



Modalities of Conflict Resolution in Afghanistan: A Negotiated Settlement Scenario

Peace Studies III

Dr Yaqub Ibrahimi



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The analysis provided in the research paper relate to the research team and do not reflect the official position and viewpoint of Afghanistan Institute for Strategic Studies and the research funding institution, Center of National Endowment for Democracy (NED).



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Contents

Foreword.....	i
Author’s Acknowledgement	iii
Glossary	iv
Key Findings.....	vii
Introduction.....	1
Methodology.....	12
Causes and Structure of the Taliban Insurgency	16
Conflict Resolution: A Militarily Victory is Unlikely	37
Negotiation and Its Conditions.....	44
Negotiation and the Requirement of Coercion	53
Negotiation in Difficult Times	61
Conclusion	68
Appendix A: Questionnaire.....	73
Appendix B: List of Interviewees	78
Bibliography	79

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Foreword

This research is part of the Peace Studies research series of the Afghan Institute for Strategic Studies (AISS). The previous works of AISS on the Peace Studies include *Afghan People's Attitude and Perceptions toward Peace Talks between the Government and the Taliban* (2016), *Four Decades of Efforts for Peace and Reconciliation in Afghanistan* (2017), *The Fallacy of Peace Process in Afghanistan: the People's Perspective* (2018) and a series of papers on trends in radicalization across various sectors in Afghanistan including the university campuses, the madrasas, among the ranks of Afghanistan national police, and social media.

The research attempts in shaping an inclusive and democratic space for a constructive dialogue on the peace process, primarily amongst the citizens of Afghanistan and different stakeholder in the peace process. There is no doubt that a successful and longstanding peace in Afghanistan requires a well-informed inclusive national political debate. Our aim, as a research center, is not only to play a constructive role in informing the citizens but also in raising some critical and thought-provoking questions for the future debates and researches.

The piece you are reading is a peer-reviewed research, which was conducted within the time frame of eight months beginning from January 2018. Following the preliminary studies and literature review done by the author, the interviews of the research were conducted and transcribed by AISS researchers in Kabul and were sent to the author for analysis. AISS wishes to thank everyone who enriched this research either with their perspectives as interview participants or with their critical comments and feedback as peer-reviewers. Sincere gratitude goes to Dr Barnett Rubin and Dr Magnus Marsden for reading and

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Dr Omar Sadr

Afghan Institute for Strategic Studies (AISS), 2018

Author's Acknowledgement

I wish to present my gratitude to all who directly and indirectly contributed to the accomplishment of this research. I thank, specially, the Director of the Afghan Institute for Strategic Studies (AISS), Dr Davood Moradian, who provided the opportunity to research this timely topic and facilitated the research process. I also would like to pay my regards to Dr Omar Sadr, an AISS researcher who assisted in different stages of this research from data collection to reviewing the earlier drafts of this paper. It is also important to mention that this research was impossible without the assistance of AISS field researchers in Kabul who conducted and transcribed the interviews. I sincerely thank them. This research also benefited from insightful comments of Dr Magnus Marsden and Dr Barnett Rubin whose feedback to an earlier draft enriched the paper. Overall, I would like to pay my regards to all those whose assistance, comments, and contribution proved to be a milestone in the accomplishment of this research. I hope the findings of this paper help progress toward a durable peace in Afghanistan.

Yaqub Ibrahimi

Glossary

Conflict: The term ‘conflict’ refers to the pursuit of incompatible goals by different parties which could appear militarily and non-militarily. Since the purpose of this research is to study a specific violent dispute, it equates the term with a military or violent dispute between a government and an insurgent group.

Insurgency: Insurgency or rebellion refers to military and violent activities committed by groups that are not necessarily a part of a government. In other words, the insurgency is a militant campaign by a non-state actor mainly for a political purpose. Insurgent attacks could be directed against both combatants and civilians. Insurgent groups use a variety of violent tactics from rebellious operations to occupation of territory to terrorist acts.

Terrorism: Terrorism is a form of warfare in which violence is directed primarily against non-combatants. Insurgent terrorism is purposeful and is used for a variety of purposes from short-term to long-term.

Coercion: Coercion is a complex form of pressure on a warring party to either terminate the conflict unilaterally or to pressure it to resolve the dispute through negotiation. Coercion is both violent and diplomatic. Violent coercion is initially based on the use of physical force, while diplomatic coercion is based mainly on non-violent interactions.

Diplomacy: diplomacy, in conflict resolution, refers to the management of a conflict by negotiation. Negotiation and mediation, in this sense, are two key elements of diplomacy.¹

¹ Christer Jonsson and Karin Aggestam, “Diplomacy and Conflict Resolution,” in Jacob Bercovitch, Victor Kermenyuk, and I. William Zartmen (eds.), *The*

Communication: communication is about maintaining contact among parties in conflict with the purpose of facilitating negotiations and conflict resolution.

Negotiation: Negotiation is a process where parties seek to settle their conflicts by taking non-violent approaches. In most cases, negotiations are the first step toward conflict resolution and peace. A structured negotiation includes three phases including mediation, conciliation, and reconciliation. In mediation phase, a third party or a mediator intervene to bring the warring groups together to talk about the possibilities and obstacles of settling the conflict. In conciliation phase, the third party tries to encourage the warring groups to move towards negotiations. In reconciliation phase, the warring groups try to overcome the hostility and differences.

Conflict Settlement: Conflict settlement refers to the first phase of conflict resolution in which a negotiation leads to reaching an agreement between the warring parties to settle the conflict. An agreement might be signed in this phase but its enforcement requires a further commitment by all parties involved in the conflict.

Conflict Resolution: Conflict resolution is one of the most comprehensive steps toward peace. It is a long-term, broad, and complex process in which the root causes and underlying conditions of a conflict are comprehensively addressed. The structure of the conflict and the behavior of warring groups are transformed from violent to political during this process. Thus, conflict resolution transforms the conflict into a political process.

Sage Handbook of Conflict Resolution, 33-51 (Los Angeles, London, and New York: SAGE, 2009), p. 33; Gartner et al., "Assessing Outcomes."

Peace: Peace refers to the absence of conflict by any means. Peace is both negative and positive, structural and cultural. It is a process which transforms the structure and culture of violence into a non-violent environment. In order to achieve peace, the structure and culture of conflict must be replaced with a cultural of tolerance and political inclusion.

Peace-making: Peace-making is the situation where warring groups move toward settling the conflict voluntarily. In this case, warring groups are frustrated by the conflict and see no results by military means. Then, they tend to resolve their disputes in a non-violent environment.

Peace-keeping: Peace-keeping refers to the intervention of an international force, conventionally with the consent of conflict parties, in order to help them to transform their violent attitudes into civil and political activities.

Peace-Building: Peace-building underpins the work of peacemaking and peacekeeping by addressing structural issues and the long-term relationships between warring groups. In other words, peace-building is the extension and the higher level of peace-making and peace-keeping.²

² Ramsbotham, Woodhouse, Miall, *Contemporary conflict resolution: the prevention*; Jacob Bercovitch, Victor Kremenyuk, and I. William Zartman, *The SAGE Handbook of Conflict Resolution* (Los Angeles, London, New Delhi, Singapore, Washington: SAGE, 2009). The glossary is, mainly, extracted from Bercovitch, et al., *The SAGE Handbook*; Gartner et al., “Assessing Outcomes;” Jonsson and Aggestam, “Diplomacy and Conflict Resolution;” Ramsbotham et al., *Contemporary conflict resolution: the prevention*.

Key Findings

- There is no agreement among the parties on the modalities and agenda of a negotiated settlement of the conflict: The government seeks to directly negotiate with the Taliban with the purpose of integrating the group in the post-Bonn political process; the Taliban emphasize on negotiation with the United States considering the government as illegitimate to negotiate with; the United States supports the former's position.
- The Taliban believe that the presence of foreign troops in Afghanistan is the main cause of the conflict perceiving the withdrawal of troops a main step toward a peace process.³
- There is no common understanding on causes and issues of the conflict: the Taliban describe the insurgency as a resistance to foreign troops and the government believes the insurgency is imposed by Pakistan.
- Both the Taliban and the government are influenced by foreign players which has made the likelihood of a bilateral negotiation between the two parties complex and difficult.
- Following Mullah Omer's death, the Taliban became organizationally fragmented but managed to maintain its political unification around the Quetta Shura, also known as the *Rahbary* Shura/Leadership Council.
- The Taliban personnel is comprised of at least four layers: the ideological Islamists, the unemployed and discontented

³ Mawlawi Haibatullah Akhundzada, "Message of Felicitation of the Esteemed Amir-ul-Mumineen Sheikh-ul-Hadith Mawlawi Hibatullah Akhundzada (may Allah protect him) on the occasion of Eid-ul-Fitr", *alemarah*, June 12, 2018 <https://alemarah-english.com/?p=30364>; Mullah Abdul Salam Zaef, "Special Interview with Mullah Abdul Salam Zaef," *Tolo News*, June 13, 2018 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XNOFXxUI0nQ>

individuals, the local elements who joined the Taliban due to tribal rivalries, and the externally motivated circles.

- The conflict in Afghanistan is complex and influenced by multiple causes and players at domestic, regional and international levels. Therefore, conflict resolution should not be limited to a negotiation between the government and the Taliban.
- Regional powers support the Taliban, mainly, for exerting pressure on the US in Afghanistan and countering its expansion in the region.
- The status quo is a stalemate in which neither the Taliban nor the government can win militarily.
- The current stalemate is in favor of the Taliban and the group will try to maintain it in order to turn the situation more in its favor by discrediting the government.
- Afghan participants believe the regional causes are first to blame, but foreign players believe that the primary causes of the insurgency are domestic and national.
- The government's negotiation agenda has prioritized ending violence and bringing the Taliban to negotiation table, while the agenda does not contain a long-term vision for peacebuilding.
- Both domestic and international players support a peace negotiation between the government and the Taliban but there is insufficient recognition of remedy to the two parties' diverged expectations of the outcome (i.e. the Taliban expect establishing a Sharia-based regime in Kabul; the government expects integrating the Taliban within the post-2001 political process).

- Lack of a regional cooperation to negotiations and the regional powers' diverged policies in Afghanistan are the main obstacles confronting a negotiated settlement of the conflict. Therefore, bringing the different positions on one page is one of the main challenge confronting a peace process.
- While direct talks between the government and the Taliban could not take place in the past, international players failed, at the least, to develop a mediatory mechanism for establishing a stable line of contact and an effective “good office” for talks.
- Lack of a clear modality and step-by-step agenda for conflict resolution which all parties agree upon, and the multiplicity of internal and external players would constantly challenge any progress toward a negotiated settlement of the conflict.
- The Taliban will not negotiate unless it is weakened in the battleground and pressured by its regional supporters to come to a negotiation table.
- Efforts for negotiation will not meet success unless the Taliban's regional supporters, particularly Pakistan cooperate.
- Most parties, in particular Washington D.C., believe that more pressure on Pakistan would help bringing the Taliban to the peace talks table.
- Any type of talk at any level and place are necessary at earlier stages to pave the way for more structured and formal negotiations.

