

## THE IMPORTANCE OF ENSURING INCLUSION IN AFGHANISTAN'S PEACE PROCESS by [Abbigail Denner](#)

The Afghanistan civil conflict is at an important turning point. Intra-Afghan peace talks began in Qatar on September 12, 2020 and the United States has a vested interest in ensuring that an agreement between the Afghan government and the Taliban is reached and upheld. Past negotiations and a growing body of research reveal that supporting an inclusive peace process is necessary to achieving this. To that end, the U.S. must support the establishment of an independent third-party mediator, the public dissemination of the contents of the talks, and mechanisms for broad-based participation in the process.

### THE CURRENT SITUATION

Since the Taliban's insurgency began after being removed from the government by a U.S.-led military campaign in 2001, Afghanistan's civil conflict has claimed nearly 157,000 lives in total,<sup>1</sup> and the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan recently noted that 2019 marked the 6th year in a row that saw civilian casualties exceed 10,000.<sup>2</sup> This staggering violence coupled with the breakdown of public health, security, and infrastructure has resulted in approximately 1.2 million internally displaced Afghans and another 2.7 million Afghan refugees living in Pakistan and Iran.<sup>3</sup>

February 2020 brought a new impetus to the long and rocky process of getting Afghanistan closer to a comprehensive and lasting peace deal. The most recent negotiation attempt took place between the U.S. government and the Taliban with the exclusion of the Afghan government. In the agreement that resulted from the talks, the U.S. committed to the eventual withdrawal of all foreign troops from Afghanistan and the Taliban agreed to prevent al-Qaeda and other terrorist organizations from using Afghan territory. It also professed both sides' support for the long anticipated intra-Afghan negotiations set to begin as early as the end of August.<sup>4</sup>

The United States has a vested interest in keeping current negotiations on track because the collapse of the process could undermine all three of its main priorities in Afghanistan.

- If the Taliban gains more control in the country, the U.S. could face an increase in terrorist organizations and terror activities on Afghan soil.
- The collapse of negotiations and return to all out conflict could result in increased regional instability as Russia, Iran, India and Pakistan support government forces, non-state militias, and insurgent groups. Russia and Iran are both major challengers to

the U.S. and rising tensions between India and Pakistan could lead to a potential nuclear crisis as militant activity and Taliban control in Afghanistan grow.

- Stalled or collapsed negotiations would most likely lead to a rise in violence levels which would negatively contribute to an already dismal humanitarian situation.<sup>5</sup>

While the arrangements of the agreement signed in February binds the Taliban to vigilance against terror groups, the removal of U.S. troops from the territory decreases incentive to follow through. Observers have noted that the absence of foreign troops would certainly make it easier for the Taliban to gain more control in Afghanistan and have criticized the ambiguity of the conditions on which U.S. withdrawal is based on. These remarks, combined with increased attacks on Afghan troops in the months since the agreement,<sup>6</sup> support the idea that the Taliban do not intend to follow through with negotiations or the conditions agreed upon in them. Because of these commitment issues, fully withdrawing all U.S. troops at this point would be a mistake.

Instead, the United States needs to take an alternative approach that prioritize giving all parties to the conflict, belligerent or otherwise, a stake in the success of the negotiations rather than focusing on an exclusive and limited ceasefire agreement with only one of the main actors. An inclusive process will help to prevent excluded parties from attempting to disrupt peace talks and decrease the Taliban's incentive to renege once a deal is reached.

In this context, the U.S. must maintain ongoing support of negotiations and it must help to ensure that these talks are inclusive in order to overcome the Taliban's commitment issues and achieve a lasting and comprehensive peace agreement.

### WHAT IS AN INCLUSIVE PEACE PROCESS?

Inclusion in a peace process refers to participation by groups beyond armed combatants such as civil society, political parties, and women. A growing body of research including Nilsson's 2012 study on civil society groups in negotiations and the quantitative work of Krause et al. (2018) focusing on women in peace processes show that when all actors impacted by a conflict, whether by fighting on its frontlines or by its direct consequences, are able to influence the contents of peace agreements and/or its application, the likelihood of reaching a deal and implementing it is much higher than when actors outside the main conflict parties are excluded.<sup>7</sup>

This is because broader participation decreases the likelihood that conflict parties "will resort to violence to gain access to negotiations or to express their opposition to an agreement from which they feel excluded" according to Dr. Thania Paffenholz of the Center on Conflict, Development, and Peacebuilding.<sup>8</sup> The involvement of civil society can increase the general public's support of the process and these groups often serve as a monitoring mechanism that can help to pressure other parties to participate and follow through with negotiations and their subsequent agreements. Furthermore, inclusion from a wide range of actors often broadens the negotiation agenda which allows for more of the root causes of the conflict to be addressed.<sup>9</sup>

