Processing peace
in Afghanistan

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Author

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Overview

On 9-11 January 2017, Conciliation Resources organised a Joint Analysis Workshop (JAW) as part of the formative stages of the production of an Accord publication on peace in Afghanistan. This event, hosted by the Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies (CPCS) in Siem Reap, Cambodia, involved 23 participants coming together to discuss priorities for peace in Afghanistan, providing perspectives from different blocs within the Afghan government, human rights specialists, the Afghan media, and members of the academic and policy communities (both Afghan and international).[1] The aim of the JAW was to identify ways in which the Accord project could most usefully engage with and explore these priorities in some depth with a variety of stakeholders actively involved in peace processes at different levels. This project is part of the Political Settlements Research Programme.

Central to the aims of the project is the intention to compile an Accord publication as a practical resource to guide and galvanise policy and practice for peace in Afghanistan. Contributions made to the discussions by participants identified priorities and gaps in a proposed draft publication structure.

The following report summarises the discussions, organised into six themes: peacemaking in perspective; terminology; inclusion – distributing power, considering costs; understanding divisions; re-centring the regional stage; and processing peace. Linking all themes is the recurring concern that contextual understanding should be central to designing an appropriate peace architecture. As one participant emphasised, Afghanistan is currently experiencing not just one war, but many: any attempt to promote peace will need to recognise and address these wars as discrete but interconnected components of a conflict system.

1. Participants in the JAW were not intended to constitute a 'representative' sample of Afghan opinion, but rather were invited on the basis of their ability to speak to current concerns from a variety of perspectives. The Accord project going forward – and the publication specifically – will engage a broader spectrum of views, ensuring in particular that a variety of women, rural Afghans and those sympathetic to Taliban narratives of exclusion are commissioned as contributors, building on the extent to which views from these different groups were expressed at the JAW.

Executive summary: priorities and challenges for peace in Afghanistan

- **Peacemaking in perspective** – previous experiences of transitions from conflict in Afghanistan bring important lessons for the shape of future talks, such as the need to examine narratives of exclusion and take into account the political and economic incentives of all parties involved in perpetuating violence.

- **Terminology** – the vocabulary of peace in Afghanistan is contested. This has significant practical implications, notably in sustaining the status quo – enabling some to claim to be pursuing peace while not engaging with the substantive challenges that this implies, such as fostering dialogue or accommodation between antagonistic groups, or to use 'peace initiatives' as cover for activities with unrelated or contradictory objectives.

- **Distributing power** – conventional approaches to power-sharing in Afghan peace initiatives have not accommodated Afghans' multilayered identities. Unpicking Afghan understandings of inclusion and power-sharing and how these relate to stability and conflict transformation may help to avoid getting stuck in patterns of horizontal elite inclusion at the expense of progress towards vertical forms of societal inclusion.

- **Inclusion costs** – what are the implications of peace talks with the Taliban in terms of inclusive outcomes? Administrative leadership positions in the National Unity Government are already saturated to accommodate interest groups from respective blocs. Who would make way for new arrivals, how might such restructuring be incentivised to convince potential losers, and what is the capability of the current administrative set-up to manage such a process? How, when and where to advance inclusion in relation to a peace process is a key question for Afghanistan.

- **Understanding divisions** – a precise under-standing of the divisions that underpin conflict, including their complexity, is important for identifying appropriate responses. Examples include how ethnic groupings are often instrumentalised to obscure other tensions, for instance relating to land distribution or political geography; how ownership of Islamic identity has historically been contested to legitimise political authority; and how splits among different Taliban factions could both facilitate and hinder potential talks.

- **Politics of the opposition** – there is insufficient understanding among the Afghan public or international partners of the workings of Taliban politics. There are a number of reasons for this deficiency, including the lack of a clear position within the Taliban itself. But a more precise knowledge of the Taliban's internal dynamics, and its various priorities for peace and for governance, is important for achieving progress towards a viable political solution to the conflict.

- **Re-centring the regional stage** – a nuanced analysis of regional and international interests and roles in both the conflict and peace is important in order to anticipate spoilers and identify supporters, for example the different perspectives within Pakistan or shifting global priorities.

- **Hekmatyar precedent?** – the 2016 peace agreement with Gulbuddin Hekmatyar took more than six years of difficult talks and involved significant concessions by both sides, for example on the presence of foreign troops. It has been heavily criticised for granting impunity to a warlord accused of great brutality in the war, but Afghan public reaction has so far been mixed. The government intended the agreement to signal to the Taliban its readiness to negotiate, but there has been little concrete progress towards dialogue since.

- **Processing peace** – a major block to progress is the current dearth of detail about what a peace process between the Afghan state and the Taliban might actually look like, and the specific mechanisms through which peace initiatives might be pursued – sequencing talks, developing agendas, configuring support structures, or building consensus or public support. Afghan and international parties and actors need to identify appropriate models or entry points for peace talks and initiatives, and to anticipate the political and material demands, compromises and risks that such processes require.

About Accord and the Joint Analysis Workshop

Accord projects and publications document and analyse the lessons of peace processes through comparative and participatory research and activities, presenting insights from local and international experts and practitioners. Accord has been published since 1996 by Conciliation Resources, an independent non-governmental organisation working with people in conflict to prevent violence and build peace. This 27th Accord project on Afghanistan is an output of the Political Settlements Research Programme – a four-year research project by a North-South Consortium of five organisations led by the Global Justice Academy at the University of Edinburgh, to examine how political settlements emerge, how open and inclusive they are, and how internal and external actors shape them.

The Joint Analysis Workshop (JAW) was an opportunity to identify and problematise key challenges, priorities and opportunities for building peace in Afghanistan and inform the design of the inquiry. The 'joint analysis' investigated these from the different perspectives of Afghan and international actors with an interest in peace initiatives and their outcomes. The interaction among participants was important – how they presented their viewpoints and reacted to those of others, and how they collectively considered blockages to progress and potential ways to address these. By pinpointing research gaps on peace in Afghanistan, and who is best placed to respond to these in terms of experience, expertise and networks, the JAW will help to focus the Accord inquiry where it is most needed.

Peacemaking in perspective: a recent history

Civil War and the Taliban regime

The context of brokering peace in Afghanistan in 2017 has a complex and relevant historical basis. A political history of the last three hundred years sheds valuable explanatory light on the pitfalls and progress of current peace initiatives. For the purposes of this paper, however, a brief summary of talks and agreements over the last 25 years helps to situate analysis of the current status of peace in Afghanistan.

