



Afghanistan 2021: The Peace Process and Ways Forward

A working paper prepared by the Kabul Institute for Peace in cooperation with the Next Century Foundation in consultation with Afghans in Afghanistan for distribution to member states of the Group of Seven (G7). This paper has been the outcome of long engagement and discussion in ongoing working meetings between the Kabul Institute for Peace and the Next Century Foundation in which key opinion formers, both Afghan and Western, have participated. It is founded in turn on a series of meetings at grass roots level between the Kabul Institute for Peace and the citizens of Afghanistan both in Kabul and in the interior. The following working paper has been prepared for immediate submission to key governments by HRH Prince Nadir Naim, the Director and Founder of the Kabul Institute for Peace.

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Executive Summary

The key recommendations in this report are intended to inform the governments of the G7 nations of outcomes of discussions hosted by the Kabul Institute for Peace and the Next Century Foundation. In brief these recommendations are (in no particular order of priority):

1. The appointment of an aid supremo of impeccable character to oversee international aid delivered to the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. The delivery of aid channelled through the government of Afghanistan (as opposed to civil society “off budget” aid) to be dependent in some considerable degree on the delivering of continuing stability, justice, women’s rights and democracy in Afghanistan.
2. Afghanistan’s community *Jirghas* (community councils) should be developed and encouraged by being given an advisory role in the peace process. The presence of *Khans* (the nominated leaders of community *Jirgha* and of the higher tier inter-community *jirghas*) or their representatives at peace negotiations would be constructive. The community *Jirghas* would feed into Afghanistan’s traditional three tier *Jirgha* system which could, at Grand (*Loya*) *Jirgha* level, also take cognisance of the behaviour of the proposed High Council of Islamic Jurisprudence and nominate representatives to that council. That said, in any case, the convention in Afghanistan is that tradition trumps religion in regard to the de facto practice of decision making in the *Jirgha* system. Thus the mere existence of a strong parallel *Jirgha* system will constrain any proposed High Council of Islamic Jurisprudence.
3. We recommend that the international community pressure the Afghan government and the Taliban to introduce a quota of women negotiators from across the rural-urban divide. All negotiating parties must commit to facilitating education for women to university level, access to healthcare and justice. As a signal gesture to indicate international concern we suggest something of the calibre of the invitation of a group of influential Afghan women to stay at Number One Observatory Circle for talks together with US Vice President Kamala Harris. Other world leaders could then follow suit.
4. That a programme of substantial crop-specific agricultural subsidies be instituted in Afghanistan in order to allow farmers to turn a significant profit whilst harvesting legal produce. The funding for this programme should come from wealthier nations, who will themselves benefit directly from the shrinking of Afghanistan’s illicit economy.
5. A long-term financial package remains necessary to continue support the Afghan people that address basic governance related services, basic socio-economic related development needs. In the meantime, the Afghan government must be pressured to strictly adhere to the principles of market-based economy and so ensure a viable business environment to the private sector. In addition, a strong new five-year plan for the economy should be initiated which addresses development issues in Afghanistan. International aid and government investment should be diverted towards key strategic sectors, these being: infrastructure, energy, information and communications technology, and trade in natural resources.

Chapter 1: The Role of the Actors

A. International Actors: Good Faith, Bad Faith

Foreign actors are often vocal about their commitment to improving such areas as human rights, women's rights, inclusivity, and the plight of victims of war. The significant influence of international powers is a resource that must not be ignored: diplomatic pressure from foreign governments might, if exerted properly, act both as a catalyst for successful peace talks and as a means of ensuring that all stick to their promises in a post-conflict Afghanistan.

However, the agendas of foreign governments are not always in line with the interests of Afghanistan. A factor behind the Taliban's return to power has been support and funding from external powers. The Islamic Republic of Pakistan has arguably contributed to the destabilisation of Afghanistan by propping up the Taliban. As a consequence of the hospitality and respect the State of Qatar has given to the Taliban, it too has a degree of influence. The Islamic Republic of Iran could and should be more helpful. Once the United States of America and her allies withdraw the influence of various regional players will increase, as foreign governments seek to fill the void left by American disengagement.

WE RECOMMEND that a system of hybrid peace ownership is established, whereby major international players act as mentors and facilitators to Afghanistan. International actors should be encouraged to provide training and material support depending on local needs. Key international powers could be encouraged to endorse a treaty which includes specific indicators which may be used to judge whether the different Afghan parties are complying with the settlement. All parties to the conflict aspire to international legitimacy. If they fail to deliver on issues such as democracy, women's and minority rights, the international community should make it clear that they will disengage in so much as they will cease material and moral support for the Government of Afghanistan. We do not, however, suggest that the international community should invoke Chapter VII of the United Nations Charter or adopt a sanctions regime that would punish the people of Afghanistan.