- A combination of coercion and negotiation strategy is the ideal scenario for bringing the Taliban to the negotiation table.
- A successful negotiation with an acceptable outcome in Afghanistan requires any efforts for negotiations to be transparent and public.
- The government's efforts for negotiations should be accompanied by reforms and improvement of good governance, employment opportunities, security, and the rule of law, in order to address the domestic causes of the insurgency.
- The government's efforts for negotiations should be accompanied by a proactive regional diplomacy in order to address the external causes of the conflict.
- The US policy should not provoke the neighboring countries which are already concerned about the US influence in Afghanistan.
- To restore trust, both the government and the Taliban should exhibit their political will and specify their capability in adhering to any possible negotiation outcome.
- A stable line of contact should be established at early stages in order to clarify the agenda, details, stages and places of any possible negotiation.
- While direct negotiation seems difficult in current situation, a mediatory approach by both domestic and foreign players are needed for creating a primary line of contact between the parties.

Introduction

Conflict, in human societies, breaks out for a reason and ends as soon as the causes are addressed and the issues of conflict are resolved. In general, approaches to conflict resolution are of three methods: coercion leading to a military victory by one side, negotiation through peace-talks, and a simultaneous combination of coercion and negotiation which entails pressure in the battleground while engaging in peace negotiation. The appropriateness of any of these methods to a conflict depends on the relative strength of the combatant parties, the type, dimension, and phases of the conflict, and the disputants' mutual expectation of the outcomes. By any means, a conflict would end only when the parties in conflict get to the point where they gain more from stopping the conflict than continuing it. Any type of warfare, before reaching a meaningful end, goes through a cycle of escalation, relief, return, and re-escalation. Every phase requires a specific conflict resolution policy.

Today, conflict in Afghanistan has reached the point of re-escalation as a result of a constant failure in conflict resolution in the past seventeen years. Following the Bonn Conference in December 2001, both the Interim Government under Hamid Karzai and its foreign supporters adopted a policy of coercion toward the Taliban whom they were initially labeled as a terrorist group. This approach led to the intense military pressure on the Taliban by the Coalition force and the mobilization of the Afghanistan Security Forces to fight the remnants of the Taliban militarily. The US coercive campaign in this period, in particular, was proactive and aggressive and yielded results initially. The country was mostly clear of the Taliban and the insurgency threat did not seem imminent. This condition developed the impression that

Afghanistan was on the right track for political stability and development. However, this belief was challenged by changes in international politics. With the US invasion of Iraq in April 2003, attention was swayed from consolidating the initial achievements in suppressing the Taliban to addressing insurgency in Iraq. The decrease of attention in the case of Afghanistan coupled with the resurgence of the Taliban placed the government of Afghanistan in a vulnerable position to maintain and secure the post-Bonn achievements and to fight the Taliban.

The violent resurgence of the Taliban in 2004 marked the commencement of a second plan for dealing with the group. In this phase, which lasted until President Obama's exit plan and President Karzai's re-election in 2009, the initial policy of coercion transformed into a policy of combined coercion and reconciliation. While the US continued its counterterrorism campaign, the government of Afghanistan adopted a reconciliation policy with remnants of the Taliban who they believed were not connected with al-Qaeda. The main reason behind the failure of negotiations and reconciliation efforts, in this phase, was the reactive, rather than proactive, military policies on the battlefield, underestimation of the need to address the domestic and regional causes of the conflict, and lack of a coherent conflict resolution policy to be followed by both the government of Afghanistan and its international allies uniformly.

Following President Karzai's re-election in 2009 and his increasing skepticism on the international forces' activities in Afghanistan, he commenced a new negotiation plan with the Taliban marking the third phase of efforts to deal with the insurgency. The implementation mechanism for negotiation, in this phase, was assigned to the High Peace Council of Afghanistan (HPC) which was established in 2010 as a result of The National

Consultative Peace Jirga, a gathering of 1,600 delegates in Kabul on peace process in the country.⁴ The HPC was initially led by Burhanuddin Rabbani, the former president of the Islamic State of Afghanistan (1992-2001) who had been, ironically, ousted from power by the Taliban in 1996. Soon after its creation, the HPC lost its credibility due to its lack of capacity in conflict management, on the one hand, and lack of coordination with international forces, on the other. Foreign players dealt with the Taliban according to their own policies disregarding Karzai's plan and developing parallel negotiation agendas. An example of this approach is the opening of the Taliban's political office in Qatar in June 2013 as a result of the American and German diplomats' direct contacts with elements of the Taliban, particularly Tayyeb Agha, for opening a channel of peace talks with the Taliban.⁵ The office was closed after Karzai protested to the Taliban's raising the flag of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (IEA) and proclaiming the office to represent the IEA which was interpreted in Afghanistan as the Taliban were trying to identify themselves as a parallel government to the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan.

As a reaction to the foreign diplomats' direct contacts with the Taliban, Karzai developed "secret contacts" with some Taliban elements.⁶ Karzai's negotiation plan did not prove to assist the

⁴ "Resolution Adopted at the Conclusion of the National Consultative Peace Jirga," *United Nations Peacemaker*, June 6, 2010
<https://peacemaker.un.org/node/1551>

⁵ Christoph Reuter, Gregor Peter Schmitz, & Holger Stark, "How German Diplomats Opened Channel with Taliban," *Spiegel Online*, January 10, 2012; Dean Nelson and Ben Farmer, "Secret Peace Talks Between US and Taliban Collapse over Leaks," *The Telegraph*, August 10, 2011; Steve Coll, *Directorate S: The CIA an America's Secret Wars in Afghanistan and Pakistan* (New York: Penguin Press, 2018), 563-585.

⁶ Azam Ahmad and Matthew Rosenberg, "Karzai Arranged Secret Contacts with Taliban," *The New York Times*, February 3, 2014.

government in bringing the Taliban to a negotiation table. However, it led to the release of hundreds of the Taliban fighters from Kabul Pul-e-Charkhi prison as a result of Karzai and the HPC's bargaining with elements of the insurgency who poorly represented the core Taliban. Unlike Karzai's expectations, the released Taliban fighters returned to battlegrounds marking a bloodier period of insurgency and terrorist attacks in Afghanistan. In this process, the Chairman of the HPC was also assassinated at his home in Kabul by a suicide attacker who had identified himself as one of the two Taliban commanders and claimed to contribute to Karzai's peace plan.⁷ Prior to Rabbani's assassination, the Pakistani security establishment had also targeted the "old-generation" of Taliban figures based in Quetta and Karachi in an effort to maintain the control of any possible political settlement of conflict in Afghanistan.⁸ It was publicly assumed in Afghanistan that Pakistan targeted elements of the Taliban who were preparing to open a channel of talks with Karzai on an "Afghan-led" political settlement of the conflict.

Despite these incidents, Karzai continued to express interest in bilateral negotiations with the Taliban whom he publicly called as his "discontented brothers." However, contradicting modalities and agenda of conflict resolution and rigid preconditions of the parties stalled progress toward a feasible negotiated settlement of the conflict. While the government sought to integrate the Taliban in the post-Bonn political process, the latter used to bring forward preconditions for negotiation which was

⁷ "Afghan Peace Council Head Rabbani Killed in Attack," *BBC*, September 20, 2011 <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-south-asia-14985779>

⁸ Alex Strick Van Linschoten and Felix Kuehn, *An Enemy We Created: The Myth of the Taliban al-Qaeda Merger in Afghanistan 1970-2010* (London: Hurst & Company, 2012), 294.

unfeasible for the government to commit to (e.g. the complete withdrawal of foreign forces and the establishment of a Sharia based government in Kabul).⁹ This gap between an ideal scenario and the status quo was not possible to be bridged with instruments that the two sides were using to leverage the other.

Following the controversial Presidential Elections and the establishment of the National Unity Government (NUG) in 2014, the Taliban were invited for peace talks once again. President Ghani's initial strategy was similar to the phase two of President Karzai's peace talks – comprised of a combination of coercion and negotiation – which is now changed to a policy of higher priority to negotiation manifested in the President's peace offer in February and his unilateral ceasefire in June 2018. Accompanied with President Ghani's escalation of efforts for bringing the Taliban to the negotiations table, President Donald Trump's new South Asia Strategy and the United States' subsequent pressures on Pakistan and the Taliban created the impression that the policy shift might breakthrough the stalemate. Following this development, President Ghani made an ambitious negotiation offer to the Taliban. The offer was made at the Second Kabul Process Conference in February 2018. Ghani's offer entailed unprecedented incentives including possible constitutional amendments, a promise for the

⁹ On government's integration program see Linschoten and Kuehn, *An Enemy We Created*, pp. 318-319; In his Eid-ul-Fitr message in September 2010, Mullah Omer emphasized that the Taliban's upcoming government and foreign policy will be based on Sharia Law. On this see Mullah Mohammad Omer, "Message of Felicitation of the Esteemed Amir-ul-Momineen Mullah Mohammad Omer Mujahid on the Eve of Eid-ul-Fitr," *theunjustmedia*, September 8, 2010; Haibatullah Akhundzada, "Message of Felicitation." On Taliban's conditions and emphasis on the withdrawal of foreign troops see the series the Taliban's political statements in www.alemarah.com, particularly, Haibatullah Akhundzada, "Message of Felicitation."

release of imprisoned Taliban members, and the group's recognition as a political party.¹⁰

While the offer is supported by all parties involved in Afghanistan, the Taliban have refused to directly respond to the call. Instead, the group has continued its traditional strategy of 'war-making' as the primary political means in practice with a simultaneous emphasis on negotiations with the United States rather than the government of Afghanistan.¹¹ There is nothing new about the Taliban's request for direct talks with the United States. The Taliban's interest in talking to the United States has been the group's conventional international politics since its emergence in the midst of the civil war in Afghanistan. In the late 1990s and 2000, for instance, the Taliban sent delegations to the United States to talk with American officials on certain issues including Afghanistan's seat at the United Nations and the IEA's official recognition by the US and the UN. However, they returned to Afghanistan with no clear result.¹² In the post-2001 era also, the Taliban repeatedly requested a direct talk with the US on a negotiated solution of the conflict, some of which were rejected by the United States and some were ultimately failed for certain reasons including the Taliban's rigid pre-conditions and/or lack of capacity in maintaining their initial promises. An example of the

¹⁰ "Government Discloses Details of Ghani's Peace Offer," *Tolo News*, February 28, 2018.