Rivalries between key leaders and their factions in the civil war (1991–95), while often shifting, have remained pertinent to the ways in which peace agreements have been reached. In 1993, the Islamabad Accord was signed in Pakistan, setting up a power-sharing agreement between warlord Gulbuddin Hekmatyar and the Government of Afghanistan led by Burhannadin Rabbani, in which Hekmatyar was given the position of Prime Minister. Hekmatyar was a political activist at Kabul University in the 1960s, and is the founder and leader of the Islamist group Hezb-e Islami and one of several protagonist militant leaders in the civil war. This deal was short-lived, however, and the bombing of Kabul soon resumed, this time with Hazara and Uzbek military leaders joining Hekmatyar's offensive against what was perceived to be the consolidation of state power by Tajik leaders (Rabbani and Ahmad Shah Masood). A further attempt in 1994 by Masood to revive the 1993 deal was unsuccessful.
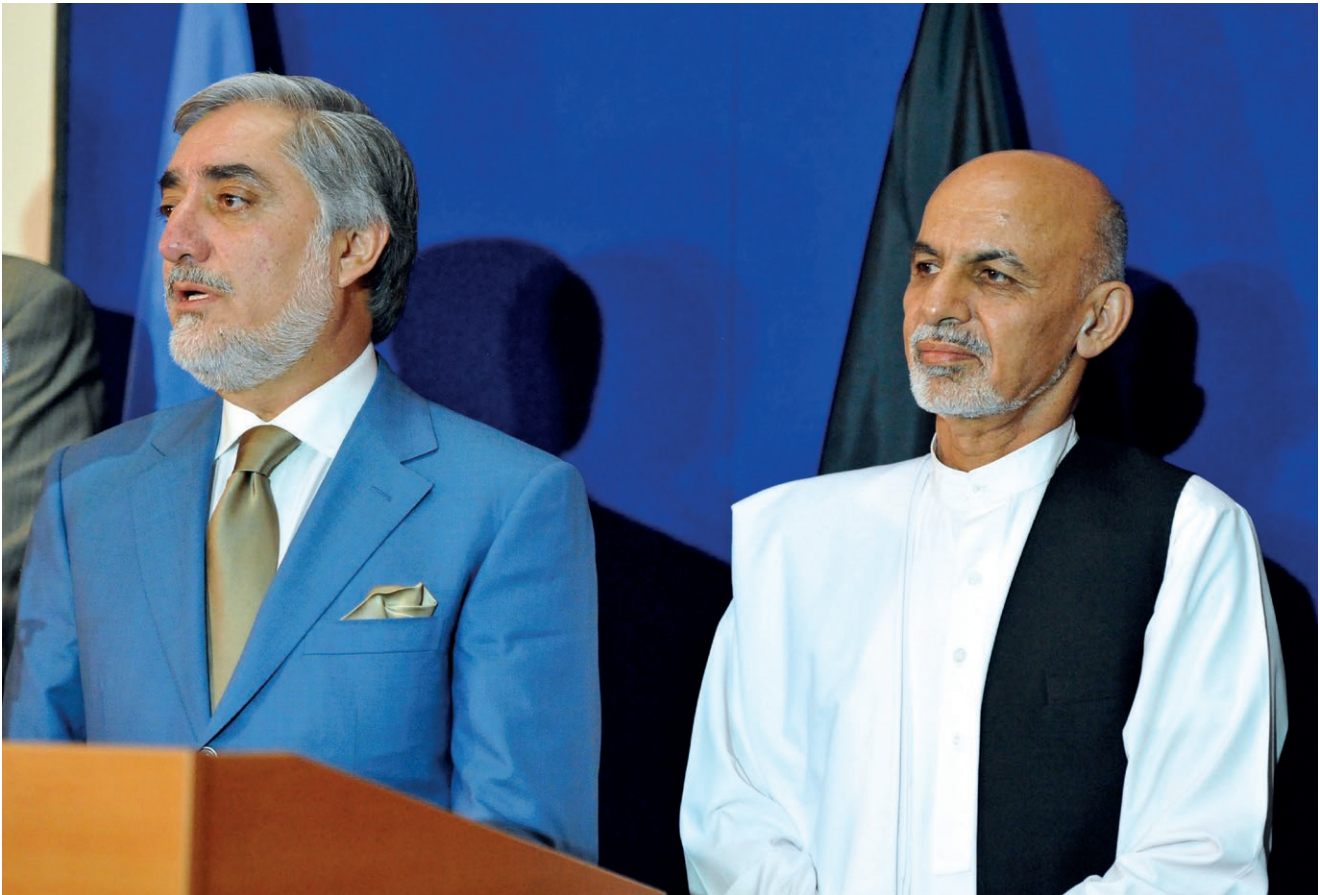
Amid the anarchy of the civil war the Taliban opposition group emerged in Kandahar, south Afghanistan, claiming to hold exclusive entitlement to re-establish religious moral values. It grew in influence in the south as warring militant factions destroyed Kabul. After a string of military and political battles across the country, Taliban forces captured Kabul in 1996 and established the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. After this point, Hekmatyar remained in Pakistan while other leaders combined forces against the Taliban under the name of the United Front or Northern Alliance.

Bonn process

The invasion of Afghanistan and ousting of the Taliban in September 2001 followed the Taliban's refusal to hand Osama bin Laden over to the US authorities in response to the 9/11 terrorist attacks. A short military campaign was considered successful after the surrender of Taliban officials in their headquarters in Kandahar and the apparent flight of Taliban leader Mullah Omar. The Bonn Conference was held in December 2001 as a means to draw up a roadmap for peace (later termed the Bonn Process). This included setting up an interim administration, a process for the participatory development of a new constitution for Afghanistan, and an elections cycle beginning with Presidential elections in 2004.

The Bonn Agreement was widely seen to benefit Northern Alliance leaders, who, claiming the defeat of the Taliban as their own, received international support for building Afghanistan's new administration. The roadmap also set out a programme for disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) that targeted militia groups – largely of the former Northern Alliance (or *Shura-e Nazar*) – but excluded the Taliban, who were seen as enemy combatants. DDR was widely perceived as only partially implemented, with reports of commanders handing in old weaponry in return for cash but holding on to key supplies of arms. Very little attempt was made to encourage former Taliban fighters to join the government, who in fact risked imprisonment on surrender.