With respect to the peace process itself, the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, and most particularly the ISI (Inter-Services Intelligence) and Iran have the potential to influence the Taliban in some degree. International powers should encourage Pakistan and Iran to bring weight to bear upon the Taliban to encourage that movement to strengthen its commitment to inclusivity, women's rights and democracy. To ensure that the government of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan does become a force for good in this context, the Secretary of State for the United States of America should make it clear in unequivocal terms in private discussion with both the ISI and the Prime Minister of Pakistan that the continuance of the very considerable aid granted to Pakistan by the United States of America is dependent on their cooperation in this regard. Iran's support for the peace process is also necessary and their role should not be undermined.

We further recommend that the Biden-Harris administration reviews the allocation of US aid to both Afghanistan and Pakistan. Aid could and should be maintained at the same level as in previous years. But the concept of delivering a significant proportion of the aid delivered in Afghanistan at province level and not through Kabul and only to those provinces which evidence stability should be seriously and

proactively examined. An American aid supremo of impeccable character could be appointed to make the choices necessary.

B. The Afghan People and Representation

The current peace talks on Afghanistan have been led by elite actors: figures from the Afghan Government, the United States, the Taliban and regional leaders. During discussions regarding how Afghanistan should transition to a conflict-free system of governance, there has been limited attention paid to the views of the Afghan public.

This problem appears particularly acute in light of the widespread popular distrust of Kabul's political class. Recent fieldwork undertaken by the Kabul Institute for Peace concluded that Afghan civilians are increasingly frustrated with all sides: the warring parties, the international community, and other elites involved in the peace process. The people feel that their voice is not being heard. Those Afghans who do not feel valued or consulted have no reason to rally behind an elite-led vision for Afghanistan's future.

The absence of popular engagement with the peace process is especially confounding in light of Afghanistan's rich history of community participation in governance. Historically, a system of *Jirghas* (community councils) has maintained a significant social-political structure that is free, independent and holds legitimate decision-making power. There are three types of *Jirghas*: a local *Jirgha* (*Jirgha Mahal*) inter-ethnic and inter-tribal *Jirghas* (*Jirgha Bainulqawami*) and national or grand *Jirghas* (*Loya Jirgha*). These councils nominate *Khans* as their community leader. *Jirghas* and their *Khans* hold a critical position in society today, and they retain social legitimacy in the eyes of the population. *Jirgha* can address conflict at multiple levels and offer a means by which community members can play an active role in determining policy. Furthermore, women traditionally participate at all three levels of the *Jirghas*. This system acts as a gateway for women's voices to be heard, increasing female engagement in the political arena and thus bypassing strictures imposed by the Taliban.

WE RECOMMEND that Afghanistan's *Jirgha* should be given a major advisory role in the peace process. Their presence is necessary for any future peace mechanism, but the international community must begin to fund their meetings and ensure that community *Jirghas* (community councils) continue in every part of Afghanistan at sub-district level. The community *Jirghas* (*Jirgha Mahal*) should nominate representatives to the *Jirgha Bainulqawami* and, as and when *Loya Jirgha* are called, to that national forum. Either the *Khans* or a designated representative nominated at the *Jirgha Bainulqawami* and *Loya Jirgha* level should be at the negotiating table, this would help to make grassroots Afghans feel more connected to diplomatic proceedings, offering a two-way dialogue between negotiators and the general public. It should be noted that though the *jirgha* role is advisory, *jirghas* carry such weight in Afghanistan that in reality they have some degree of de facto veto. For example a peace process that is not endorsed by a *Loya Jirgha* can never and would never get off the ground.

C. The Afghan Government: Corruption and Reform

Corruption has been widespread throughout the tenures of successive Afghan governments, not only at elite-level but also among the 'lower' echelons. Even *Loya Jirgha* have been compromised by cronyism and bribery. Traditionally *Loya Jirgha* were a bottom up process (called for as necessary by the tribes),

but in recent years they have been called from the top down (i.e. by the President). However the community *Jirghas* can act as a check on any excesses of the *Loya Jirgha* if they are encouraged and developed. However, popular support for the Afghan government has also been eroded by perceived failures of governance in other areas: notably high unemployment, security concerns, disputed election results, and successive administrations' refusals to engage with communities at grassroots-level. The Afghan public's perception of corruption among their political elites is likely to destabilize not only the peace process itself but also any subsequent governance structure.