¹¹ Akhundzada, "Message of Felicitations;" Zaef, "Special Interview;" "Statement by Political Office of Islamic Emirate Concerning Last Comments by US Department of State;" *alemarah*, February 28, 2018 <https://alemarah-english.com/?p=26067>; "Letter of the Islamic Emirate to the American People," *alemarah*, February 14, 2018 <https://alemarah-english.com/?p=25640>

¹² Yaqub Ibrahim, "The Taliban's Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan: 'War-Making and State-Making' as an Insurgency Strategy," *Small Wars and Insurgencies*, 28(6), 2017: 956-957

latter would be the Taliban's raising the flag of the IEA in the newly opened office in Qatar in 2013 against the planned roadmap and without consultation with the US and other parties which resulted in the official closure of the office. Although the Taliban's desire for direct talks with the US was initially rejected by President Trump¹³ and the US Embassy in Kabul describes its official policy as facilitating direct negotiations between the government and the Taliban,¹⁴ it was recently announced that a top US envoy for South Asia, Alice Wells, met with the Taliban officials in Doha in July 2018.¹⁵ This meeting is considered as "preliminary" and is not clear whether it contributes to or contradicts President Ghani's so-called "Afghan-owned Afghan-led" negotiation policy which is broadly supported by his international allies.¹⁶

In Afghanistan, despite the Taliban ignoring President Ghani's offer and the group's continuation of violence on the ground and emphasis on direct negotiations with Americans, the government has increased its efforts at all community, government, and international levels aiming to bring the Taliban to the negotiations table. The trilateral meeting of Islamic scholars of Indonesia, Pakistan, and Afghanistan in West Java in May 2018, which released a declaration denouncing terrorism and suicide

¹³ "Trump: We Don't Want to Talk with the Taliban." *Radio Free Europe*, January 29, 2018; reference to the political officer of the US Embassy in Kabul participated in this research.

¹⁴ Reference to the political officer of the US Embassy in Kabul participated in this research.

¹⁵ "Taliban Sources Confirm Qatar Meeting With Senior US Diplomat." *BBC*, July 30, 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-45006643>

¹⁶ Laignee Barron, "Mike Pompeo Pushes for Peace Talks with the Taliban During a Surprise Stop in Afghanistan," *Time*, July 10, 2018 <http://time.com/5334263/mike-pompeo-peace-talks-taliban/>

attacks as against Islamic principles,¹⁷ and President Ghani's unilateral ceasefire in June of the same year are the government's major moves toward starting a negotiation process. Although the Taliban responded to President Ghani with a three-day ceasefire during the Eid-al-Fitr, the efforts did not guarantee any progress. The Taliban leadership constantly refuses to recognize the government as a legitimate party to negotiate with. Moreover, despite President Ghani's extension of the ceasefire, the Taliban resumed their violent campaign immediately after the group's three-day deadline. As a result, the stalemate confronting a meaningful peace process in Afghanistan persists. The stalemate and the extension of the conflict in Afghanistan also entail foreign policy dimensions. Therefore, to unpack the complexities of the stalemate, it is necessary to investigate the multi-level causes and dimensions of the conflict from domestic to international.

Neither the Taliban nor the conflict are independent phenomena and, therefore, cannot be addressed exclusively. A coherent conflict resolution policy needs to be designed in a way to include and properly address causes and dimensions of the conflict at multiple levels. Therefore, a government versus the Taliban scenario could not be a comprehensive context for conflict resolution. Evidently, the continuous efforts of the government of Afghanistan and its international partners to eliminate barriers to negotiation with the Taliban have been challenged by the absence of a central policy agreed and followed uniformly by all involved parties of the conflict. Such a policy would reconcile the complex and multi-level causes and dimensions of the conflict and articulate options for addressing the peace-talk stalemate issue. It would also

¹⁷ Sheany, "Ulema from Three Countries Meet in West Java, Denounce Terrorism, Suicide Attacks," *Jakarta Globe*, May 11, 2018.

incorporate a blueprint of action for a negotiated settlement, and clearly explain the role and limits of different parties in a likely negotiation process. In the absence of such a policy on table, unilateral efforts by a variety of players (e.g. HPC, tribal and religious elements, the United States, European Union, United Nations, Russia, Norway, Pakistan, Iran, China, India, Turkey, Uzbekistan and many others) to influence war and peace in Afghanistan have proven to be anything but a success. Lack of a uniform policy has also resulted in contradicting modalities and agenda of conflict resolution which has created a chaotic condition on the ground. Today, while all domestic and international players in Afghanistan indicate support for a negotiated settlement in Afghanistan, lack of agreement among parties on modalities and agenda of negotiations has stalled progress in conflict resolution. Although the findings of this research indicate that the Taliban is incapable of winning militarily, the insurgency's rigid preconditions have sabotaged a viable peace process and a negotiated settlement of the conflict. The Taliban's main approach, i.e., carrying out offensive operations including suicide bombing while emphasizing on negotiation preconditions and talking to the US instead of the government of Afghanistan, demonstrates the group's inclination toward maintaining the status quo with the assumption that it will eventually turn in their favor (i.e., the complete withdrawal of international forces, changes in international and regional politics in favor of the insurgency, the erosion of the Afghanistan armed forces as a result of reductions in international aid, and an elite fragmentation).

By contrast, the government of Afghanistan, despite its severe fragility, constantly remains the preeminent force in Afghanistan and enjoys both popular and international support. No reliable evidence supports the possibility that the Taliban could

remove this government in current circumstances. However, the government also has not shown the capability of winning on the battleground. The Taliban and the government's mutual inability in winning militarily has created a stalemate in which a negotiated settlement poses as the most possible way out of the conflict.

The rationale for conducting this research stems from the above-mentioned opportunities and challenges confronting a peace process in Afghanistan. This research is an effort to analyze the complexity of the Taliban's insurgency, assess the past negotiation efforts, collect views of local, regional and international parties on defining the problem and possible solutions. The research is conducted on two levels. First, it investigates the causes of the conflict at domestic, regional, and international levels. Next, it examines a relevant conflict resolution scenarios in Afghanistan. This approach would help diagnose causes of the conflict and incorporate them in a conflict resolution policy.

The remainder of this paper proceeds as follows. First, the methodology of the research is explained. Next, the root causes and the internal and external structures of the Taliban's insurgency are discussed. Three subsequent sections are devoted to conflict resolution scenarios. In these parts, the three models of conflict resolution, i.e. coercion, negotiation and a combination of the two are examined in detail. Finally, drawing on theoretical debates of conflict resolution, the paper investigates the requirements and conditions of a negotiated settlement of the conflict in Afghanistan. In conclusion, the contributions of this research are outlined.

Methodology

This research is an effort to diagnose causes and dimensions of the current conflict between the government of Afghanistan and the Taliban; discuss challenges, conditions, and possibilities of a negotiated settlement of the conflict; and explore potential scenarios for conflict resolution. The research is based on historical data and 24 in-depth interviews with domestic, regional and international sources involved in war and peace in Afghanistan. The research addresses two interconnected questions concerning both the causes of conflict and possibilities for peace as follows:

- *Why does the Taliban fight?*
- *How could the conflict be settled?*

The questionnaire of this research was designed to seek response to these questions and contained two sets of open-ended questions including general questions and customized questions for each participant to suit their institutional experience and expertise.¹⁸ A semi-structured interview guide was used to ask participants about their perception of the causes of the Taliban's insurgency and possible negotiations and conflict resolution scenarios. Interviews were conducted and transcribed by field researchers of AISS in Kabul from April to June 2018. Interviews were conducted both in English and Farsi following the interview guideline of the institution.

The 24 interviewees included domestic, regional, and international players including foreign Embassies and political missions in Kabul, the government and parliament of Afghanistan, political parties, civil society organizations, analysts, and the

¹⁸ See Appendix A.

HPC.¹⁹ A number of potential sources including the Taliban, the Embassies of Russia, India, China, Saudi Arabia, and Central Asian countries in Kabul were contacted but declined to participate in this research. The research attempts to minimize this limitation by reviewing accessible relevant documents. In particular, the Taliban’s official statements as the crystallization of the group’s policy on negotiation and conflict resolution are reviewed.

Data analysis follows a qualitative document analysis method through which findings are extracted by a step-by-step coding and categorization of data.²⁰ The findings are grouped into two categories (i.e. causes of the conflict and conflict resolution scenarios). Each category combines three variables concerning causes of the conflict and conflict resolution scenarios in Afghanistan. This categorization is conducted with the purpose of covering the two main question of this research and organizing the findings under specific variable. The following table reflects a clearer image of the categorization:

<i>Causes of Conflict</i>	<i>Scenarios for Conflict Resolution</i>
Domestic	Coercion
Regional	Negotiation
Global/International	Combination of Coercion & Negotiation

In order to produce a reliable and inclusive interpretation of the data, data analysis followed a three-stage process. In the first or

¹⁹ See Appendix B.

²⁰ Elizabeth Pierre, Alecia Jackson, “Qualitative Data Analysis After Coding,” *Qualitative Analysis* 20(60), 2014, 715-719; Pat Bazeley, *Qualitative Data Analysis: Practical Strategies* (London: SAGE, 2013),125-156

“open-coding” stage, the overall interviews were reviewed several times, a general understanding of the data was made, and prominent patterns and themes were highlighted. In the second or “axial-coding” stage, specific passages and codes, and prominent themes and patterns, and the relationship between them were highlighted. Finally, in the third or “selective-coding” stage, the highlighted themes and patterns in the second stage were reviewed, main themes and patterns relevant to the six main variables of this research were selected, validated and categorized as “main findings” in order to generate a grounded theory on conflict resolution in Afghanistan.²¹ The findings were categorized as common understandings, disagreements, and diverse perspectives on issues related to causes of the Taliban’s insurgency and conflict resolution scenarios. In a later stage, the findings were extracted in order to produce the “key findings” section for easy reference of readers.

Following the data analysis, the findings were compared and analyzed against the conflict resolution and historical data. First, the main conflict resolution literature was reviewed and discussed as to how they corresponded or contrasted with findings of this research. Second, in order to include recent developments concerning negotiations efforts a content analysis of some relevant data was conducted. Finally, for the purpose of providing a comparative image of the problem of Afghanistan, lessons from two conflicts that are resolved by different methods of conflict resolution are briefly reviewed. The cases include Colombia in which peace was the outcome of a combination of coercion and negotiation, and Sri Lanka in which the insurgency was dissolved

²¹ For coding stages and theory development see Sharon M. Kolb, “Grounded Theory and the Constant Comparative Method,” *Journal of Emerging Trends in Educational Research and Policy Studies*, 3(1), 2012, 83-86.

through a military coercion by the government. This comparison categorizes chances, conditions, and consequences of a negotiated peace and discusses their implication in the case of Afghanistan. In the light of insight extracted from both the within-case and comparative analysis,²² this research makes a number of conclusions on why previous efforts for peace-making in Afghanistan failed, how to address the causes of the conflict, how the Taliban would submit to a negotiated settlement, and what is the ideal scenario for conflict resolution in Afghanistan. The findings of this research are categorized and discussed in the five following sections, and the conclusion highlights the contribution of this research.

