

Mansour promptly authorised a former Taliban diplomat to meet de Mistura on his behalf, scheduled for late September 2011 in Dubai. On 20 September, the then Chair of the Afghan High Peace Council, Professor Burhanuddin Rabbani, was assassinated. Rabbani had been reaching out to the Taliban and working to persuade members of the former Northern Alliance to embark on reconciliation discussions. With characteristic over-caution, UNAMA cancelled the meeting, counter to the view of a former UN SRSG who used to say events on the battlefield should be kept separate from events at the negotiating table. This set UN-Taliban relations back by two years and was the first of several lost opportunities to build pathways to peace.

In December 2013, the new SRSG, Jan Kubiš, asked me to convey a message to Mansour to again send his envoy. The Taliban’s Political Commission was authorised to meet with Kubiš and the first meeting took place in January 2014 in Dubai. Two senior Taliban representatives attended: Zahid Ahmadzai, a former Taliban diplomat in Islamabad, and Qari Din Mohammad Hanif, a former Minister of Planning under the Taliban government. Their seniority signalled that the Taliban were serious about engaging. Discussion covered public health, human rights, access to political prisoners and security guarantees for humanitarian assistance.

A second meeting in March 2014 in Qatar involved a Taliban delegation led by Supreme Leader Mullah Omar’s personal envoy, Sayyid Tayyib Agha, Director of the Taliban’s Political Commission. Discussions covered the need for a peace process and the upcoming presidential elections.



Agreement was reached for UN and Taliban political and humanitarian teams to meet regularly to discuss peace, human rights and humanitarian access. A third meeting followed in May, bringing together UN officials with the directors of the Taliban Commissions for Health, Prisoner Issues, Non-Governmental Organisations and Protection of Civilians. This was the start of a periodic dialogue that still continues.

2014 elections

Concurrent to these direct talks, I facilitated communication between Kubiš and Mullah Mansour on the election process, through a close contact of Mansour. Kubiš promoted the idea of peaceful elections as a shared goal and staging a regional dialogue to rejuvenate the peace process. Mullah Mansour issued confidential instructions to Taliban shadow governors and military commanders not to disrupt campaigning or election day itself, or to threaten the public and election commission workers. Despite this, there was a spike in Taliban violence and casualties around polling day, although fighters seemed to refrain from directly targeting voters. This illustrated the limited ability of the Taliban central command to control the largely decentralised operations of its fighters.

After an impasse over the result of the presidential election, a brokered deal brought the final two candidates into a National Unity Government (NUG). Ashraf Ghani took over as President on 29 September 2014 with Abdullah Abdullah

designated as Chief Executive. Two weeks later, Ghani referred in a press conference to the Taliban as 'the political opposition' of the Afghan government. This reframing of the Taliban as 'opposition' rather than as 'terrorists' followed a request passed to Ghani by Kubiš after the talks in Doha.

Mansour had proposed that the UN adopt a mediation role. President Ghani subsequently proposed the creation of a special envoy for 'peace and regional cooperation' in a telephone conversation with UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon. However, Ghani did not follow through with a written request to the Security Council, so the proposal remained pending. The UN concluded that the president did not favour a major UN role in the peace process, and subsequent comments have borne this out, such as when Ghani laid the blame for the death of former Afghan President Najibullah on the UN: 'The UN guaranteed him peace, but it ended up with a disaster,' (*New York Times*, 28 January 2019).

Ghani faced domestic criticism for his initial overture to the Taliban. In search of more tangible gains from reaching out to the Taliban, Ghani asked Kubiš to ask Mansour to declare local ceasefires in Helmand Province. If successful, this could have emboldened Ghani to advance the peace process, including direct government contacts with the Taliban and confidence-building measures such as removing Taliban figures from sanctions lists and releasing prisoners.

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A ceasefire could have supported government efforts to reframe the Taliban as disaffected opposition rather than terrorists. Mansour countered with a more ambitious proposal for provincial-level ceasefires in places such as Kapisa and Konduz. However, Ghani pivoted to demanding that the Taliban first enter direct political negotiations before he consider local ceasefire arrangements. This about-face appears to have been on the advice of security officials, who opposed the idea of piecemeal peacemaking and pursuit of confidence-building measures. The episode had a lasting impact on Taliban perceptions of the government, elements of which they suspected were not serious about making peace.