After the election of Hamid Karzai as president in 2004, who had previously led the post-Bonn interim administration, popular narratives of Pashtun exclusion from central government continued to flourish – in spite of the way in which he presented himself as from the Popalzai Pashtun sub-tribe. At the same time, Taliban forces regrouped and began what would become a longstanding offensive against the Afghan government, which grew in strength and influence to become a significant threat to security and statebuilding.

Abdullah Abdullah and Ashraf Ghani at a press conference in Kabul, Afghanistan on 8 August 2014. © US State Department

Talking to the Taliban

Afghan and international actors gradually came to recognise the extent of the Taliban offensive and that it could potentially undermine efforts to stabilise the country, and to move towards an understanding that some sort of accommodation with the Taliban might be necessary. A 2009 communiqué from the international Hague conference on Afghanistan recognised the need to incorporate 'Afghan fighters who distance themselves from international terrorism'.[2]

This coincided with Karzai's appeal to 'upset brothers' among the Taliban rank-and-file, attempts to buy the allegiance of Taliban forces through one-off payments, and the beginning of President Obama's civilian 'surge' to promote statebuilding initiatives and a move away from an exclusive international military focus on counter-insurgency. Karzai made informal

efforts to re-establish ties with the Taliban. He subsequently looked to formalise these through a National Consultative Peace Jirga in 2010 (although no Taliban representatives attended) and the formation of a High Peace Council under the leadership of former president Burhannudin Rabbani. Rabbani was killed in a suicide attack in 2011, claimed by the Taliban.

The lack of concrete progress towards talks with the Taliban was further complicated in 2013 by the Taliban's establishment of a political office in Qatar. Many analysts had considered this necessary, providing a fixed address for the Taliban and an indication of their intention to engage politically. Qatar also suited the Taliban as a location, who considered it neutral, as well as suiting the US. But for Karzai it symbolised an erosion of state authority and a loss of control over the process.

2. Communique, International Conference on Afghanistan, The Hague, p. 2. Accessed 27 March 2017 online at: http://peacemaker. un.org/sites/peacemaker.un.org/files/AF_090331_Hague%20Conference%20Declaration.pdf . For a summary of earlier informal attempts to broker talks see Nils Wörmer (2012), 'Exploratory Talks and Peace Initiatives in Afghanistan'. Berlin: SWP. Accessed 28 March at www.swp-berlin.org/fileadmin/contents/products/comments/2012C44_wmr.pdf

Ghani era

Ashraf Ghani's assumption of the presidential office in 2014 brought a renewed focus on Pakistan as a key ally in bringing the Taliban to talks. A first meeting took place as part of the 'Murree Process' in July 2015, although the Taliban complained it had been organised under false pretences and refused to acknowledge it.[3] Talks were also stalled at this point due to the announcement of Mullah Omar's death, which had occurred two years earlier but had been kept secret. Two subsequent leaders have since led the largest branch of the Taliban movement: the first, Akhtar Mansour, was killed by a US drone strike in May 2016, and was succeeded by Haibatullah Akhundzada.

Military attacks by the Taliban have continued, although alongside Taliban assertions that violence is only resorted to through necessity, that civilians are not targets, and that valuable national infrastructure will be protected.[4] This contradicts Afghan government narratives that the Taliban still constitutes a dangerous terrorist organisation and the main source of violent extremism in the country. Nevertheless, international partners seem more open to dialogue with the Taliban than at any point previously: not only North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) countries, but also Russia and China, which have hosted Taliban delegates in talks in recent months.

In September 2016, the Afghan government and Hekmatyar signed a peace deal after several years of negotiations. Hekmatyar agreed to lay down arms in return for certain privileges, including the president's stated intention to lobby for the removal of his name from UN and US terrorist exclusion lists, and the payment of USD $4 million for living costs and personal security.[5] Hekmatyar has been in exile since 1997 and listed since 2003, and has been accused by many, including Human Rights Watch, of the targeted shelling of civilians and assassination of intellectuals during the civil war. Until this point he had refused to sign a peace deal until foreign troops left Afghanistan. After many iterations and rounds of talks, the 25-point accord asserts that he disagrees with the government on the continued presence of foreign military forces but concedes that he renounces terrorism. The implications of the Hekmatyar deal for peace in Afghanistan more broadly are considered in more detail below.

3. www.afghanistan-analysts.org/the-murree-process-divisive-peace-talks-further-complicated-by-mullah-omars-death
4. See for example the Taliban statement issued in December 2016 as reported by the Diplomat http://thediplomat.com/2016/12/taliban-pledge-to-protect-infrastructure-projects. According to the Watson Institute, Brown University, by August 2016, 31,000 civilians had been killed in the war since 2001 and another 41,000 injured, by both Taliban and NATO/Afghan government attacks. This report also cites the UN as stating that 2016 saw the highest number of civilian casualties since the intervention in 2001. Neta. C. Crawford (2016), 'Costs of War: Update on the Human Costs of War for Afghanistan and Pakistan, 2001 to mid-2016', Watson Institute, Brown University, p1. Accessed 27 March 2017 at http://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/files/cow/imce/papers/2016/War%20in%20Afghanistan%20and%20Pakistan%20UPDATE_FINAL_corrected%20date.pdf
5. See Sune Engel Rasmussen (2016), 'Butcher of Kabul pardoned in Afghan peace deal', Guardian, 22 September. www.theguardian.com/world/2016/sep/22/butcher-of-kabul-pardoned-in-afghan-peace-deal

Terminology

'Peace process', 'peace settlement', 'peace agreements', 'peace talks' – the **language of peace** is a lexicon in its own right. In Afghanistan these terms can be used interchangeably, uncritically and at cross-purposes among different groups and actors. Workshop participants stressed that maintaining ambiguity can be strategic, notably for supporters of the status quo: allowing people to claim to be pursuing peace when they are not; diluting and dispersing peace efforts; and facilitating the failure to align peace initiatives with identified causes. This report does not intend to produce an agreed or fixed glossary but rather to promote a shared understanding of what peace might entail in Afghanistan so that initiatives might converge productively.

References to the peace process in Afghanistan are misleading. There is not one unified process involving and identifiable by all parties to the conflict (let alone the general public). Different narratives exist at both national and local levels that serve a variety of political purposes. Some claim to be pursuing peace but do not engage with substantive challenges – such as fostering dialogue between opposed groups – either because they do not have access to these groups, or because the perceived outcome of dialogue actually threatens the status quo and the power structures it fosters.