²² Joachim Blatter & Markus Haverland, *Designing Case Studies: Explanatory Approaches in Small-N Research* (New York: Palgrave, 2012), 79; Dirk Leuffen, “Case Selection and Selection Bias in Small-n Research,” in Thomas Gschwend & Frank Schimmelfennig (eds.), *Research Design in Political Science: How to Practice What They Preach* (New York: Palgrave, 2007), 148-149

Causes and Structure of the Taliban Insurgency

Conflict resolution requires addressing the root causes and factors that shape and support an insurgency's external and internal structures. This part examines the causes and structure of the Taliban's insurgency by drawing on both empirical and comparative data, and discusses the possible ways of addressing the sources of the conflict.

The findings of this research suggest that for making a meaningful peace process in Afghanistan possible, both domestic and foreign causes of the conflict have to be addressed simultaneously in a peace process. In this regards, the government needs to focus at domestic level in increasing its legitimacy, authority, and capacity, and at regional and international levels, it has to launch a proactive and dynamic diplomacy in order to reconcile contradicting regional positions concerning war and peace in Afghanistan. These findings correspond with historical and comparative data. Both the findings and comparative data suggest that for making a viable peace through negotiations possible, it is necessary for a government and its partners to intertwine negotiation efforts with addressing the root causes of the insurgency at domestic, regional, and international levels. While domestic factors provide a favorable environment of recruitment and operation for the Taliban, external factors increase the strength of insurgent groups and prolongs and complexes the conflict. Historical data indicate that nearly half of all insurgencies after the WWII had links to external factors or received support from foreign sources.²³ As long as the domestic and external causes were

²³ David, E Cunningham, Kristian Skrede, and Idean Salehyan "Non-State Actors in Civil Wars: A New Dataset," *Conflict Management and Peace Science* 30 (5): 2013, 527; David E. Cunningham, "Blocking Resolution: How

not addressed properly, efforts for negotiation and reconciliation did not result in a viable peace and stability.

The conflict in Afghanistan is complex and influenced by multiple causes and actors at domestic, regional and international levels. Therefore, in order to direct the conflict resolution efforts toward a viable peace, it is necessary for the government of Afghanistan and its partners to diagnose those causes and address them properly. In this effort, the background of the conflict issues, positions, interests, sources of leverage, the external context, and potential entry points should be considered and addressed.²⁴ Empirical data show that when conflict resolution efforts have failed to address sufficiently the underlying causes and issues of a dispute, the conflict broke out again. Almost half of negotiations in which causes of the conflict were not considered and appropriately address resulted in agreements that lasted less than two months. These short-lived agreements failed to provide the space necessary for an agreement to shift political conditions, therefore conflicts broke out again.²⁵ Recognition of the underlying sources of the Taliban's insurgency and dealing with them are major requirements of reaching a peace agreement that would last long and provide the political space for a lasting peace process in Afghanistan.

External States Can Prolong Civil Wars,” *Journal of Peace Research* 47 (2): 2010, 124.

²⁴ Crocker et al. “Why Mediation Matters: Ending Intractable Conflicts,” in Jacob Bercovitch, Victor Kermenyuk, and I. William Zartmen (eds.), *The Sage Handbook of Conflict Resolution*, 492-505 (Los Angeles, London, and New York: SAGE, 2009), 499.

²⁵ Scott Sigmund Gartner and Molly M. Melin, “Assessing Outcomes: Management and the Durability of Peace,” in Jacob Bercovitch, Victor Kermenyuk, and I. William Zartmen (eds.), *The Sage Handbook of Conflict Resolution*, 564-579 (Los Angeles, London, and New York: SAGE, 2009), 566.

As articulated, the Taliban's insurgency are based on causes at all three domestic, regional and international levels. At domestic level, this research finds that the political economy of the conflict is a noticeable pattern which respondents mentioned as a main cause of the insurgency. Factors such as popular discontentment with government performance in provinces, unemployment, lack of the government authority and capacity in providing basic services, and the drug economy are frequently mentioned as a determinant driving force behind the Taliban's insurgency and the extension of the conflict. According to a US Embassy Political Officer in Kabul, who interviewed on the condition of anonymity, for example, the domestic causes of the conflict include "corruption, lack of rule of law and lack of capacity to offer social service to people." And according to a UNAMA Political Officer, who also spoke on anonymity condition:

One of the primary causes [of insurgency] is dissatisfaction. Especially, at the local level, government authorities were considered to be abusive or corrupt or not representing the real interest of the people at the local communities or who intervened in pre-existing rivalries at the local level. They picked one side which generated a resistance towards the other. I think that is one indigenous cause of the insurgency and something which allowed insurgence to be gain more fraction after having been somewhat marginalized in the national period of 2002, 2003, 2004. Obviously, there is also a geopolitical dimension which has been well-researched and discussed.

Participants who underline domestic factors as a major cause of the conflict articulate that the government's lack of authority in securing the country and enforcing the law, and its lack of capacity in providing basic services are significant drivers behind the Taliban's campaign and provide a crucial basis for Taliban's recruitment. These respondents believe that the government has to include fundamental reforms in law enforcement, security, and services sectors in order to assure the people that it is capable of providing a better alternative to the Taliban. The government of Afghanistan does not reject the domestic causes but believes the domestic sources of the conflict are interconnected to a series of events and factors at regional and global levels. According to the National Security Council of Afghanistan (NSC), there is no agreement about the order of the causes:

... a faction of the Taliban have emerged from the local people who have preferred war and violence for different reasons since the creation of the Taliban. Local disputes, complaints, and inter-tribal and inter-ethnic problems in the south-west, and inter-group dispute and widespread discontentment, particularly the extension of war, in the north, west and other parts of the country have been the main causes of their conflict...The second reason is that in the post-Bonn period, the Taliban lost their leadership. In fact, the group was disintegrated. Most individuals who came in [for peace talks] in this period whether lacked the sufficient power to represent the Taliban or were involved in peace talks individually. Following some developments in the region and some countries' efforts to resist the United States and

the West, they [those countries] in addition to other efforts, tried to use the Taliban for achieving their tactical objectives. Therefore, contacted the Taliban and provided them with financial support and weapons. This effort not only strengthened the Taliban but also provided a reason for Pakistan to claim that the war of Afghanistan and support for the Taliban do not belong to Pakistan, alone. Thus the conflict took a regional form and got complicated over time.

Unlike the conventional wisdom, religion and ideology were mentioned as a secondary factor which facilitates the Taliban's recruitment. Respondents who mentioned religion as a factor of the Taliban's extension, believe that the Taliban recruit from the very illiterate and highly conservative communities in the south and east of Afghanistan. However, unlike the conventional wisdom that considers the Taliban as a segment of the global jihadi movement, most participants to this research believe that the Taliban have a domestic agenda which is retaking power only within the borders of Afghanistan. Mahiuddin Mahdi, a member of the Leadership Council of Jamiat-e-Islami, and a member of the Parliament of Afghanistan, for instance, believes that the Taliban's current agenda is political and directed toward retaking power in Kabul:

The Taliban's post-9/11 campaign was stimulated by Pakistan's hidden agendas [in Afghanistan] but this time, it seems that the Taliban's resurgence was caused also by the group's motivation for retaking the power that they lost in Afghanistan. A very minority segment of them might have been motivated by extremist religious sentiments who

consider their violent campaign as an extension of Jihad...

Intertribal and local disputes in the south and east of Afghanistan was mentioned as another major domestic driver behind the Taliban's insurgency by NSC. According to an NSC senior advisor, who spoke on the condition of anonymity, several tribes and sub-tribes in the southern and western parts of Afghanistan who did not benefit from the post-Bonn process, turned to the Taliban demanding protection from their rival tribal elites who had strong links with the government and the Americans. The following statements touches on the tribal factor of the Taliban insurgency:

There is no doubt that a large segment of the Taliban in the southwest was, initially, formed of ethnic groups such as Noorzai, Alizai, Ishaqzai, or Hotak, that had considered themselves deprived and marginalized in the past. ... One of the main reasons that the Taliban could not return to the southwest after 2001 was the occurrence of new circumstances [in the region]. Following the escape of Mullah Omer from Kandahar and the elimination of the Taliban from there, local power was transferred to the people who did not only have ethnic disputes with most of the Taliban leadership but also were perceived by the Taliban as the enemy number one. Under this circumstance, the Taliban escaped [from southwest] because they were afraid of a revenge [by the enemy tribes who took power]. This, in turn, caused more anger among the Taliban.

Despite the participants' broad agreement on multi-level causes of the resurgence of the Taliban, foreign sources largely divide from the Afghanistan's participants on the nature of the Taliban insurgency. While domestic sources indicate that the Taliban would not survive without transnational connections and supports they receive from external sources, most of foreign diplomats and analysts in Kabul consider the Taliban as a domestic or local insurgent group. The European Union Head of Delegation to Afghanistan, Pierre Mayaudon, for instance, states that,

of course they are domestic insurgency but there is [also] an ideological dimension. But the main aspect is domestic causes... And obviously, we know the theory that has been advanced that there is a geopolitical goal for which the Taliban is being used for. Even though, I think, that a fundamental agenda of Taliban is domestic or national one.

The UNAMA political officer also defines the Taliban as a more domestic insurgency than a transnational group. Likewise, the Pakistani Ambassador in Kabul, Zahid Nasrullah Khan, believes that the Taliban is a very local group. He elaborates his point as follows. "They are, I think, very local group. They have always been a very local group. They never claimed for any khilafat, they never claimed to spread their ideology... or their interpretation of Islam to other countries."

The Director of the Institute of South and Southeast Asian and Oceanian Studies at the China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations, Hu Shicheng, also states that based on the group's recent activities, the Taliban only have local agendas rather than a regional or global one. Moreover, according to the Director of Department of Asian Studies, Institute of Political and

International Studies, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Iran, Alireza Gholipour, the Taliban emerged, initially, with regional dimensions but the group is currently transforming into a domestic or what he calls “an independent social and political force” in Afghanistan. By contrast, domestic sources perceive the Taliban as a more complex and multi-dimensional phenomenon with links both inside and outside Afghanistan. Abdul Hafeez Mansoor, a member of the Parliament of Afghanistan, for instance, divides the Taliban into three categories and emphasizes that dealing with each category requires distinct policies, “The Taliban has many layers. The first layer includes simple peoples who have studied in religious schools and in recent years some unemployed youth have also joined them. The second layer is the regional powers that support the Taliban, and the third layer is the global powers. They all together create a phenomenon named the Taliban.”

Likewise, the Executive Director of Afghanistan’s Civil Society Forum, Azizullah Rafiee, distinguishes the Taliban into four parts and suggests that dealing with each part requires different measures:

The Taliban are structurally divided into many parts and they are not an independent group. The first segment of the Taliban includes unemployed youth who are the generation of war and unfortunately do not have any expertise but using the weapon for making an income. The second part includes individuals who for family or political reasons, or also because they are victims of the process, have joined the Taliban to fight the injustices which are the outcome of the government’s corruption or the pro-government local commanders’ attitudes. This

group fights the government to take revenge. ... The third part includes the drug mafia which is very powerful both politically and economically within the Taliban. The fourth part includes ideological circles who fight by extremist and radical ideas and believe that fighting the infidels in Afghanistan is legitimate and one must fight. These [ideological] circles are not reconcilable with a democratic regime in Afghanistan and will fight to the end. Unfortunately, this group has an effective influence in all segments of the Taliban...

