Foreword

Michael Semple is visiting professor at the Institute for the Study of Conflict Transformation and Social Justice, Queen’s University Belfast. He specialises in research, policy and practice of humanitarian assistance and conflict resolution in Afghanistan and Pakistan. He worked in the region from 1988–2008 and was a member of the United Nations political team that helped implement the 2001 Bonn Agreement. From 2004–08 he was Deputy to the European Union Special Representative for Afghanistan. Michael is a recognised analyst of the Afghan Taliban Movement and his current research looks at challenges facing militant jihadi groups evolving a political role.

Pioneers of peace talks with armed groups are often figures from communities affected by violence. This Accord Insight, exploring local engagement initiatives, is a timely reminder that conflict transformation often proceeds without a presidential mandate or mediation by a retired international diplomat. National level and formal processes have much to learn from the experiences of tribal elders, clerics or civil society activists who have sat down to talk with their local armed groups.

In my experience, media coverage of conflicts often presents civilian populations as disempowered and at the mercy of armed groups. In Pakistan, estimates of the number of tribal elders assassinated by Taliban and al-Qaeda affiliates are cited to show how militants have subverted traditional authority structures such as jirgas. But my understanding of both Pakistan and Afghanistan is that there is intense interaction between armed groups and community figures, in part driven by militants’ recognition that their survival depends on maintaining a degree of popular consent.

Communities engage with armed groups on a range of issues: from hostage negotiation, to criminal justice, dispute adjudication and local ceasefires. The degree of agency shown by civilian interlocutors also varies. Representatives may articulate community demands to armed groups. In Pakistan and Afghanistan there are a wealth of informal actors, including clerics and elders, ready to act as intermediaries for the recovery of hostages or to agree truces. In areas where an armed group is the de facto authority, much of the engagement consists of petitioning – civilians approach the armed group’s commander because the government-sanctioned assistant commissioner is no longer able to deliver.

The importance attached to civilian engagement by the Taliban is illustrated in cadre training programmes, which in recent years have increasingly emphasised the need for courteous and non-coercive relations with civilians. The actual behaviour of cadres may differ, but the Taliban’s intention is clear enough – recognising that the ability to operate safely in rural areas depends upon maintaining a modicum of community consent. Conversely, the Afghan Taliban perceive arbakai (government-backed community militias) as the greatest threat to their influence, which are formed when the Taliban fail to secure consent to their presence. Armed groups know that losing the argument with communities may mean losing the war.

Since 2010 there have been periodic attempts to orchestrate official peace talks with the Afghan Taliban. Early 2015 saw the most concerted attempt yet, as President Ashraf Ghani made a strategic calculation that top-level rapprochement with Pakistan, complemented by Chinese mediation, could bring the Taliban leadership to the table. The initiative started out as a classic example of top-down peacemaking, relying on the persuasive power of state actors to engage with the leadership.

This Accord Insight points to alternative approaches, where communities engage with and influence armed actors in their operational area. By considering grassroots engagement in a range of contexts the Accord Insight usefully draws attention to the richness of experience in dealing with armed groups.

The new data will hopefully help address the top-down bias in official peacemaking, and create space for complementary approaches at multiple levels. The experiences documented are relevant internationally to anyone developing a strategy to bring armed groups into a peace process. Afghan peacemakers may yet embrace the bottom-up approach if they find that high-level talks do not deliver the kind of progress they have been hoping for.