This loss of trust in government officials will reduce the likelihood of popular approval for any negotiated peace deal. Power is diffuse in Afghanistan. If tribal communities and their leaders do not consent to a prospective settlement, regional militias and community power brokers may work to undermine the agreement.

WE RECOMMEND that steps be taken to weaken the control which corrupt senior members of the establishment currently exert over the Afghan state. One means of ensuring that these corrupt officials are held to account is to give ordinary Afghans - for whom corruption is a major concern - a more direct role in Afghan governance. This should be achieved by the staging of *Jirgha Mahal* that inevitably reduce the power of the central government. The *Khans* from the *Jirgha Mahal* speak for their representative regions and call for and serve in the national *Loya Jirgha* as and when they consider it necessary. The act of introducing representatives with closer connections to grassroots Afghans into the Kabul-based political arena will help to ensure that the anti-corruption sentiment observable among the Afghan population is also heard in the corridors of power. In a very real sense the *Loya Jirgha* when called is of itself a check on the power of the corrupt elites. If an action of government is condemned by *loya jirgha* it will be near impossible for that action to proceed, given the respect that the *jirgha* process is held in by Afghans.

D. The Taliban: Tactics, Human Rights

Current Taliban negotiators — most of whom resided in Guantanamo Bay or Qatar since 2001 — recall the Afghanistan of 1996-2001; they are conservative, insular, and traditional. Since the Taliban leaders' exile, however, large areas of urban Afghanistan have modernised. Afghans in these areas have become accustomed to the positive elements of a globalized modern society and aspire to improved human rights, peace, equality before the law, and economic development. This is no longer an environment in which previous Taliban initiatives — notably their 1996 banning of all women from employment — would be willingly tolerated by citizens. This is also true of the significant Afghan diaspora, whose experience of global society over the last three decades has gradually filtered back into the collective Afghan consciousness.

However, in the Taliban controlled regions, especially in those rural areas where the Taliban have strongholds, the Taliban have successfully reduced levels of corruption and have managed to enforce the rule of law within those communities and for that reason there is considerable popular support for the Taliban in some quarters.

It is none the less worrying that US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken's proposed peace settlement envisions a prominent role for the High Council of Islamic Jurisprudence. That said the proposed High

Council for Islamic Jurisprudence to provide “Islamic guidance and advice” falls short of Taliban demands for the return of a “pure Islamic government”. This religious institution is imagined in the proposal as being “separate and co-equal” with the Executive Administration and the Judiciary. The prospect of granting such huge power to a religious body is concerning, as it will undoubtedly be exploited by the Taliban and used as a parallel source of executive power with which to undermine the government. This potential division of institutional power between religious and non-clerical bodies threatens to codify the schism between the rural (or ‘traditional’) and the urban (or ‘modernized’) into Afghanistan’s institutional composition. If this occurs, Afghanistan will become a society divided not only by geography, not only by social convention, but also in terms of its government.

WE RECOMMEND that the Afghan government and the Taliban group should work together at initiating and enforcing new laws that tackle corruption. The Taliban’s approach to law enforcement will at least promote stability.

In accordance with the system of power sharing, we advise that the system of *Jirgha* outlined in this report act to check the power of any High Council for Islamic Jurisprudence and nominate representatives to that council. This will help to ensure that an effective system of checks and balances is in place at the heart of Afghanistan’s politics, and that the Taliban will be less easily able to exploit religious institutions to destabilize the post-settlement government. Once the Taliban are persuaded to accept the *Jirgha process* as the preferred mode of power transition, then democracy, the rights of women and those of minorities will be reinforced. The transition of power through three layers of *Jirgha* (local, ethnic and grand) itself embodies a form of free and fair representation. However, community *Jirgha* are not proposed as an alternative to the election of representatives at parliamentary level, but in addition to that process. For the time being, community *jirgha* at sub regional level and inter-tribal *jirghas* at regional level would offer a forum for dispute resolution and representation at local level. This is especially important given the fact that envisioned governorate elections have, as yet, not taken place. Indeed, after long consideration, we would recommend that governorate council elections not take place until such time as the political climate in Afghanistan changes to such a degree that the law forbidding political parties can be repealed (thus making it easier, for example, to vote for a political grouping with a reputation for a strong anti-corruption stance). Though we are not seeking an alternative power structure, it is important to not forget that the existing power structure is mired in corruption and not fit for purpose. It is all too easy to envision a circumstance in which the existing parliament wanes in importance despite its constitutional significance. The *jirgha* system is one Afghans understand and respect and will remain with us if properly convened.