Pieces of the puzzle

It proved impossible to build on the confidence established in the early UN-Taliban dialogue. High-level talks were blocked by the Taliban's refusal to talk directly with the NUG, while the US refused to talk officially to the Taliban about withdrawal. Meanwhile, fighting intensified and casualties mounted on all sides. In this context, local peace initiatives emerged organically in several locations, but with the central government deeply sceptical about such efforts, trust ultimately proved elusive. The following are some critical events that eroded what little trust remained.

Konduz, September 2015

Konduz city was taken by the Taliban in September 2015. Civilians were caught in the crossfire and killed as they attempted to find food and water. The UN requested a 'humanitarian pause' to send a convoy of food and water. The government refused, prioritising the military operation to regain the city and deny the Taliban any political advantage from an extended occupation.

Dand-e-Ghori, September 2015

In September 2015 Afghan officials, including the Minister of Tribal and Border Affairs, the Baghlan Provincial Governor, and tribal elders from Dand-e-Ghori (Pul-i-Khumri district), signed an agreement to improve security in the area. It stipulated that neither the Afghanistan National Defence Forces nor the Taliban would carry out military operations, that a joint commission between elders and government officials would be established, and that elders would act as guarantors. Local elders close to the Taliban signed the deal, but the local Taliban leadership did not.

The Taliban did not feel bound by the terms of the deal and the elders had no way of forcing compliance.

Dand-e-Ghori is predominantly Pashtun and strategically important due to its location on the highway linking Kabul and northern Afghanistan. In April 2015 the Taliban took control of large parts of the district as part of their spring offensive. Government counterattacks led by Tajik commanders began in August. Some 250 families were displaced, schools closed, and livelihoods disrupted. Community leaders believed that they were unfairly targeted because of their Pashtun ethnicity and perceived sympathy for the Taliban. In the face of the widespread insecurity and impact on the civilian population, President Ghani backed his minister's mission, which culminated in an informal agreement to leave the area as a demilitarised zone in which no armed actors (government, Taliban or militia) would operate. But critics again claimed the agreement showed the NUG's inability to defend territory against Taliban attacks.

Following the signing of the agreement, displaced Dand-e-Ghori residents returned and resumed agricultural activities. Security improved significantly, with recorded incidents declining from 40 in July–August to six in September. However, the agreement fell apart in October with the government accusing the Taliban, emboldened by their recent successes around Konduz, of breaking the agreement and using it to move fighters to the Konduz offensive.

Local factors exacerbated the collapse of the deal, including ethnic tensions and proximity to the major battlefield around Konduz. But the central problem was that the deal was not actually signed with the Taliban. The community wanted the deal, but local Taliban were concerned about the likely negative reaction of their ruling council, based in Quetta, Pakistan, who would oppose a deal with the 'puppet administration' and were unwilling to relieve pressure on government forces. None of the parties seemed to see any benefit in a third-party monitor, so the elders were in effect not only signatories but powerless monitors too.

Central Afghanistan, March 2016

In 2016 a Taliban provincial 'shadow governor' contacted me seeking an agreement with the government on a ceasefire in his province and wanting a UN role in mediating and supervising any agreement. Despite the earlier indication that Ghani wanted the UN to mediate, the government would not agree to this. There was by this time a new, top-down initiative called the Quadrilateral Coordination Group (involving Afghanistan, China, the US and Pakistan), which hoped to engage the Taliban in talks.

Ghani did not want to allow any other tracks that might relieve the pressure on them to participate in his initiative. Once again, the space for the UN diminished.

Eid, 2018

Coordinated unilateral ceasefires for Eid in June 2018 saw scenes of Taliban and Afghan police and soldiers embracing, and fighters being able to cross into 'enemy-controlled territory' to see relatives and friends, with minimal incidents of violence. It was a clear indication that the community wanted peace and could live together, yet this disturbed the leadership of the Taliban and Afghanistan National Army.

Eastern Afghanistan, 2018

In late 2018, a Taliban military commander in Kunar province reached out to me and claimed that he could implement a local ceasefire. I was no longer working for the UN, but he also wanted the UN to play a role in the initiative. The UN, under their 'good offices' mandate, commenced shuttle diplomacy and the government showed some interest in the idea. UNAMA convened intermediaries for the Taliban (a religious scholar, a humanitarian worker and a tribal elder) alongside other UN personnel and the government. An intermediary presented audio and video messages from the commander in question, proving his *bona fides*. At this point, the government decided to insist on dealing with only one genuine intermediary, to deter inflated demands for assistance.