Nevertheless, among most Afghans there is a widespread and urgent desire for peace – or at least the cessation of violence. Critical accounts of the peace process should recognise the concerted efforts made by many actors towards achieving this, including the significant emphasis placed by the Afghan government on the importance of talks with the Taliban, and a general acknowledgement by most Afghan stakeholders, including senior Taliban leaders, that talks will constitute a key component of what may become a peace process. At present the term 'peace initiatives' seems to describe the breadth of these efforts more accurately than the term 'peace process'.

Also discussed was the potential differentiation between '**peace agreement**' or 'deal', and '**political settlement**'. Distinctions can be made between an *agreement* as a temporary, conditional springboard for progress towards a longer-term *settlement*. Yet, there is still considerable overlap. A political settlement implies an arrangement in which power or resources and the mechanisms through which these will be shared are decided upon. It can also refer generically to an existing set of arrangements for how power and resources are divided – such as the Bonn Agreement.[6] Distinguishing between agreement and settlement implies that an agreement should come first. But it is also possible that peace agreements and political settlements could occur simultaneously, that talks about the content of political settlement(s) take place while violent conflict is ongoing, or that a very 'thin' agreement is reached which has little buy-in or commitment to any new political settlement.

Talks can take place around both agreements and settlements, and many types of dialogue between different groups are needed before official 'talks' can be held. Different groups may negotiate arrangements with the Afghan government at different times, as well as multiple, simultaneous agreements with different groups, for example at the subnational level. And while 'settlement' implies finality, any arrangement for power-sharing is never fixed but is continually being renegotiated and evolving.[7]

Workshop participants also challenged the term '**reconciliation**'. It has been conflated with 'reintegration' in Afghanistan since Karzai's attempt to appease rank-and-file Taliban fighters ('upset brothers') in 2008 through a 'reconciliation and reintegration' programme, and because of the selective and largely unsuccessful implementation of DDR initiatives prior to this. These different understandings of reconciliation have exposed contradictions between counter-insurgency and

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6. While the roadmap established at Bonn was intended as a springboard for ratification through the longer, democratic and participatory Bonn Process (2001–05) – perhaps in theory a deal to be followed by a publicly affirmed settlement – from the perspective of many Afghans the Bonn Agreement itself symbolised how power would be divided and among whom, with the former Northern Alliance commanders present and reaping the rewards of their military struggle against the Taliban, and the Taliban not present at all.
7. Christine Bell (2015), 'What we talk about when we talk about political settlements', Working Paper 1, Political Settlements Research Programme, p.18

Afghan warlord Gulbuddin Hekmatyar (centre) waves before giving a speech to supporters in Jalalabad, Afghanistan 30 April 2017.
© REUTERS / Alamy Stock Photo

peacemaking. Karzai's rhetoric in 2008 came to signify buying-off Taliban fighters rather than political engagement with the leadership. How the Karzai administration applied the term had serious implications for Taliban perceptions of their own status and legitimacy, and consequently for their preparedness to engage in dialogue. Reconciliation was being presented as a one-sided process in which the Taliban would concede both their arms and the cause they had been fighting for in return for an assurance of impunity and a cash pay-off. In effect, it was only the Taliban who would be doing any reconciling – there was no move on the state's part to listen to Taliban grievances.

Kabul-based elites, civil society and media organisations and their constituencies also need to reconcile themselves to the idea that peace means talking to the Taliban. As in Colombia, where public resistance to the peace deal was associated with perceptions of impunity granted to FARC rebels, there is still considerable opposition to processes that imply overlooking Taliban terrorist attacks over the last 15 years, which have killed thousands of Afghan civilians.

This viewpoint is particularly strong among Afghan media that have been the target of many such attacks, and has consequently been broadcast extensively countrywide.[8] Urban dominance of the insurgency narrative also derives from urban elites' ability to communicate widely and in English, thereby also attracting international coverage. But there are other perspectives of the conflict across the country, and workshop participants pointed out that some Afghans criticise the lack of attention paid to civilian casualties caused by offensives by NATO or the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) compared to Taliban atrocities.

Reconciliation further involves the political reformulation of relationships – a remodelling of the power dynamics inherent in the elite-urban bias in approaches to conflict resolution in the country to date. The Accord publication intends to address broader concepts of peace and how different groups fit into a political settlement. The publication aims *both* to clarify the current standing of those whose position is already visible *and* to identify the voices missing from the debate.[9]

8. Examples of attacks on journalists include an attack on a minibus carrying TOLO TV staff in January 2016 and the killing of well-known Afghan journalist Sardar Ahmed and his wife and two children in the Serena Hotel in March 2014. Widespread public outcry at the loss of this well-loved media personality led some commentators to associate it in part with the high turnout in elections as protest against the continued brutality of Taliban attacks.
9. With thanks to Michael Semple for thoughts on this point.

Inclusion: distributing power, considering costs

A session of the JAW was dedicated to what 'inclusion' means for peace in Afghanistan. Very much of international interest, the idea that any lasting peace agreement or political settlement must be 'inclusive' is often assumed but rarely qualified in the Afghan context. More work needs to be done to explore how, why and which peace initiatives should be inclusive, in terms of both participation (who is there) and agenda (what is discussed).

The disconnect between **elite leaders** who claim to represent significant Afghan constituencies – whether ethnic, sub-ethnic, religious or party-based – and the actual interests and involvement of those constituencies affects how inclusive peace initiatives actually are. As one participant articulated, '"power-sharing" doesn't do justice to the multilayered identities of Afghans'. Unpicking Afghan understandings of inclusion and power-sharing and how these relate to stability and conflict transformation is vital to developing a practicable political settlement in Afghanistan, including how horizontal (elite) and vertical (societal) inclusion intersect.

From the perspective of those who follow the **Taliban** closely, any consideration of *inclusion* must first recognise the purposeful *exclusion* of the Taliban from the Bonn Agreement and Process. One workshop participant asked in what, exactly, the Taliban would be included as part of a peace process – into which national political institutions, for example. The National Unity Government (NUG) is already awash with administrative leadership positions as a result of its joint leadership structure, to reward electoral supporters of both President Ghani and Chief Executive Officer Abdullah Abdullah. *Who*, then, would lose out from further inclusion, and *how* to incentivise losers of political capital to accept change, are key questions.