And, Njibullah Manalai, a political analyst in Kabul believes that the Taliban are constructed of, at least, four layers, each requiring different measures to deal with:

First, the group that fight for an ideology and a specific political regime in Afghanistan. This group took power in Afghanistan but could not maintain it. This group concern about Afghanistan but seek a different political system. ... The second segment includes international terrorists... This group was dominant during the Taliban regime's last two three years of government... This group only numbers between 7 and 8 thousand. The third segment comprises of the largest part of the Taliban who have joined the insurgency in the past seventeen years due to discontentment with the government. ... The fourth segment comprises of the mafia structure which has turned war into business...

The drug economy is another factor that was frequently mentioned as a domestic driver behind the Taliban's insurgency. Participants,

who highlighted drug as an element of the conflict, believe that powerful tribes and local men with an interest in the drug economy, use the insurgency as a cover for their business. These participants also considered the Taliban opium tax levied upon local producers as their major source of income to wage the insurgency. Respondents refer to a number of other factors explaining Taliban's insurgency: the nature of the Taliban as an essentially "war-making" force; the belief among the Taliban that a military approach is feasible at the absence of international assistance and its subsequent Afghanistan national army erosion; the approach endorsed by the Taliban to coerce the government as a way to gain bargaining leverage at international level; and, the dependency of the Taliban to Pakistan. Taking the domestic roots and dimensions of the Taliban insurgency into consideration, participants suggest that, in addition to efforts for direct negotiations with the Taliban, an effective conflict resolution agenda should be designed for understanding and addressing these causes. These participants suggest that the policy should include reforms in governance, security, and justice systems, and focus on increasing the government's capacity and authority in providing security, justice, and services in Afghanistan, particularly in areas that serve as the Taliban's hotspots.

At regional level, this research finds that the insurgency has strong roots in regional and global power politics. Almost all participants to this research explicitly highlight the role of Pakistan as a key factor in the extension of the Taliban's insurgency. Most arguments, particularly presented by Afghanistan's participants, are based on a claim that Pakistan uses the Taliban as a foreign policy instrument with the purpose of increasing its influence in Afghanistan. According to the National Security Council of

Afghanistan, Pakistan is a major driver behind the extension of the conflict in Afghanistan:

Pakistan was one of the main causes behind the continuation of the Taliban's insurgency against the government. [Pakistan] provided the conditions for the resurgence of the Taliban and by maintaining the Taliban in the battleground, aimed to both have control over developments in Afghanistan and receive benefits from the US. For this reason, the Taliban's efforts for ending the conflict through negotiations between 2004 and 2005, were sabotaged by Pakistan.

Mohammad Ashraf Haidari, the Director of Policy and Strategy at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Afghanistan, also, highlights Pakistan's role in insurgency as follows:

From their [the Taliban's] perspective the purpose [of their insurgency] is [the creation] of an Islamic state which we experienced in the 1990s... which is a return to a Sharia-based regime. But from our perspective, this is just an excuse. We believe that our neighboring country, Pakistan, by misusing the issue [religion] follows a strategic agenda, which is the extension of Pakistan's policy in our territory.

Moreover, Rayhana Azad, a member of the Parliament of Afghanistan describes the Taliban as a non-autonomous force controlled deeply by neighboring countries that use the group as a foreign policy tool for increasing influence in Afghanistan. Likewise, Davood Ravoosh, the leader of the Progressive Party of Afghanistan considers Pakistan as a key driver behind the Taliban's extension of power and coercive campaign. Even the

Pakistan Ambassador in Kabul, Zahid Nasrullah Khan, did not explicitly refuse Pakistan's link to the Taliban describing Pakistan's interest in Afghanistan a "very legitimate" one.

In addition to Pakistan's influence as a regional driver behind the insurgency, the Taliban has developed broader regional dimensions, particularly in the past five years. Iran and Russia, for instance, are mentioned as regional powers that have developed connections with the Taliban. Pressuring the US in Afghanistan and countering its expansion in the region are considered as the main reasons behind the regional powers' supporting the insurgency. For example, Ataurrahman Salim, a Deputy Chairman to HPC, believes that Pakistan, Iran, and Russia are specific powers that have developed strong relations with the Taliban for their long-term strategic goals and interests in the region. Abdul Hakim Mujahid, a Deputy Chair of HPC and the former Head of the Taliban Delegation to the UN, connects the regional powers' support of the Taliban to their policies of countering the US in Afghanistan. Pakistan's Ambassador in Kabul emphasizes that every regional power's involvement in the conflict in Afghanistan is linked to their own concerns among which the presence of the US troops in Afghanistan is the most significant one:

...the Iranians were worried that the Americans are sitting there... They [the Iranians] thought they could be destabilized from here. Then China also felt that the situation has been destabilized. They [the Chinses] want to develop economically. They want to open up its corridors... for that Afghanistan must stabilize. Russia felt that the US is here and Da'esh [Islamic State] is coming in and that can destabilize central Asia... and the US was having a strife over

Ukraine... So, all those factors were also influencing the policies of all these regional countries. And then, of course, China versus India. That competition is also going on there... they are competing economically, people are thinking that the United States is building India to counter China. So, all those things were having their implications for these regional countries in their Afghan policy also.

In addition to the clear regional resistance to the US presence in Afghanistan, the regional power's involvement in the conflict, in some cases, are more complex. China's involvement for instance, as Hu Shicheng's discusses, is indirect and through the Pakistani government. However, Hu Shicheng clarifies that China's purpose is taking part in conflict resolution rather than engaging in the conflict:

[China] tries to engage with the Taliban through the help of Pakistan, due to lack of resources. Not successful up to today. Then [China] participated in the QCG (Quadrilateral Cooperation Group)²⁶ but the killing of Mansoor had disrupted this process. Then [China is] holding China-Pakistan-Afghanistan trilateral ministerial talks to encourage AF-PAK mutual understanding, so that Pakistan may use more resources to force the Taliban to the table. Still in process.

²⁶ QCG was a cooperation group which included Afghanistan, Pakistan, China and the United States. QCG was launched in January 2016 to facilitate negotiations between the Taliban and the government of Afghanistan but terminated in May, when the leader of the Taliban, Mullah Akhtar Mansoor, was killed by a US drone attack.

Highlighting the regional drivers behind the conflict as significant, a number of participants emphasized that the negotiation efforts between the Taliban and the government should begin on regional level. For example, Vladimir Paramonov, an Uzbekistani researcher and a former Advisor to the President of Uzbekistan on Social-Economic Policy, indicates that negotiations should start on a diplomatic level with countries that enjoy influence both in Afghanistan and on the Taliban, such as Qatar, Russia, China, and the United States. Participants also suggest that a dynamic diplomacy is needed to reconcile the contradicting regional policies convincing them that they would gain more from peace than the war in Afghanistan. In other words, a negotiated settlement of the conflict requires a diplomacy that is capable of bringing regional players on one page concerning conflict resolution in Afghanistan.

Finally, at international level, causes of the conflict are more complex and intertwined with domestic and regional factors. The global power politics and international rivalries in the region have provided a favorite condition for the persistence and extension of the insurgency. The presence of the United States troops in Afghanistan is considered as a major factor that the Taliban believe are the cause of their insurgency. In most of its political statements, the leadership of the Taliban has highlighted the presence of the US forces in Afghanistan as a main source of insurgency. In a most recent message, for instance, “on the occasion of Eid-ul-Fitr,” the Taliban’s Supreme Leader, Mawlawi Haibatullah Akhondzada described the presences of “American and other occupying forces” in Afghanistan as the main cause of the conflict emphasizing on extension of jihad until the forces leave the country.²⁷ The participants of this research also mentioned

²⁷ Hibatullah Akhundzada, “Message of Felicitation.”

frequently that the regional powers' rivalries with the United States in Afghanistan have added international dimensions to the conflict extending the Taliban's sources of income and their foreign policy dynamics. Abdul Hakim Mujahid, for example, remarks that the presence of US troops in Afghanistan have encouraged the regional powers to support the Taliban in order to counter the American influence and expansion in the region. Mujahid also believes that the presence of foreign troops in Afghanistan helps the Taliban to extend the insurgency, "What we hear from the Taliban is that their only objective and agenda is resistance to the foreign forces in Afghanistan. [The Taliban tell us] as long as they [the foreign troops] are here we will continue fighting."

In addition to diagnosing and addressing the root causes of the conflict in Afghanistan as articulated and discussed above, identifying and sufficiently addressing the Taliban's external and internal structures are also vital in conflict resolution. In the absence of those structures that interact with the root causes of the conflict, developing a relevant negotiation model and a comprehensive peace agenda does not seem feasible.

Concerning external structure of insurgency, three key sources of support shape the external structure of the Taliban which include local tribal support, cross-border sanctuaries, and state-sponsored support from the region. The Taliban, unlike many other insurgencies, enjoy more complicated sanctuaries facilitated both by the neighboring countries, particularly Pakistan, and cross-border ethnic and tribal relationships.²⁸ These sanctuaries are a significant factor that would influence efforts for negotiations and any conflict resolution agenda. Therefore, it is necessary to include

²⁸ Ben Connable and Martin C. Libicki, *How Insurgencies End* (Santa Monica, CA.: RAND, 2010), 46.

them in efforts for negotiations. Unless the sanctuaries are closed, the Taliban would use them for extending their military campaign. Thus, they would constantly affect efforts for a negotiated settlement. Moreover, foreign support to the Taliban is another significant external structure of the insurgency that has to be taken into consideration for making negotiations feasible. External support for the Taliban extends their confidence in covering the cost of war motivating them to maintain the insurgency for a military victory. Among other types of external support, state support is the most decisive one that the Taliban enjoy. As the findings of this research suggest, the Taliban enjoys state support from Pakistan and other neighboring countries which have to be addressed through a proactive diplomacy parallel to negotiations efforts. Finally, poverty and underdevelopment create another external structure for the Taliban's insurgency. The Taliban operates in one of the most impoverished rural areas in the world with low income and poor urbanization, which provide a significant advantage for the insurgency.²⁹

Concerning internal structure, the organization of an insurgency has a critical influence on an insurgent group's motivation and decision for negotiations. Insurgencies that are organized in a hierarchical structure and enjoy a military system are more resistant than networked insurgency with a para-military force.³⁰ The Taliban is more similar to the latter. Evidence shows that despite its capability in maintaining its political unification, the Taliban, following Mullah Omer's death in 2015, has turned into a network of semi-autonomous political councils and military headquarters including:

²⁹ Ibid., 48.

³⁰ Ibid., 77, 80.

