

A Roadmap for Peace for Afghanistan

Policy Brief

May 2016

EQUALITY for Peace and Democracy



Policy Brief

Background

The Taliban regime collapsed in 2001, giving rise to a wave of optimism about the country's prospects for wealth and stability. In the years which followed, Afghanistan saw an increase in democratic participation through provincial, parliamentary, and presidential elections, as well as international involvement in military and reconstruction efforts.

Since 2006, the relative security started to follow a declining and deteriorating path, and fighting against the government was intensified by opposition armed groups (AOGs). The Taliban was re-emerging as the main fighting group challenging the legitimacy and authority of the central government in various parts of the country.

The High Peace Council (HPC) was established by the Government of Afghanistan in June 2010, with view to implement the Afghanistan Peace and Reintegration Program (APRP). This marked an effort to enhancing efforts for negotiation and peace talks with

opposing fighting groups and in particular with the Taliban. The HPC was initially comprised of 69 members,⁹ of whom were women.

However, despite its presence in all of the country's 34 provinces, people were not satisfied with the output of the HPC. A lack of transparency in the peace process, exclusivity and merely symbolic nature of the role of women in its decision-making levels were among people's chief concerns.

Against this backdrop, a coalition of Afghan CSOs (CPAU, EPD, HREVA, PTRO and TLO) came together to conduct a nation-wide consultation on the prospects for peace, with the generous support of Open Society Afghanistan (OSA). Consultations took place at the provincial and district level, to capture people's concerns about the APRP, HPC and the peace process in general. The outcome of this was further analyzed through national and international symposia, whose respective findings are summarised in this policy paper.

Concerns and Ways Forward

As part of the national consultation, over 500 Afghan civil society actors were interviewed, along with 560 subnational APRP officials, peace council members and reintegrated fighters. The diversity of experience among the sample group offered an insight into how APRP has worked in practice at all levels of society.



However, despite the diversity of participants, there were key issues upon which there was a surprising degree of consensus. By and large all interviewees were in support of regional dialogue and outreach, urging the National Unity Government (NUG) to enhance efforts to involve the Taliban and neighboring countries in discussions. At the same time, while there was greater awareness as to the APRP than any of the preceding initiatives, there was also general confusion about the status of the program—its current objectives, its role in regional talks, and its future under the NUG. Participants were concerned about the lack of transparency and credibility of the APRP, despite believing in the peace process more generally. Perhaps for this reason, consultation found strong support for reforming the High Peace Council and Provincial Peace Committees, to curb what interviewees regarded as widespread corruption and a lack of impartiality.

National Symposium on the Roadmap to Peace

In January 2016, peace activists and civil society representatives from all Afghan provinces attended the National Symposium on the Roadmap to Peace. Half of those in attendance were women, and the input of the audience and speakers were incorporated into the findings of subsequent Roadmap publications.

The resolution of the National Symposium, agreed upon by all participants, proposed the following measures to the National Unity Government of Afghanistan to consider as critical steps for the Roadmap to Peace:

- To focus on thorough and comprehensive reforms in the structure and peace strategy of the High Peace Council;
- To dismantle and disarm illegal armed groups, while creating reliable job opportunities for former militants to



facilitate their integration into the peace process;

- To effectively enhance its efforts in fighting extremism and radical ideologies being waged by religious 'Madrassas' and the infiltration of foreign fighters;
- To further strengthen good governance and outreach to rural populations, in terms of social services, facilities and accessibility to education and employment opportunities;
- To support and protect civil society institutions' involvement in peace processes and talks, and;
- To consolidate its cooperation with regional countries and the international community in enhancing efforts for peace and stability in Afghanistan.



As well as informing the regional symposium, which brought together experts at an international level, the above findings offer guidance to CSOs working on grassroots advocacy. They shed light on the key aspects of peace where local interviewees were keen to see progress, and confirm the continued appetite for dialogue and cooperation as a means of overcoming the conflict.

Regional Symposium on the Roadmap to Peace

The findings of the research and suggestions made by the national symposium were shared with regional and international experts through a Regional Symposium on the Roadmap to Peace in Afghanistan. The event was once again made possible by the Open Society Afghanistan (OSA), and through together experts from such countries as Pakistan, India, Tajikistan, Turkey, Germany, and the UK over 29-28 March 2016).