The 'politics of presence' dominates in Afghanistan,[10] in which, akin to Ljiphart's consociational model, elites from all significant minorities are allocated governmental positions to ensure collective rights and the perception of equal access to government resources. This means there is little to bind the government together as a cohesive entity with a unifying ideology. It is far from clear either what the Taliban would gain from inclusion in a fragmented, corrupt and inefficient system of governance, or what advocates of a more effective and inclusive peace process would gain from the Taliban's involvement in that.

Participants also stressed the significance of the **Hazara minority**, members of which have mobilised against unfavourable conditions of ethnic discrimination and subordination in the past, and now have significant representation in government, higher education and civil society. For this group, inclusivity would mean sustaining similar, relatively high levels of representation in national government and the current constitution, and ensuring equal rights are afforded to Shia Muslims compared with the majority Sunni population.[11] The Taliban's historical persecution of Hazaras makes notions of altering the hard-fought status quo difficult to justify.

Efforts by the **international community** to provide impartial support for inclusive peacemaking are complicated by its own complex tapestry of interests and constraints. For example, international actors have been very supportive of the peaceful efforts to promote citizen-state dialogue that a number of Hazara groups have made recently, such as those of the Enlightenment Movement, but are also keen to support talks with the Taliban. They need to maintain some semblance of impartiality in this regard while also distinguishing between non-violent and violent actors. A diplomatic answer to this dilemma has been to engage with groups prepared to make concessions, making a clear distinction between the Taliban on the one hand, and Al Qaida or ISIS on the other.

10. See Anne Phillips (1995), 'The Politics of Presence', Oxford: OUP.
11. In Afghanistan, all members of the Hazara ethnic group are associated with Shia Islam. Some non-Hazara minorities are also Shia.

International actors are also better placed to support inclusive participation in peace initiatives than to affect inclusive outcomes. This is particularly evident in relation to women's engagement – where inclusive outcomes are arguably the greater priority for Afghans. Nevertheless, *who* participates affects the overall legitimacy of an agreement, in terms of the perceptions of key elites or interest groups. When and where inclusion happens, and how this then impacts different interest groups and agendas, may be critical to the longevity of any agreement.

Many workshop participants felt the **Bonn Agreement** prioritised stability over transformation. It established a balance of power (albeit in a context of regime collapse and very rapid change) that entrenched 'horizontal inclusion' among senior leaders as self-proclaimed 'representatives' of ethnic and other groups, although in reality with minimal participation of their purported constituencies. The Bonn period – September 2001 to June 2002 – merits greater analytical scrutiny of its relevance to the current context, both to understand the nature of Afghanistan's contemporary political landscape, and to inform negotiations for a future political settlement.

International actors appear keen to avoid a repeat of the Bonn scenario. But there is little discussion on (and arguably limited political will for) ensuring participation in a process that allows for **transformative change** – beyond a general acceptance that an agreement will involve an elite bargain of sorts, alongside some stated commitment to making this bargain 'inclusive enough', or better than it might otherwise be. A more transformative approach might imply a multi-stage process in which some aspects of a deal are limited to a small group of participants while others are more inclusive. A model could be the two-tiered approach in Colombia, which to an extent sought to separate bilateral peace talks to end violence between the government and FARC from a more participatory peacebuilding process involving all Colombians after the signing of an initial agreement.[12]

A great deal of emphasis has been placed over the intervention years on transition processes being '**Afghan-led**' or '**Afghan-owned**', referring primarily to Afghan government control over decision-making. Questions were raised throughout the JAW of the meaning of these terms in practice, for example as signifying: strategic international disengagement or even the withdrawal of all international support for peace or statebuilding initiatives; international delegation of responsibility for 'peace failures' to Afghans, even as international actors continue to hold the purse-strings and make decisions regardless of Afghan priorities; or Afghan elite capture.

Many international partners are frustrated with the seemingly reactive nature of Afghan politics, where waiting on policy decisions by international and regional powers constitutes an important part of internal decision-making. The concern is that progress towards peace should be Afghan-*initiated* and Afghan-*specified*, with different actors engaging in debates on the practical details of peace agreements and settlements. But it is not clear where leadership might come from given the divisions within government, reflected in the NUG's inability to select an election commissioner in view of the sway this post holds in determining the outcome of the election.

12. Kristian Herbolzheimer (2016), 'Innovations in the Columbian Peace Process', p. 3, Oslo: NOREF.

Understanding divisions past and present: political communities, political cultures and common ground

As with any conflict context, the identification of **different political cultures** and the **divisions and connections between different social groups**, both historically and currently, is an important basis on which to situate peace initiatives. During the JAW, attention was drawn to ethnicity and how common portrayals of Afghanistan as 'deeply divided' over-simplify societal relationships. While ethnic narratives are important, the way in which they intersect with other factors such as land ownership and political geography is critical to understanding how elites use the discourse of ethnicity for political purposes, and how these dynamics change over time.

Other important divisions highlighted by participants included **Islamic identity** and contestation for ownership over it – a political tool used historically to legitimise rule by different leaders, including Abdurrahman Khan in the 1880s. Different political cultures that distinguish communities with access to power from those without to some extent coincide with both **urban-rural divides** and with the **elite culture** of the Afghan court. This links back to the monarchy and those close to it who have traditionally been privy to political decision-making, compared with the Afghan population at large – invariably excluded from and oppressed by resultant policies.

These patterns of power and relationships highlight how and when the interests of constituents might be brought into elite bargains, and the extent to which elite deals (ostensibly) about representation in government institutions could (actually) incorporate community or subnational interests. More specifically, the Taliban have demonstrated their ability to understand and engage rural political cultures, in particular through their articulation of *maslumiyat* (the state of being oppressed). The question now remains, how to link these cultures and the Taliban that connect to them with those of the Kabul elite?

JAW participants also noted the significant **divisions within the Taliban**, and the emergence of different political cultures among different Taliban groups – for example the Mansour network, based in Helmand and led by Mullah Rahim; the Political Commission in Qatar; the Quetta Shura leadership under the Emir Haibatullah Akhundzada; the Rasoul group, whose leader Mullah Rasoul is currently under arrest in Pakistan; the Haqqanis, a Pakistan-supported terrorist network originating from Paktia province, eastern Afghanistan; as well as a number of other groups. Divisions have been exacerbated by growing contestation over funding streams within the movement and the inability of the leadership to affect changes in subnational shadow governance structures in some provinces. These divisions may necessitate multi-track approaches to peace that are based on a clear acknowledgement of differing political cultures in different sections of the Taliban. Focusing only on elites and a bargain between them might enable an agreement in the short term, but the history of power-sharing agreements in Afghanistan indicates that such bargains, while perhaps necessary, are never sufficient to bringing about lasting peace.