- The Official leadership of the Islamic Emirate or the Quetta Shura which is based in Quetta and Karachi, Pakistan, and led by Mawlawi Haibatullah Akhund. This Shura is active in the south and north-west Afghanistan.
- The Mashhad Shura which mostly concentrates in the west and accounts for 10% of the Taliban. It has good relations with the Quetta Shura but has not officially recognized Haibatullah as its leader.
- A minority group of dissidents to Haibatullah's leadership led by Obeidullah Ishaqzai, cousin of Akhtar Mohammad Mansur, which accounts for 10% of the Taliban's manpower.
- The High Council of the Islamic Emirate or the Rasool Shura which split from Quetta Shura in 2015 and is active in western Afghanistan. It accounts for less than 10% of total Taliban manpower.
- The Miran Shah Shura which leads the Haqqani network and accounts for 15% of the Taliban, which is active in south-east and south.
- The Peshawar Shura which is active in eastern Afghanistan and around Kabul.
- The Shura of the North which split from the Peshawar Shura is based in Badakhshan and active in north-east and east Afghanistan, and around Kabul and accounts for 15% of the Taliban.³¹

This segmentation creates the impression that the Taliban is no longer a uniform and centralized organization. However, recent events, particularly the Eid-al-Fitr's three-day ceasefire by the Quetta Shura indicated that the Shura enjoys, at least, a political

³¹ Antonio Giustozzi, "Taliban and Islamic State: Enemies or Brothers in Jihad," *Center for Research and Policy Analysis*, December 14, 2017.

domination over the network of the Taliban. Despite such political centralism, the findings of this research suggest that the Taliban are not only divided into Shuras, but each Shura and faction is also composed of a variety of layers, circles, and sub-factions that follow different agenda on the ground. Findings of this research confirm the networked nature of the Taliban suggesting the complexity should be included in modalities and agenda of peace. Ataurrahman Salim, for instance, believes that the organizational fragmentation of the Taliban has made the conflict and conflict resolution more complicated than it was in the past:

... the Taliban cannot be reduced to one single organization. There is the Taliban that fights for local reasons. There might have been the Taliban that fights for personal reasons. Nevertheless... we do not confront a single front called the Taliban anymore. We have factions called the Mashad Council, the Quetta Council, the Mullah Rasool Council, and the Northern Council which receive support from multiple sources. If there was one country that supported [the Taliban] in the past, today there are many countries that have developed connections with the Taliban and communicate with them. Today the Taliban are gone beyond being a local group, and there are national regional and even global motivations behind their insurgency.

Another internal structure of the Taliban that needs to be considered in negotiation efforts is the relative strength of the government. The strength of the government depends both on increasing its coercive momentum and decreasing the Taliban's operational capacity. If sufficient troops are available to secure the

population and territory, then reforms and combat operations parallel to efforts for negotiations could be effective in bringing the Taliban to the negotiations table. Conventionally, an optimum ratio of 20 security-force personnel to 1,000 civilians is needed to this end. In other words, 600,000 troops and police would be sufficient to secure a country of 30 million population.³² Whereas, Afghanistan has hardly half of the required troops. Lack of the sufficient number of troops would significantly affect a negotiation process and its outcome.

In the absence of sufficient troops to guarantee dominance in the battlegrounds, states use alternative incentives such as granting group-specific rights and privileges to insurgency in order to motivate them for negotiations. However, historical experiences show that these alternative measures including granting the insurgency safe zones or “semi-autonomous” territory has destructive consequences.³³ In addition to indicating government weakness, such measures could create popular and ethno-sectarian based anger in highly divided societies. Although the policy of safe zones is not officially announced by the government yet, the Governor of the southern province of Paktia’s recent remarks on the possibility of implementing such a policy indicate the government’s interest in such alternative measures. In an interview with BBC in June 2018, Shamim Katawazi, the governor of Paktia, remarked that the idea of safe zones for the Taliban is under consideration and he wished Paktia to be the first safe zone for the Taliban.³⁴ The government might use the policy of safe zones as an

³² Connable and Libicki, *How Insurgencies End*, 129.

³³ *Ibid.*, 117-18.

³⁴ “Paktia Governor: Efforts are being made for Establishing a Safe Zone for the Government and the Taliban.” *BBC Persian*, June 22, 2018 <http://www.bbc.com/persian/afghanistan-44573857>

incentive for negotiations. However, based on historical evidence, the implementation of such a policy would extend the Taliban's sphere of influence from which they could conduct further military maneuver, rather than facilitating negotiations. In similar cases, the governments of Sri Lanka and Colombia granted the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), respectively, semi-autonomous zones, in order to motivate them for negotiations. Despite the two governments' perceptions, the insurgents used the zones as safe havens, built further strength, and ultimately did not cooperate in peace negotiations.³⁵ Below these cases are discussed in more details.

³⁵ Connable and Libicki, *How Insurgencies End*, 117-18.

Conflict Resolution: A Militarily Victory is Unlikely

There are a number of factors and conditions that predict a military victory by one side of the conflict. Most of those indicators do not seem relevant to the case of Afghanistan. Therefore, a win-scenario in the current circumstances, does not seem likely by either side of the conflict. Therefore, unless a drastic change such as an unpredicted intervention of an external force in the conflict occurs, a mixed outcome in relative favor of both sides is the only predictable end to the conflict.

According to historical and comparative data, insurgents win when the conflict has passed a tipping point in favor of the insurgency and the government has begun to decay at an accelerating rate.³⁶ Crossing such a tipping point indicates that the final period of the struggle has begun.³⁷ At this phase of a conflict, previously neutral elements and government supporters increasingly turn to the insurgency. In Afghanistan, the conflict entered this phase, in favor of the Mujahidin in the spring of 1992 when the high-ranking government elements and senior military officers started joining the Mujahidin in a very high rate. Overall, there are nine indicators that explain an insurgency win among which the first six are the most decisive ones:

- Decline in domestic support for the government
- Withdrawal of international support for the government
- Decrease in government control over population and territory
- Increasing weakening of government's coercive power

³⁶ Ibid., 14.

³⁷ Gordon McCormick, Steven Horton, Lauren Harrison, "Things Fall Apart; The Endgame Dynamics of Internal Wars," paper Presented to the RAND Corporation Insurgency Board, August 29, 2006: p. 6, Ben Connable and Martin C. Libicki, *How Insurgencies End* (Santa Monica, CA.: RAND, 2010), 15.

- A growing military desertion rate, particularly among senior officers
- Increasing rate of absenteeism among civil servants, business leaders, and civic leaders
- Loss of actionable intelligence and information previously supplied by civilian population
- Increasing rate of capital flight and brain drain
- Parking of financial assets and safeguarding families of government personnel in safe havens abroad³⁸

Except for the last two, these indicators do not seem relevant to the current conflict in Afghanistan because of the following reasons: Regardless of its weakness in performing authority and good governance, the government of Afghanistan enjoys more popular and international support than the Taliban. The government has a relatively stronger coercive capacity but is incapable of using it proactively. There is no significant desertion or defection of military cadre and civil servants, and the government has not lost a significant control of territory and population. According to a Special Investigator General for Afghanistan Reconstruction's (SIGAR) report, released in April 2018, the Taliban control or influence only 59 of Afghanistan's 407 districts, the government controls 229, and 119 are contested.³⁹ The report neither provides details about the extent of the Taliban's control of districts nor does it elaborate on contested districts. Therefore, it is difficult to provide a concrete image of Taliban's control of territory or disputed areas in Afghanistan. However, it is clear that the government has maintained control over all major cities, provincial capitals, and strategic areas. This is also clear that the Taliban

³⁸ Connable and Libicki, *How Insurgencies End*, 16.

³⁹ "Quarterly Report to the United States Congress," *SIGAR* (April 30, 2018), 86-87.

remain in remote and mostly impassible areas. This condition simply indicates a regular insurgency status, rather than a tipping point in favor of it. Moreover, there is no sign or report of desertion among the armed forces cadre or senior officers, and a remarkable absence of civil servants. Moreover, local populations in conflict zones might not cooperate in providing the government with actionable intelligence due to tribal disputes or fear from being punished by the Taliban, but this does not indicate a drying up of popular intelligence for the government. Only capital flight, brain drain, and the “parking” of government officials’ assets and safeguarding their families abroad are a serious issue which leverages the Taliban’s recruiting and propaganda campaign. However, this shortage, alone, does not seem to develop a tipping point in favor of the insurgency. Therefore, a military victory by the Taliban does not seem likely in current circumstances. This argument corresponds with empirical findings of this research as no participant see a military end to the conflict in favor of the Taliban under current circumstances.

Likewise, the government’s military victory does not seem likely. In principle, governments win by destroying the insurgent forces, the insurgent cadre, and the insurgent political structure.⁴⁰ The government’s victory, similar to the insurgency victory scenario, appears when the conflict enters a tipping point, but this time, in favor of the government. In general, there are five signs or indicators that show the conflict has reached such as tipping point:

- Increased number of insurgent defection and desertion, particularly among its high-ranking cadre
- The elimination of internal and cross-border sanctuaries and insurgent safe heavens

⁴⁰ Connable and Libicki, *How Insurgencies End*, 18.

- A significant drop in international assistance, including financial support from diaspora
- Higher volumes of actionable intelligence supplied by the population in favor of the government
- Insurgent began paying more for material, services, and information⁴¹

This scenario, at least in current circumstances, does not seem likely in Afghanistan. There is no significant defection or desertion among the Taliban. Although there are signs that the Taliban is organizationally fragmented following Mullah Omer's death, the defection or desertion of any faction or its cadre is not supported by any reliable data. Despite organizational segmentation, the Taliban have managed to maintain the group's political unification with all factions following the same political purpose. For example, the Taliban's compliance of the Quetta Shura's Eid-al-Fitr ceasefire is a clear sign of the group's political unification. Moreover, there is no data that supports that people in conflict zones provide an increased rate of actionable intelligence to the government. However, this might be due to tribal disputes in south Afghanistan or the people's fear of the Taliban. Furthermore, the Taliban sanctuaries within and outside Afghanistan are active and in command of the insurgency's operational and political agenda. The Taliban are also not under a remarkable financial pressure and there is no sign of an aid cut to the Taliban either from domestic or foreign sources. Thus, the conflict in Afghanistan has not reached a tipping point in favor of the government, and a zero-sum end by a government victory does not seem likely under these circumstances. This conclusion is broadly supported by empirical

⁴¹ Ibid.

findings of this research, and therefore, a negotiated settlement is suggested by participants as the most feasible end to the conflict.