The two-day discussions of the Regional Symposium were focusing on the nature of the conflict in Afghanistan, the complementary roles of Track 1.5/II in enhancing peace efforts in the South Asian region, the impact of peace in Afghanistan



on regional security and the mediatory role of the UN or OIC in the conflict.

Once again, despite the impressive diversity of the assembled experts, there was some agreement as to underlying principles that should inform the peace process. First, there was strong consensus that the blame game, particularly directed at Pakistan, was not productive when it comes to discussions between nations in the region. Moreover, many of the experts spoke of the importance of people-to-people diplomacy, and its ability to build trust and cooperation in a setting which is unrestricted by official protocol. Finally, there was agreement as to the interconnected nature of the region, and the likelihood that peace in Afghanistan would positively impact on the prosperity of South Asia as a whole. As such, experts argued that neighbouring nations should recognise that their own interests are in fact tied up with the stability of Afghanistan itself.



Regional Symposium on the Roadmap to Peace



Key recommendations from the Regional Symposium were as follows:



- Lessons can be learnt from the Tajik peace process, historically one of the most successful peace negotiations of all time, in which the Government of Afghanistan played a key role. In contrast to the current “security first” approach to the intervention in Afghanistan, peace-brokers should recognise that any Taliban foothold would be devastating to the region, that dialogue must be inclusive and that a political settlement would be essential.
- A more inclusive approach to dialogue, incorporating civil society groups, can reduce the danger that the Taliban are given legitimacy as one of the only non-state actors brought to the negotiation table, and give a voice in the vulnerable “silent majority”.
- Beyond their role in negotiations, civil society must be supported in their efforts to educate local people, and to act as watchdogs where development efforts are failing.
- Regionally, there is need for enhanced economic cooperation between Afghanistan, India and Pakistan. This would help to build the stake these countries have in achieving a region-wide stability, and to provide the jobs and prosperity that can act as a powerful local incentive for peace.
- Because of the strong regional dimension to the conflict, the intervention of an international and well-regarded entity should be looked to with view to mediating negotiations. For this, attendees considered the UN the most reliable player, with the OIC perhaps lacking in peace mediation experience.

Conclusion

Based on the findings of the above symposia, the experts in attendance have been able to integrate its lessons into their day-to-day work. The key recommendations apply to the international community, governments and civil society organisations alike.

The Roadmap project confirms that local populations remain very much invested in the peace process. Grassroots organisations are encouraged to be vocal about their interest in ending the conflict, and in monitoring high-level attempts to do so. Moreover, the attendees argued that the distrust that has grown between Afghanistan and Pakistan can be most feasibly restored by local initiatives, rather than through official mediation alone.

However, the findings make clear that change does not fall to civil society alone to action. On the contrary, there was a strong consensus on the need for the Government of Afghanistan to reform the HPS, to integrate accountability measures and to restore public trust in nominally democratic institutions. Meanwhile, experts argued for a clear and consistent policy towards the Taliban, along with rigid demands that the group must condemn violence against civilians and respect the constitution if it is to be included in negotiations. Should these demands be met, the research suggests that the public would even be prepared for a political settlement with insurgency

leaders, as long as the gains made over the past decade were not compromised.

In terms of the international community, there was consensus among the expert speakers that the UN remained the most promising entity with regards to peace mediation. However, there was emphasis that the approach should not be focused solely on the provision of security, but rather should acknowledge the need for prosperity which is crucial to peace, stability and cooperation across the region. There was some sense that more sophisticated efforts to track financial transactions may bring may help to identify and ultimately cut off the funding streams of armed opposition groups. Nonetheless, the overall approach most consistently emphasised was one of inclusivity beyond official channels, which embraces the need for prosperity among local populations and the shared interest in stability and wellbeing across the region.

Finally, it was clear from the successive symposia that the drivers of the conflict are complex and changing. In order for the efforts of policymakers to be effective, research needs to continue at a local, subnational and regional level. Such analysis can be contributed to by all of the organisations involved in the Roadmap project, and reflects the interest of those at all levels in achieving a lasting peace for the people of Afghanistan.