A number of participants highlighted the considerable confusion among the Afghan public – and indeed within the movement itself – as to what the **Taliban's priorities for and perspectives on peace** actually are. This also aligns with the general difficulty for international actors in discerning Taliban views. Some participants attributed this to divisions, tensions and changes within the Taliban leadership, their sense of battlefield gains and failure to communicate peace priorities clearly. Others stressed the unwillingness of the Kabul-based media to report on this, or the language barrier of the mainstream media reporting in Dari or English and its unwillingness to engage with rural Pashtun narratives.

Civil society representatives at the JAW expressed widely held perceptions that **negotiations with the Taliban posed threats both to the Constitution and to the gains made over the last 16 years**, in particular concerns over women's rights, elections and democracy more generally. But there is little consensus on what such gains actually constitute substantively and for whom, precisely what risks greater engagement with the Taliban imply, or what gains there might be for different constituencies who feel more represented by the Taliban than by local NUG affiliates. Even less attention has been paid to the potential damage to these 'gains' of a refusal to engage in dialogue or an escalation of conflict. According to Gopal and Osman, at least some Taliban views on women's roles in society have softened since their hardline position in the 1990s, and are generally more akin to conservative practices commonly found in many parts of rural Afghanistan.[13]

Workshop participants who have followed Taliban activities and narratives closely suggested that it was the exclusionary nature of the current architecture of government that formed the basis of major Taliban grievance. Acknowledgement by the political class in Kabul and the international community that Bonn was exclusive by design and not by mistake could pave the ground for talks. Inclusivity would constitute not simply incorporating the Taliban into the current administrative set-up, but re-examining the set-up itself. A more palatable approach for Afghan and international officials could be that the circumstances that necessitated an exclusionary process at Bonn have since changed and now require a reassessment of the Agreement and the political set-up it created.

Some participants identified some **common ground** on peace between the government and Taliban, essentially involving the removal of foreigners and multi-ethnic power-sharing. Gopal and Osman suggest that the views of the state among some more pragmatic members of the Taliban demonstrate greater overlap with the government than is usually assumed, including that elections are not in themselves antithetical to Sharia; that the constitution need not be dissolved; and that some form of power-sharing agreement will be necessary.[14] This also links to the notion of *perakh bansat*, or 'broad-based government', widely considered across different communities in Afghanistan to be an ideal form of shared government in which different ethnic and sub-ethnic groups are represented in central decision-making and resource allocation.[15]

Gopal and Osman state that the Taliban's political committee is currently working on a set of guidelines for power-sharing that indicate a potential development and refinement of Taliban priorities. Both the Taliban and the broader Afghan population are deeply sceptical about the ability of the current NUG to lead peace initiatives, given perceptions of stalemate between Ghani and Abdullah and the general administrative dysfunction – exemplified by the government's failure to fill key leadership positions or make progress on significant issues such as electoral reform.

13. See Anand Gopal and Borhan Osman (2016), 'Taliban Views on a Future State', New York: Center on International Cooperation, p. 26.
14. Gopal and Osman, (2016).
15. *Perakh Bansat* was used by respondents regularly in a study of perceptions of democratisation by the Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU) in 2011: Anna Larson (2011), 'Deconstructing Democracy in Afghanistan', Kabul: AREU, p. 48.

Re-centring the regional stage

A common narrative about the inability of the Afghan government to conduct talks with the Taliban relates to the extent of neighbouring countries' influence over Taliban activities. Yet, this is also often used as a reason for inactivity and was considered by some participants to exaggerate Pakistani control and underestimate the degree to which the conflict was fundamentally Afghan. Recent reports have indicated that many elements of the Taliban would prefer to be free of the influence of Islamabad.[16] Participants recommended a measured appraisal of Pakistan's role, an exploration of what kind of Afghan polity would be acceptable to its different neighbours, and a strategic assessment of the countries that could act as spoilers to any peace process and so would need to be engaged in supporting talks – namely, the US, Pakistan, Iran and Russia.

A key recent development has been Moscow's attempts to increase its influence over the Afghan peacemaking space, after the failure of the quadrilateral talks involving Afghanistan, China, Pakistan and the US. This could be linked to developments in Syria, and to Russia manoeuvring for international influence and status in the diplomatic sphere, or simply to the fact that Russia, like India, China and by extension, Pakistan, would benefit economically from a stable Afghanistan. As Barnett Rubin has recently observed, however, all major regional powers share concerns over the establishment of a long-term US military outpost in Afghanistan – which could then be used against them in future.[17] While the implications of its involvement are as yet unclear, Moscow's move to get involved signifies shifting global dynamics and the need to factor these into peacemaking planning.

The inauguration of President Donald Trump has left a great deal of uncertainty surrounding US policy on Afghanistan, with a 'wait and see' attitude prevailing. But emphasising Afghanistan's regional significance and the imperative for the government to take advantage of its strategic position shifts the focus from one of blame to one of necessary initiative. This extends to Kabul's foreign policy more broadly, which one participant asserted should be proactive and not simply wait for the result of successive US elections.

The JAW clearly highlighted that **talks with the Taliban are now very much part of international agendas in Afghanistan**, although the international military effort to defeat the insurgency is still commanding much greater resources than the political effort to engage. As one participant stated, 'everyone [accepts the necessity of] talks now; no one disputes the fact that there must be talks'. Yet, it is important that the different components of this shift be understood better. Participants noted that the Accord publication will need to address how donor priorities have changed over the last 16 years, what donors could have done differently from the outset of their engagement, and what needs to change looking forward.

UK priorities in Afghanistan align broadly with those of other international donors and include promoting UK security through ANSF support and regional security, sustaining the state and bringing the Taliban into peace talks. The UK is also concerned with its legacy in Afghanistan and not losing perceived gains made, although again there seems little substantive discussion of what these gains actually are.