Findings of this research show that both the Taliban and the government are strong enough to persist but weak enough to eliminate one another militarily. The government has stronger allies and stands in a stronger position, but it is incapable of winning militarily under the status quo. Most of the respondents of this research who believe that the Taliban compared to the government is in a weaker position indicate that the government does not have the coercive capacity to eliminate the Taliban. As such, the US Embassy in Kabul describes the status quo a *military stalemate* for both sides and Ambassador Mayaudon of the EU believes a military victory by either sides seems unlikely in this circumstances, “I think the government has strong allies. And Taliban, from what I heard, believe that they cannot win. But the government is not winning either. President Ghani also said that without support of allied forces our presence will be limited to few provinces”

Another common understanding, particularly among domestic participants, is that the Taliban’s preference of coercion over negotiations stems from the weakness of the government and the group’s initial belief in turning the status quo further in its favor through an extended insurgency. Thus, the Taliban have maintained the conflict to frustrate the government and buy time for reaching an ideal moment and bargaining leverage. Abdul Hafeez Mansoor, a member of the Parliament of Afghanistan, for example, believes that the Taliban persist violence because they disagree with the post-Bonn Conference process but the group knows that a military victory is not feasible. Therefore, the Taliban’s main purpose of keeping the conflict up is to disturb the

government and its projects, rather than winning militarily. Only one respondent, Gul Muhammad Gulzai, believes that the Taliban can win militarily if Afghanistan loses its international support. And one respondent, Mohammad Ashraf Haidari, believes that the government could win militarily if regional countries, particularly Pakistan, cooperate.

Lack of the Taliban's independence and the group's intensive reliance on foreign powers, particularly Pakistan, are considered as other reasons behind the Taliban's preference for a military campaign. Zarqa Yaftali, the Director of Women, and Children Legal Research Foundation, for instance, believes that the reason Taliban has a preference for violence over negotiation is the group's lack of permission from their foreign supporters to come to negotiation table, "one of the reasons [of the Taliban's insurgency] is the group's lack of independence. The Taliban are not the ones who decide but their decision makers are their supporters who have interest [in Afghanistan]. This is the reason behind the Taliban's incapability of coming to peace and ending war. Another reason is the government call for peace from a very weak position."

A number of participants in this research believe that "war-making" by the Taliban, in current circumstances, is in favor of the Taliban's supporters, particularly Pakistan. They emphasize that the Taliban will continue the military campaign unless their supporters are satisfied that they would gain more from peace in Afghanistan than conflict. Furthermore, the nature of the Taliban as an extremist and insurgent group is considered, by a number of respondents, as another reason for the Taliban's preference for war over negotiations. From this perspective, the Taliban exist because they fight and it is a traditional strategy of the insurgency.

Ambassador Mayaudon illustrates the perspective as follows, “They [the Taliban] are, primarily, a fighting force. They were the same in past during the Soviets and the civil war. They wanted to enforce their vision through force. Fight is at the core of their thinking. But hopefully they come to know that the way of arms is not the solution.”

Compare to the various perspectives on the maintenance of conflict and the unlikelihood of a military victory by either side of the conflict, the Taliban highlights one major reason underlying the group’s motivation for fighting militarily: the presence of foreign troops in Afghanistan. In most of their official statements the group has clearly highlighted that they would continue the military campaign until foreign troops leave the country. Although the group has claimed that they are finding for victory, the findings of this research show that the maintenance of insurgency by the Taliban is not because the group believes in reaching a tipping point against the government and as such would win militarily. There is no sign of the government’s erosion at an accelerating rate since the withdrawal of NATO troops from Afghanistan in 2014, which is against the insurgency’s calculation. Moreover, while the insurgency favors from the continuation of the conflict, the government enjoys more popular and international support and there is no sign that shows neutral elements and government supporters have begun turning to the insurgency. Likewise, the government is not in a condition of winning militarily neither the Taliban is in a situation of losing. There is no sign of defection and desertion among the insurgency, the Taliban enjoy cross-border sanctuaries and a massive external support. Therefore, a military victory does not seem feasible by both sides, and a negotiated settlement of the conflict seems the only way out of this stalemate.

Negotiation and Its Conditions

Moving from a military stalemate to a negotiation is the most difficult step toward conflict resolution. However, a military deadlock is an opportunity for a negotiated settlement of the conflict. While parties in conflict are locked in a situation from which a military victory by both sides seems unfeasible, they began searching for other means, particularly, negotiations to end the conflict.⁴² However, a stalemate might produce an opportunity for negotiations but it does not guarantee a peace agreement unless other factors such as sufficient will for peace from all sides, cooperation from neighboring countries, and minimization of spoilers fall into place.

In Afghanistan, although the government has shown a strong will for a negotiated settlement of the conflict and participants to this research indicate negotiations as the only way out of the conflict, the Taliban does not seem ready for direct negotiations with the government. Moreover, there are a number of factors that requires addressing for a feasible negotiations including the Taliban's pre-conditions, lack of trust and a line of contacts, and the external parties' diverge approaches concerning a negotiated settlement of the conflict. Lack of a mutual trust is what most participants highlighted as a main factor that has affected previous efforts for negotiations between the government and the Taliban. As Abdul Hakim Mujahid illustrates, for a meaningful negotiations process to take place, a mutual trust-building mechanism in Afghanistan is required, "The main problem [undermining efforts for negotiations] has been a lack of mutual trust between the two sides. The Taliban do not have trust that the

⁴² William Zartman, *Elusive Peace: Negotiating an End to Civil Wars* (Washington DC: Brookings Institution, 1995), 8.

foreign troops would withdraw and the government does not have trust the Taliban would end the conflict after the troops' withdrawal.”

Likewise, to start a meaningful negotiations process, the US Embassy in Kabul emphasizes that the government of Afghanistan has to build trust and establish a line of contact with the Taliban. A number of parties that are involved in peacebuilding in Afghanistan indicate that there have been some lines of contact between the government and the Taliban. According to an HPC deputy chair, Ataurahman Saleem, members of the HPC have been in touch with different levels and factions of the Taliban. However, Saleem asserts that the Taliban leadership has not shown a clear political will for negotiations with the government yet. Another deputy chair of the HPC, Abdul Hakim Mujahid, explains the lines of contact with the Taliban as informal talks with different levels of the insurgent group, “... There have been no direct negotiations [between the Taliban and the government]. We have managed only informal and indirect talks with different factions of the Taliban, their leaders, and commanders.”

In addition to the HPC, UNAMA also indicates the existence of lines of contact between the Taliban and the government and certain efforts for negotiations. However, the UNAMA political officer who participated in this research believes any direct talks between the government and the Taliban needs mediation from the earliest stage, “I think right now, I understand that there are contacts between members of the government and members of the Taliban leaders trying to set up the conditions for real talks to begin. But I think, if real talks begin, they would need to be mediated one way or the other.”

Participants, also, indicate that efforts for negotiations, in the past, were failed due to three main reasons: First, the government's lack of capacity in building trust, the creation of a feasible conflict resolution agenda according to which parties could have a general sense of how negotiations would start and proceed, and the provision of alternative measures such as good governance, better security, and job opportunities in order to address the root causes of the insurgency. The second factor is highlighted as the Taliban's lack of technical capacity in articulating their demands and handling a step-by-step negotiation process. Finally, the influence and contradictory interests of external players. Finally, the influence and conflicting interests of various powers in Afghanistan are marked as another factor behind the failure of previous efforts for negotiations. Most domestic participants believe that the Taliban's absolute reliance on Pakistan was the main reason that failed previous efforts for a negotiated settlement. These participants believe those efforts failed mainly because a negotiated settlement under the status quo would not satisfy Pakistan's demands in Afghanistan.

Most domestic participants believe that the HPC is not an effective organization in managing negotiations and handling conflict resolution in Afghanistan. A number of participants believe that the HPC does not have the capacity to design and implement a meaningful conflict resolution policy and that it is not a neutral party that could win the Taliban's trust. Therefore, most participants believe that a special attention is needed to bring in more effective and neutral mediators for establishing a line of contact with the Taliban. The HPC, however, considers the Taliban's lack of trust in the organization as a technical issue which could be resolved by capacity-building and further efforts. According to Abdul Hakim Mujahid, the HPC is a body of the

government which the Taliban does not recognize as legitimate. Thus, the legitimacy of HPC is affected by the Taliban's perception of the government as a whole. However, another HPC member, Ataurahman Salim, believes that as time passes, the Taliban will recognize the HPC as a legitimate organization for peacebuilding.

Concerning the type of negotiations (i.e. direct or mediated talks, formal or informal), there is no preference among the participants. Any type of negotiation that breaks the stalemate is supported by everyone. Participants believe that it could be helpful if negotiations take place both informally and formally. Informal negotiations at community level would facilitate the development of formal negotiations between the government and the Taliban. Therefore, a bottom-up approach by communities and elders are helpful in making formal negotiations possible. A number of Afghanistan participants also emphasize on a government-to-government negotiation arrangement between Afghanistan and Pakistan as an effective model. These participants, who consider a strong regional dimension to the conflict, believe the key to start negotiations is in Pakistan's hands. No participant supported the Taliban's request for a direct negotiation with the United States as a feasible alternative option. Moreover, according to UNAMA, European Union, and the Embassies of the United States and Pakistan in Kabul, there is a need for a mediator before the direct negotiations begin. The US Embassy considers this type of efforts as "exploratory talks" and shows interest in playing the role if the government and the Taliban ask for it. And the Embassy of Pakistan in Kabul indicates the need for a "trusted" mediator once the peace talks start. According to the HPC, the type of negotiations would depend on the level and type of contacts between the government and the Taliban. Dividing the Taliban into multiple

factions and levels, Ataurahman Salim elaborates the argument as follows:

There might be factions that directly contact us and [in this case] there is no need for a mediator. There might be some factions that would accept the mediation of clerics and elders. If a reconciliation process with stronger factions of the Taliban starts, we should satisfy their demands. If they ask for mediation we are ready to accept [the intervention of] an effective mediator.

A number of Afghanistan respondents highlight the effectiveness of a simultaneous direct and mediated negotiations. Aziz Rafiee, for instance, articulates the point as follows:

If the Taliban ask for a mediator, in the beginning, this could be very helpful. The government could simultaneously open a direct negotiation channel. Negotiations with those factions of the Taliban that are inside Afghanistan could be conducted directly [between the government and the Taliban], like the direct negotiations between the government and Hezb-e-Islami. However, negotiations with those segments of the Taliban that are outside Afghanistan could be mediated by and conducted in a third country.

Rafiee believes that a combination of internal and international mediation arrangement is needed for facilitating negotiations with different factions of the Taliban. Moreover, it is frequently emphasized that efforts for negotiations should address the root causes of the conflict both at domestic and regional levels.

International diplomats and analysts in Kabul believe that President Ghani's peace offer to the Taliban is a good start for formulating a more sophisticated conflict resolution agenda. Almost all foreign players including the United States, the United Kingdom, the European Union, UNAMA, and Pakistan demonstrated support for the offer. These players believe that an international consensus on backing the government's offer is achieved and must be used to facilitate negotiations. The British Embassy in Kabul asserts that events such as the Kabul Process II in which many countries came together to show support for the President's peace offer could be a practical step toward creating an international consensus for ending the conflict in Afghanistan. According to an official in the British Embassy in Kabul who spoke on anonymity condition, bringing different countries together in such events would help the development of a broad-based international agreement on conflict resolution in Afghanistan:

At the international level, it's really important for the international community to come together and support this [peace process] as an Afghan-led and Afghan-owned process. We agree with the United States that Afghanistan must never be a safe haven for terrorists. I'm sure that other countries would support that as well. But, again, what that looks like in practice maybe different for different countries around the world. Therefore we think that events such as Kabul Process meetings are really important to bring a range of countries who have different views on Afghanistan often, together...