Chapter 2: Issues of Importance

A. Women's Rights

Women have fought ferociously for equality in the years since the fall of the Taliban government, and have made great progress.

Class differences and geographical inequalities mean that a woman's access to resources and freedoms differs widely depending on her position in society. All women must be given equal access to every area of society: from leadership roles to economic autonomy, to personal freedoms. Women must be allowed to live a life free from all forms of violence and in which they can contribute meaningfully to the building of a sustainable peace.

Women residing in rural Afghanistan face unique challenges which are largely distinct from those of their urban counterparts. Rural women have enjoyed less of the protection from violence and discrimination which has been attained by urban women, and often have inadequate access to healthcare, education and employment opportunities. Lack of educational opportunities for rural women and girls bleeds over into a deficit of political participation among these same groups. Female activists in Afghanistan are campaigning tirelessly to reverse these societal conditions, and it is the duty of the men in power to hear their voices.

The inequalities faced by different women are partially - though not entirely - caused by the Taliban, who have continued to use violence as a mechanism of control in rural areas. Their prolific violence has deepened the uncertainty regarding whether women's rights will be protected in the upcoming months. The Taliban have recently attempted to portray themselves as comparatively progressive on gender-based issues - often making reference to rights for women 'granted by Islam'. This shift in tone is arguably disingenuous. The all-male Taliban negotiating team in the peace talks have been hesitant to engage in-depth on questions regarding the rights of women. It is also disturbing to hear, in some quarters, elements of the Taliban advocating the segregation of men and women at the workplace.

Most notably (in contrast to statements delivered in public), areas of Afghanistan under Taliban control have absolutely no state delivered female education at all. Whereas by contrast Pashtun areas of the neighbouring state of Pakistan under Taliban control do have at least some state delivered female education. Furthermore in most Taliban controlled areas of Afghanistan, women are expected to be accompanied by their male counterpart if they wish to access healthcare services.

Female representation in the Doha and Moscow peace talks has also been insufficient on the government side. There are presently only four female negotiators in the government's 21-person Doha negotiating team, and at the Moscow conference there was only one. These few women cannot effectively represent the viewpoint of a full half of Afghanistan's population. The lack of female representation in negotiating teams has meant that the integral question of how to safeguard women's rights in a post-conflict Afghanistan has not been given the close attention it deserves. Furthermore female negotiators are, like their male counterparts, disproportionately urban. Whilst all women are insufficiently represented, the voice of rural women is especially absent from elite-level discourse.

WE RECOMMEND that the international community pressure the Afghan government and the Taliban to introduce a quota of women negotiators from across the rural-urban divide. Women's rights must be acknowledged as a central objective of the peace talks, and a comprehensive and irrevocable set of women's rights must be codified into Afghanistan's post-settlement political system. All negotiating parties must commit to facilitating education for women to university level. Female education should be the absolute priority with regard to women's rights. The international community should make clear that if this commitment is not honoured by each of the Afghan parties, punitive action will be taken in the form of removing that proportion of foreign aid channelled through the Afghan government.

One important additional reform would be the gender diversification of the presently male-dominated human resources sector. If a female voice were injected into the area of human resources in Afghanistan, women would gradually become better represented in the areas of employment for which those working in human resources act as gatekeepers.

We also recommend that the international community take steps to demonstrate to all that women's rights are a priority. As a signal gesture we suggest something of the calibre of the invitation of group of influential Afghan women to stay at Number One Observatory Circle for talks together with the US Vice President. The governments of other major nations could follow suit.

B. Economic Development and Stability

The underlying constraints that prohibit social and economic development in Afghanistan relate to the economy. The country has not attained a steady economic growth path. The biggest issues to constrain healthy economic growth have been governance related and have inhibited economic development. Donor aid was largely diverted to sub-national level development programmes, which proved more beneficial than Kabul centric investments.

The people of Afghanistan experienced economic mismanagement and widespread corruption which has significantly affected Afghanistan's economic growth and development. Whilst significant aid from the international community has helped Afghanistan, it has also brought problems. Aid has increased dependency and reduced the sense of self-reliance among senior government officials, thus leaving the country dependent on continued international aid. Inflation and slow economic growth versus population growth has consigned millions more Afghans to lives sustained under the poverty line. Since 2017, the GDP growth declined steadily to between 1 and 0.8 per cent in 2020 (partly affected by Covid-19). In 2021, the World Bank and IMF estimates a GDP growth between 1.5 to 2 per cent.

The war has damaged much of Afghanistan's infrastructure, and over half of the Afghan population now live below the poverty line. Rural poverty remains consistently higher than urban poverty, due in part to the combined effects of increased demographic pressure and the deteriorating security situation in rural areas.