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16. See for example Theo Farrell and Michael Semple (2017), 'Ready for Peace? The Afghan Taliban after a decade of war', London: Royal United Services Institute, pp. 7-8.
17. Barnett Rubin (2017), 'It's much bigger than Afghanistan: US Strategy for a Transformed Region', War on the Rocks, 25 April. https://warontherocks.com/2017/04/its-much-bigger-than-afghanistan-u-s-strategy-for-a-transformed-region

Processing peace: establishing an agreement architecture

The final and perhaps most critical theme of this report relates to the current **lack of detail on the specific, practical mechanisms through which peace initiatives might be pursued in Afghanistan**. Even at a national level, dialogue around what a peace process might actually look like is much disputed and generally underdeveloped. Assumptions surrounding the sequencing of events or scheduling more generally, in terms of balancing time for consensus-building with deadlines to keep discussions moving forward, need to be unpacked and examined.[18] Some mechanism for legitimising the process might be necessary, for example through a referendum or other means of public participation, alongside analysis and communication of the economic implications of peace for all parties to the conflict. Some workshop participants felt that a ceasefire would need to precede any negotiations, but others thought this was unlikely given the Taliban's use of violence as leverage, pointing to the Colombian experience as an example of talks without a ceasefire. As some groups within the Taliban might continue to act as spoilers even as other groups might have begun talks, it appears more likely that negotiations will occur amid ongoing violence.

The nature of the **political economy of the war in Afghanistan** and the incentives for those involved to step away from violence recurred in several guises in discussions around the practical mechanics of peace. As one participant explained, 'to understand peace processes we need to understand political networks and incentives'. Competing networks headed by powerful individuals control the Afghan economy. A broad community of actors profit from poor, selective and corrupt law enforcement, both directly and indirectly. This includes international contractors who 'cannot' verify the outputs of construction projects, for example, as a result of insecurity, or communities who benefit indirectly from customs rents charged by powerful local leaders in border areas.

Informal economic power crosses the political divide as key sources of income for the Taliban also form part of the illicit economy. One set of questions for the Accord inquiry could look into how political and economic incentives can be altered or enhanced to promote peace, and whether a parallel set of informal negotiations could address the illicit economy, especially relating to opium, in order to isolate this from formal negotiations. If, as Farrell and Semple suggest, the Mansour group is the emerging influence within the Taliban movement, which has significant control over opium revenues in Helmand, negotiating the administration of the illicit economy will be of strategic importance to the mechanics of peace in Afghanistan.[19] How might the international community engage with this given that eradicating the opium economy has been a priority at successive international conferences on Afghanistan?

Workshop participants who follow Taliban activities closely suggested '**enabling conditions**' (rather than preconditions) better described the Taliban's basic demands ahead of committing to attending talks – namely, removing sanctions and lifting travel bans. But there is also the possibility that these could be negotiated once broader parameters and basic support for talks had been established.

One participant highlighted the need to think creatively about **who would participate in talks** from both the NUG and the Taliban (possibly a delegation of *Ulema*). Both sides might need to respond to discrepancies in political cultures as discussed above, for example selecting provincial representatives to negotiate on behalf of the government, with talks between central government and the Taliban's political office or Pakistan-based leadership on a separate track. It was generally agreed that some aspects of an agreement could be negotiated separately, but that agreeing on a framework was the most important priority now.

18. See for example the recommendations set forward in Christine Bell and Kimana Zulueta-Fulscher (2016), 'Sequencing Peace Agreements and Constitutions in the Political Settlement Process', Stockholm: International IDEA, p. 7.
19. Farrell and Semple (2017), p. 7

Box 1: Hekmatyar peace deal as a precedent?

The **2016 Hekmatyar deal** has been the subject of heavy criticism by human rights groups both within and outside Afghanistan, who highlight the impunity it grants to those accused of great brutality during the war. Yet, there are mixed opinions among Afghans as to whether the *end* of securing peace justifies these *means*, even if justice itself is sidelined in the process. One participant at the JAW expressed surprise at the relative lack of public protest against the deal, potentially demonstrating that Afghans are prepared to make major sacrifices for peace.

Also of note is how, under certain conditions, the Afghan government and a belligerent potential spoiler have acquiesced to the terms of a deal in spite of considerable scepticism. The agreement was ratified at the presidential palace with a diverse range of Afghan government representatives present and speaking – including Habiba Sarabi of the High Peace Council (HPC) and Atta Mohammed Nur, a prominent Northern Alliance commander and Jamiyat party member from northern Afghanistan, formerly opposed to Hekmatyar's Hezb-e Islami group – and by Hekmatyar himself via a pre-recorded video.[20] The high profile event provided not only the chance to publicise the signing of the agreement and draw attention to the work of the HPC, but also for Hekmatyar to publicise his own reasons, justifications and caveats. Far from a simple acceptance of the deal, his video speech presented a defiant and to some extent threatening position – to save face in the light of any potential accusations of selling out to the state.

It was clear that the Afghan government intended the Hekmatyar deal to signal to the Taliban and other insurgent groups its apparent readiness to reach similar agreements. The fundamental quid pro quo of the deal was the commitment by Hekmatyar to cease military activities and respect Afghan laws, in return for a government commitment to request the delisting of Hezb-e Islami leaders from international sanctions arrangements and an amnesty. Hekmatyar conceded to relinquish his most substantial pre-condition on the withdrawal of foreign troops; and Kabul agreed to integrate Hezb-e Islami fighters into the ANSF and to support the resettlement in Afghanistan of 20,000 refugee families affiliated with Hezb-e Islami based in Pakistan.[21]

At the JAW, focus rested on the potential content of future deals in light of the details of the Hekmatyar agreement. Changes in Taliban policies since the 1990s provide some common ground for dialogue, such as more nuanced views today some of which prioritise a softer approach to women's rights, or the fair application of the constitution and its enactment in a country free of foreign interference, especially since the Afghan government in the Hekmatyar agreement has committed to the departure of foreign troops as a shared future goal[22] – although there has been little discussion about how this might be attained in real terms. There has also been no indication from the current Taliban leadership that its military campaign is coming to an end, although the movement is not unified and there is considerable rank-and-file disaffection toward the leadership and its continuation of violent conflict. This may open up new political spaces for what some analysts have called 'insurgent peacemaking' with peace-oriented Taliban.[23]

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20. For more detail see Borhan Osman (2016) 'Peace with Hekmatyar: What does it mean for battlefield and politics?', Afghan Analysts Network, 29 September. www.afghanistan-analysts.org/peace-with-hekmatyar-what-does-it-mean-for-battlefield-and-politics
21. Borhan Osman (2017), 'Charismatic, Absolutist, Divisive: Hekmatyar and the impact of his return', Afghan Analysts Network, 3 May. www.afghanistan-analysts.org/charismatic-absolutist-divisive-hekmatyar-and-the-impact-of-his-return
22. See Gopal and Osman (2016).
23. Farrell and Semple (2017).