The UN, having initially provided good offices, stepped back once the parties were in touch. There were initial successes, including agreement on de-escalation and a reduction of US airstrikes. The government reached a longer-lasting, one-year agreement with the Taliban in Kunar.

Burka, 2018

In December 2018, a mediation led by religious scholars in Burka district between the district officials and Taliban concluded with the endorsement of a four-month ceasefire. This allowed free movement and security of civilians and government staff, and led to a reduction in violence, growth opportunities for local businesses, and access for public service delivery into some Burka villages. The move was perceived locally as a communication bridge between the government and Taliban that permitted local stability. However, the ceasefire could not be sustained. While local religious leaders and community elders advocated its extension beyond March 2019, the Taliban leadership announced their usual spring offensive. Local Taliban leaders initially acquiesced to local pressure for the deal but later could not resist more intense pressure from their own high command to resume fighting.

Conclusion

These examples reveal both the potential for, and obstacles to, peacemaking in Afghanistan. Engagement with the Taliban at the leadership level generated a mechanism for the UN to connect productively with a conflict party in a structured way, over a period of years. But when the Taliban leadership gave an undertaking to deliver a specific effect (avoidance of election violence in 2014), the impact on the ground was less than the UN had hoped. In other elections, including the 2019 presidential election, local-level deals succeeded in places in reducing violence, even in the absence of central leadership authorisation.

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Communities in rural areas of Afghanistan exercise a significant degree of autonomy, but both the government and the Taliban lean towards a centralised institutional culture. This tension means that the Taliban and government alike have restrained rather than encouraged local peace initiatives. Attempts to 'decentralise' peacemaking have been resisted by central leaders and regarded as a threat.

The government in particular has tried, with some success, to limit the role of outside parties in peacemaking. The UNAMA mandate has been watered down to 'support an Afghan-led' process – although the 'good offices' mandate of the UN gives broad authorisation and UNAMA has always been careful to keep the government broadly informed of its activities. The Taliban seems to accept that the UN will have an important future role and does not see the UN as too close to the government, but some neighbouring states still regard the UN as too pro-US or just do not want further internationalisation of a regional issue.

Successful local peace initiatives must find ways of either insulating themselves from the disapproving high commands – for example, by adopting a low profile or operating with the cover of local influencers or religious authorities – or overcoming resistance and co-opting the relevant national authorities. While provisional assessments indicate that local level humanitarian and civilian protection dialogue tracks have delivered practical effects to mitigate the harm to the Afghan population from the ongoing conflict, experience since 2011 provides examples of higher-level politics blocking 'bottom-up' efforts to progress the peace process. Senior leadership buy-in is clearly a prerequisite for progress on the formal

and national-level processes. Conversely, local violence reduction makes a difference for ordinary war-weary people.

We need to rethink the approaches to make local solutions 'stick' in places like Afghanistan. One contributing factor is how narrow or broad the processes are. For example, few of the deals described above prioritised inclusivity, and none paid attention to gender: women were not involved in negotiations and nor was consideration given to their contributions or perspectives. In the Dand-e-Ghori agreement there was at least an attempt to set up a joint body to monitor the arrangements. But, because this was between officials and elders rather than actual Taliban, it was easy for the Taliban to renege on the arrangement, while Tajik security commanders also worked to undermine the deal. Local agreements require a joint commission involving all interested parties plus civil society and religious figures to promote adherence.

Local initiatives can provide positive outcomes. Community members – women, men, boys and girls – have varied and important insights and information. They can readily distinguish between the local opposition, the government, fighters sent in from elsewhere, and groups who are not Taliban. Such initiatives can also be faster and cheaper to implement than those at a higher level. Indeed, local Taliban commanders often have close relationships with their counterparts in neighbouring areas. Effective implementation of a local ceasefire can provide confidence to Taliban commanders in surrounding areas to join the process. But, in the absence of agreement at a more senior level – or at least a blind eye being turned by central leadership – these initiatives will struggle. Conversely, high-level agreements can only be implemented effectively with the negotiation and supervision of myriad local peace agreements.