- These findings are important because traditional literature on peace processes often argue that the more actors there are trying to negotiate within a process, the harder it is to reach an agreement. While Dr. Paffenholz acknowledges that inclusive processes may take more time, the results of her four year study of 40 different peace processes from 1990 to 2013 reveal that inclusion does not decrease the likelihood of reaching an agreement and that it actually increases the sustainability of a deal.<sup>10</sup>

## WHAT PAST NEGOTIATIONS CAN TELL US

Much of Afghanistan's peace process has been characterized by a lack of inclusiveness through on-again off-again highly elite meetings in a dozen or so countries attended by only those deemed most necessary to achieve a settlement that will result in less violence.

One of the few exceptions and arguably one of the most significant achievements thus far is the post-Taliban Bonn Accord (2001-04) which derived from direct talks sponsored by the UN with broad international backing. While the numerous provisions it was able to codify are significant in themselves, the Bonn Accord also remains one of the most inclusive agreements in the Afghan civil war to date. The parties involved in the process included the victors, the Northern Alliance, as well as other non-violent factions, civil society, women's groups, and ethnic minorities. However, despite being the most inclusive, the Bonn process did not embrace participation from the Taliban, nor did it provide any provision to bring them on board.

The parliamentary and presidential elections since the 2004 Bonn Accord have resulted in participation by all ethnic and tribal groups, engagement between elite and rural interest groups, and more women in public affairs, but the Taliban insurgency continues to wreak havoc a decade later. The inclusivity of the agreement and continued international support ensured that the government and most important provisions of the deal survived, but over 25 rounds of public and secret peace talks have failed to stop the violence.<sup>11</sup>

The Bonn process demonstrates the importance of inclusivity in two ways.

- The inclusivity of the deal guaranteed that a broad range of actors were involved in upholding the agreement which contributed to an unprecedented period of stability in modern Afghanistan.
- The exclusion of the Taliban ensured that not all grievances were addressed in the deal and progress towards peace was later met with resistance and violence.

As a result, the root of failure for the Bonn Accord and many of Afghanistan's past negotiations can be found in a lack of inclusion and an inability to address the underlying causes of the conflict. It is crucial that future negotiations allow for the participation of all sectors of society, and address grievances related to security, politics, economics, and territory. This is the most effective way to ensure that any agreement reached will contribute to a lasting peace in Afghanistan and not just a temporary respite.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR AN INCLUSIVE INTRA-AFGHAN PEACE PROCESS

The United States should pursue an approach that fosters inclusion at multiple levels of the negotiation process. This approach could include but is not limited to these elements:

### **Establish a credible third-party mediator that is sensitive to the importance of inclusion like the United Nations or another intergovernmental organization.**

An independent mediator is a necessary confidence-building measure that helps to ensure every side is following through on their end of a bargain and can let others know if one reneges. A mediator with inclusive priorities can also legitimize the need for broad-based participation, thus making it easier to enforce throughout the process. A major international power like the U.S. would not be suited to act as a mediator because the Taliban have consistently argued that they are biased toward the Afghan government.<sup>12</sup> The United States should support an intergovernmental organization as mediator to reduce the chances that either side perceives partiality and withdrawals from the process.

### **Outline and publicize the structure of negotiations.**

Establishing a timeline for negotiations, who will be involved at what level, and what subjects will be discussed will help to legitimize negotiation attempts and make them harder to disrupt. Publishing the plans and contents of negotiations is necessary to ensure all levels of society have access to the peace process and can contribute to increased local ownership of any peace deal reached.<sup>13</sup> The United States should lend diplomatic support to these initiatives.

### **Create mechanisms for broad-based participation in peace initiatives.**

The most successful peace processes included parallel and consulting local peace forums such as the Civil Society Assembly in Guatemala and local, regional, and national consultations in the Philippines.<sup>14</sup> Supporting local peace initiatives alongside elite negotiations can help to insulate successful peacebuilding on the ground from being diverted if the high-level process stalls. In Afghanistan, this could look like the establishment of peace zones in which the Taliban choose to renew their ceasefire temporarily in certain areas while the terms of more a more permanent ceasefire are being negotiated.<sup>15</sup> The United States should offer military support and protection to participating areas, and groups that uphold a ceasefire in the absence of a broad Taliban peace deal could be compensated. These peace zones could be used to set up parallel negotiation forums in which communities can participate in local agreements as well as consult on the high-level process.

## LEARN MORE

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