Box 2: Local dispute and conflict resolution

Local dispute resolution between communities and the Taliban has been ongoing across the country but is sparsely documented and largely disconnected from national level initiatives. Some members of the Taliban leadership have been conducting informal talks with former Northern Alliance opponents and other groups currently acting within the NUG umbrella.[24]

Other local, community-led initiatives include continuous and evolving dialogues over dispute resolution between *shuras* and local shadow government officials that have been taking place for many years, usually on a case-by-case basis,[25] and more recent initiatives by internationally supported NGOs, such as the Western Afghan Women's Network (WAWN), which is training midwives in rural Herat to talk to women about convincing sons and brothers not to join the insurgency.[26] As pointed out in recent scholarship, however, there are a number of assumptions made by development actors as to the impact that international support to such programmes can have, who neglect to question the circumstances under which they succeed.[27]

Farrell and Semple have explored the potential for negotiating sub-national ceasefires, looking at the necessary conditions and supporting mechanisms, as well as how these might coalesce towards a national peace process. They concluded that in 2013, for example, local ceasefires were possible in at least four provinces – Helmand, Kandahar, Nangarhar and Kapisa – but in order to be sustainable would need to build towards, or be agreed to in the context of, a national-level agreement.[28] The Accord publication intends to highlight local initiatives as far as possible through including accounts as compiled by those organising and participating in them.

There is no agreement within the Afghan government as to which international actors could formally support a negotiation process, and which internal actors could be potential spoilers if excluded. Similarly, questions remain as to who could facilitate or oversee talks, or act as a mediator, and what role the international community could play more generally. There is little exploration of the various alternative architectures possible. One of the aims of the Accord publication is to examine different architecture options in some depth and provide commentary as to their viability and implications, in the hope of channelling dialogue towards productive detail.

Discussions also considered the **format of a peace architecture**. **Should the strategy be frontloaded**, putting significant emphasis on one central agreement to begin with on the understanding that subsequent agreements will come later? Is it possible to have an incremental peace, for example with talks taking place area by area, issue by issue or group by group – with different groups within the Taliban targeted before others? How would this look from a Taliban perspective? To what extent should decision-making on the agreement architecture be transparent? As per the Hekmatyar agreement, there remains the question of whether it would be possible to achieve peace without a fixed settlement – given that settlements generally evolve and are rarely fixed anyway – and if so, what kind of deal would need to be made instead. Should an agreement embody **principle bargaining** or **position bargaining**, and would the presidency itself be part of the negotiations? Decentralisation is another factor of interest, especially to international actors, which among other issues of **content** has not yet been addressed.

24. Gopal and Osman (2016), p. 6.
25. Noah Coburn (2011), 'The Politics of Dispute Resolution and Continued Instability in Afghanistan', USIP, Washington, D.C.
26. Interview, Hassina Neekzad, WAWN, Herat, July 2015.
27. Séverine Autesserre (2017), 'International Peacebuilding and Local Success: Assumptions and Effectiveness', International Studies Review, (0), p. 3.
28. Farrell and Semple (2017).

Participants also questioned the **Taliban's willingness or capacity to deliver on a deal**, and how this would depend on the way in which a deal was reached in the first place. It was suggested that the movement (or certain segments of it) would only commit to implement obligations it had been seen to be fighting for, such as an end to foreign military presence. This suggests that a localised approach, in which Taliban fighters connected to certain areas could convince local communities of their success in both ending conflict and securing international troop departure, might be worth exploring in greater detail.

Participants found it helpful to consider '**principles for peace**' to help identify common ground for dialogue, as opposed to preconditions on uncompromised positions. As was the case with the Mitchell Principles in Northern Ireland,[29] principles can offer a joint basic framework around which discussions can take place, and to which the majority of each party to the conflict can agree. They can also help to separate out members of each party who do not accept them, resulting potentially in the isolation of spoilers or extreme viewpoints that may need to engage in the process at a later stage or in different ways. Principles also help to shift discussions away from the idea of a trade-off and towards the achievement of human dignity and conflict transformation.

Going forward with the Accord

The forthcoming Accord publication aims to examine and articulate practical peace initiatives put forward by contributors with a broad range of experiences in the peace field, which could inform, influence and invigorate policy and peacemakers. Discussions held at the JAW in January 2017 have been instrumental to the potential fulfilling of this goal. We intend to publish the Afghanistan Accord edition in spring 2018. We welcome feedback by email at any point in the process, and will be sending out progress updates on a regular basis.[30]

29 These included commitments: to democratic and exclusively peaceful means of resolving political issues; to the total disarmament of all paramilitary organisations; to agree that such disarmament must be verifiable to the satisfaction of an independent commission; to renounce for themselves, and to oppose any effort by others, to use force, or threaten to use force, to influence the course or the outcome of all-party negotiations; to agree to abide by the terms of any agreement reached in all-party negotiations and to resort to democratic and exclusively peaceful methods in trying to alter any aspect of that outcome with which they may disagree; and, to urge that 'punishment' killings and beatings stop and to take effective steps to prevent such actions. Colin Knox and Padraic Quirk (2000), 'Peacebuilding in Northern Ireland, Israel and South Africa', London: Palgrave Macmillan, p. 39.
30. Feedback can be sent to: anna.w.larson@gmail.com or aramsbotham@c-r.org

Processing peace in Afghanistan

This paper summarises discussions from a workshop to explore priorities for peace in Afghanistan.

It looks at six key themes: peacemaking in perspective; terminology; inclusion – distributing power, considering costs; understanding divisions; re-centring the regional stage; and processing peace.

Linking all the themes is the recurring concern that contextual understanding should be central to designing an appropriate peace architecture. As one workshop participant emphasised, 'Afghanistan is currently experiencing not just one war, but many: any attempt to promote peace will need to recognise and address these wars as discrete but interconnected components of a conflict system'.

Conciliation Resources is an independent international organisation working with people in conflict to prevent violence, resolve conflicts and promote peaceful societies.

Accord spotlight presents focused analysis of key themes for peace and transition practice.

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