Lack of good governance in regard to public financial management including poor revenue collection, and a poor approach to taxation alongside increasing corruption in the public sector are the key factors hampering economic growth.

Afghanistan contains an abundance of natural resources - notably lithium - and its geographical location is ideal for international trade. Its formal industries, however, are underdeveloped and underfunded. In particular, the nation's banking sector is in a state of crisis. The lack of confidence in financial institutions has resulted in depreciation of the Afghan currency, capital departure, declining deposits, closure of international bank branches and extremely low lending. The Afghan financial sector has reached the brink of failure, which has prevented Afghanistan from participating in international trade agreements. Concerns regarding security have made investment in the country difficult. These factors - all of which limit the growth of formal sectors - force everyday Afghans into the illicit economy.

The government of Afghanistan's expenditure grew exponentially over the past seven years. A lack of adherence to the market based economic principles and an increasing government footprint has resulted in increased corruption and mismanagement of resources. This remains the key impediment to good economic and financial governance.

WE RECOMMEND that the peace deal includes clauses which will help to address the failures in Afghanistan's economic sector, and will hold the Afghan Government responsible in taking the following steps which will help bring economic stability in the short term, and financial independence in the long run:

1. Promote, protect and facilitate local and foreign investment opportunities in Afghanistan, so that the private sector has political and financial assurances of the safety of their assets.
2. Adopt a five year plan for the development of infrastructure, energy, and trade in other natural resources, as well as information and communications technology; a plan which can assist in the economic growth of the nation. The precedent for such an initiative can be found in the five year modernization plans of Afghan ex-premier Daud Khan, schemes which were effective and popular. Work on the preparation of such a plan could and should commence as soon as possible given the constraints of the peace process. We would recommend that the plan should be in place and indeed start to be implemented in 2022, and should include an expectation that it be geared up in the aftermath of the next major donors conference for Afghanistan, slated for 2024.
3. Develop strategies that can help increase economic equality in Afghanistan and reduce the number of people living below the poverty line.
4. Those engaged in peace talks must provide some key performance indicators which the Afghan government must meet or exceed. This will display the progress of economic growth along, and will offer transparency in generating revenues and budget expenditures.

Additionally, Afghanistan could exploit its geographically advantageous position by entering into the Belt and Road Initiative (also known as the New Silk Road). Afghanistan could be a major asset in this project, sharing as it does borders with Pakistan, Iran and China and other central Asian countries. Joining the New Silk Road initiative could offer Afghanistan a means of securing foreign funding which could be used to improve its infrastructure, particularly its travel links. Such improvements would themselves have a positive knock-on effect for other areas of Afghanistan's economy.

C. The Drugs issue

Afghanistan's economic woes have increased the size of Afghanistan's robust informal economy, particularly in rural regions. Many Afghans have resorted to operating within this illicit sector as a consequence of the years of war, and the absence of economic opportunity within the boundaries of the law.

Poppies harvested in Afghanistan account for over 90% of the world's heroin supplies. The poppy represents the only stable cash crop for many of Afghanistan's farmers, who have seen legal crops become less economically viable over time. Raisin exports, for example, have fallen from around 160,000 tons per annum in 1970 to a mere 10,000 tons today. The proceeds from illicit crops not only sustain most of the nation's poorest agricultural workers, but also serve to finance Afghan militants (notably the Taliban, who have worked to incentivize farmers to continue poppy production). Nor is this intersection between narcotics and security limited to Afghanistan: the international drug gangs and terrorist groups which profit from the growing of illicit crops within Afghanistan leave a trail of violence and destruction across the world. Viewing the phenomenon in this global context highlights the fact that this is not a uniquely Afghan issue. Indeed, the existence of three major drug trafficking circuits – the northern route (through Central Asia to Russia), the Balkan route (supplying Western and Central Europe through Turkey), and the southern route (to the Gulf via Pakistan and Iran) – underlines the complicity of criminal parties in a range of nations. In light of the damage caused by the Afghan opium economy both within Afghanistan and abroad, a well-coordinated strategy is needed to combat illicit operations.

WE RECOMMEND that a programme of substantial crop-specific agricultural subsidies be instituted in Afghanistan in order to allow farmers to turn a significant profit whilst harvesting legal produce. Given that raisins, saffron, pomegranate and pistachio have provided profitable sources of income for Afghan farmers in the past, these crops would be strong candidates for initial subsidization. In light of the international nature of Afghanistan's drug-production problem, the funding for this programme should come from wealthier nations, who will themselves benefit directly from the shrinking of Afghanistan's illicit economy.

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