By contrast, most domestic sources evaluate the offer with caution and skepticism. Afghan participants, in this regards, divide into two

camps: first, a number of participants who believe the government lacks the capacity and political will to afford the details of the offer. Second, the participants who criticize the offer because they believe it gives the Taliban more than the group deserves. Most Afghan participants indicate that the Taliban cannot negotiate on a peace settlement without the permission of Pakistan. They also believe that with the intervention of regional powers such as Russia and Iran in the conflict, the Taliban's position has become more complicated. Therefore, a negotiation agenda should incorporate and address all regional and emerging dimensions of the conflict.

Participants diverge on the role of multiple players' involvement in previous efforts for negotiations. Most, however, consider those efforts as good but ineffective. According to Hakim Mujahid, the government of Qatar's intervention in 2013 was a good start but produced no positive outcome because the government of Afghanistan discredited the Taliban's office in Doha immediately after it was inaugurated. Mujahid believes that since a direct negotiation seems impossible, the role of a mediator is critical in current circumstances. Nevertheless, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Afghanistan describes the role of mediation in the past as secondary because they assume that the key to negotiations has been in the hands of the United States and its allies. Other parties such as Hizb-e-Wahdat describe the previous efforts by a third party to facilitate negotiations as unconstructive, unclear, and manipulative. Likewise, Abdul Hafiz Mansoor, a member of the Parliament, believes that efforts by many third parties in the past to facilitate negotiations were directed towards the interests of those countries (i.e. gaining more information on the Taliban and the conflict, and enhancing relationships with the Taliban), rather than peace in Afghanistan. By contrast, the US, EU, UNAMA, and Pakistan define the role of third parties such as

Qatar in previous efforts in opening a window of communications between the Taliban and the government effective in nature. However, they highlight different factors such as the intervention of “high profile” individuals in the process, the death of Mullah Omer, and the killing of Mullah Akhtar Mansoor by a US drone strike in Pakistan as reasons that complicated and failed the efforts.

Negotiation and the Requirement of Coercion

While the findings of this research show a negotiated settlement is the only way out of the current stalemate, the Taliban believes that the only barrier confronting a negotiated settlement of the conflict is the presence of foreign troops in Afghanistan. However, a number of participants to this research remark that the presence of troops as a reason of the persistence of insurgency is an excuse and the Taliban will not negotiate unless it is weakened militarily and politically. They believe that starting a viable negotiation process in the status quo, in which the government is not at its strongest position, does not seem likely. Therefore, making a negotiated settlement possible requires both a proactive military and diplomatic campaign accompanied by increased efforts for negotiations. In line with this empirical finding, comparative and historical data also show that when the status quo favors an insurgency, it would not negotiate until it is not sure of gaining more from negotiation than conflict. The data suggest that unless the insurgency is at its weakest point, it would not consider negotiation as the final option.

The history of insurgency and extra-systemic warfare indicate that for an insurgent group to come to the negotiations table, they should have reached the conclusion that they cannot gain more in the battlefield. In the most recent case, in Colombia for instance, a peace agreement was achieved when the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) was at its weakest point.⁴³ It was only after being paralyzed militarily, that the FARC recognized negotiation as the only option for achieving

⁴³ Jamie Shenk & Michael Kugelman, “What Peace In Colombia Teaches as about War in Afghanistan?” *The Diplomat*, December 23, 2017.

some of its goals.⁴⁴ The case of Colombia is a success case of a combined coercion and negotiations strategy in a condition in which a purely military victory was not likely.

Efforts for peace talks in Colombia lasted long until it reached a peace agreement between the Government and FARC. The agreement, which was the outcome of a series of failed efforts for negotiations started in 1984, ended a half-century-long insurgency in Colombia (1964-2016). The government of Colombia brought the insurgency to negotiations table by exerting pressure on the group, initially, in the battleground. Supported by the United States, the government's military campaign against FARC increased in response to the insurgency's involvement in 1980s drug smuggling. However, FARC remained active in remote areas and was successful in posing significant threat to the government.⁴⁵ The FARC, like the Taliban, benefited significantly from narcotics economy, cross-border sanctuaries and regional support, particularly from Venezuela and Cuba.⁴⁶ With the political support and billions of dollars in military aid from the United States in support of "Plan Colombia", the Government of Colombia was able to increase leverage against FARC.

Following several military victories and public and international opinion distortion against the insurgency, the Colombian government reached a definite dominant position over the rival. Evidence shows that between 2000 and 2010, the number of FARC defections, particularly among its senior cadre, dramatically increased reducing FARC membership to 50 percent. As a result of this campaign, the insurgency lost enormous territorial control and popular support. Moreover, the government,

⁴⁴ Shenk and Kugelman, "What Peace In Colombia Teaches...?"

⁴⁵ Connable and Libicki, *How Insurgencies End*, 57-58.

⁴⁶ Shenk and Kugelman, "What Peace In Colombia Teaches...?"

in order to address the root causes of the insurgency, managed to improve good governance and democratic legitimacy and strengthened army and police forces to the point where they could stand without the US assistance.⁴⁷ Moreover, the government increased popular and international support and intelligence influence among the local populations.⁴⁸ In order to address the regional dimensions of the FARC insurgency, the government of Colombia launched a regional diplomacy that motivated Cuba and Venezuela to force FARC leadership to the negotiations table. In this regards, the Colombian government took a triangulate conflict resolution policy that simultaneously addressed the domestic and regional sources of the conflict and pressured the insurgency militarily in the battleground. The case of Colombia indicates that negotiations can be only possible when the insurgency is weakened, the government increases popular and international support, and improves capacity in order to address the domestic and regional causes and dimensions of the insurgency.

Compared to Colombia, the government of Afghanistan, whose efforts for negotiation have escalated since 2017, has been unable at multiple fronts: to systematically identify and address the root causes of the conflict; to close Taliban's cross-border sanctuaries; and, to influence international players to put pressure on supporters of the Taliban for a negotiated settlement. The Taliban, as articulated, are not at their weakest position to consider negotiations as a final option. Therefore, and as the data suggest, a coercive and diplomatic campaign by the government is required to place the government in a stronger military and political position before a meaningful negotiation process could be expected.

⁴⁷ Connable and Libicki, *How Insurgencies End*, 59-61.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

The findings of this research show that there is a general consensus that a “combination of coercion and negotiation” is the most effective and relevant approach in bringing the Taliban to the negotiations table. Since the Taliban have extended their military campaign the government should take a proactive coercive approach in the battleground, a dynamic diplomacy in the region, and simultaneously, increase its efforts for negotiations. According to the US Embassy in Kabul, “the new US strategy has put both [a combined coercion and negotiation policy] forward and it is working.” A political officer of the Embassy elaborates his government’s recommendation for ending the Taliban’s insurgency as follows, “ANA [the Afghanistan National Army] should be offensive. Reforms should be taken seriously. The NUG [the National Unity Government] should make attempts to direct negotiations. More pressure on Pakistan is needed.”

Furthermore, the British Embassy in Kabul emphasizes on the importance of a simultaneous military and political pressure, and negotiation as the best option for bringing the Taliban to negotiation table. An official of the British Embassy who participated to this research, elaborates the British government’s position, in this regard, as follows:

One thing we have been saying is that the approach of talking and fighting at the same time seems to be the right one. If things go well, one would hope that the talks would get to such a stage whereby the fighting would stop. That’s clearly the goal. But while the initial stages of talks are taking place, it is likely that the fighting will continue and that will put pressure on both sides.

Likewise, domestic participants in this research emphasize that the government's efforts should be accompanied with further pressures on the battleground. These participants believe that one of the main reasons that failed previous efforts for negotiations was the government's approach from a position of weakness, which motivated the Taliban to assume a zero-sum end to the conflict. Mohammad Natiqi, the Deputy of Hezb-e-Wahdat, elaborates the relevance of a combined coercion and negotiations policy to conflict resolution in Afghanistan as follows:

There is a very radical view that emphasizes on the elimination of the Taliban by coercion because the group does not understand the peace language. There is a second view, that we also support, that is to resolve the conflict through negotiations. Now we have a third right option, which is a combination of the two [coercion and negotiation] which is also supported by the Americans.

Highlighting the Taliban's strict preconditions as a pressure on the government, most Afghan participants emphasize that the government should also put a strict precondition for peace talks in order to clarify its objectives of a negotiated settlement of the conflict. They believe a lack of clear preconditions in President Ghani's peace offer has put the Taliban in a stronger position. There were, at least, four issues which according to these respondents, the government has to put forward to the Taliban as preconditions for negotiations. The preconditions include: ceasefire for negotiations; recognition and respect for the Afghan constitution and the post-Bonn Conference achievements including women's rights and democracy; and, disconnection between the Taliban and foreign sources including Jihadi fighters. However,

some of foreign diplomats, believe that these preconditions would create new obstacles. The British Embassy in Kabul believes that there might be red-lines for all parties, but highlights the absence of preconditions in President Ghani's peace offer as a strength, "One thing that we thought was good about President Ghani's offer of 28th of February was talks without preconditions. Clearly there are some issues that in terms of the end state will be red-lines for both the government and the international community and [there will also be] red-lines for the Taliban."

Respondents also highlighted that, in order to address the regional causes and dimensions of the Taliban's insurgency, the government needs to launch a proactive diplomacy, simultaneous to military, development, and negotiations efforts. A number of participants believe that all countries who have influence on the Taliban should be pressured to contribute to a negotiated settlement between the government and the Taliban. According to the British Embassy in Kabul, those countries, particularly Pakistan, could play a significant role in bringing the Taliban to negotiation table, "All countries that have influence on the Taliban should be putting pressure on the Taliban to be talking to the government of Afghanistan as the legitimate government here. I think Pakistan can play an important role."

While pressures in both battleground and the region are required for bringing the Taliban to negotiation table, a lack of agreement among parties both at domestic and regional levels on conflict resolution in Afghanistan is a major challenge confronting a negotiated settlement of the conflict. Therefore, bringing the conflicting positions on one page is a main requirement of opening a viable peace process in Afghanistan. The UNAMA political officer articulates the problem as follows:

I would say the main obstacle is... disagreement on what is the source of the conflict. So, for the Taliban, the [source of] conflict is international troops that are in Afghanistan... For the Afghan government... that is mostly the conflict zone in Afghanistan and Pakistan for which the Taliban is a symptom. For the US the conflict is between the Taliban and the government, [therefore], Afghan brothers need to sit down and talk to each other. And for Islamabad, the conflict is a phenomenon, sub-phenomenon, of its rivalry with India to make sure that Pakistan cannot be outflanked by having the hostile powers with too much control in Afghanistan. So this has made it very difficult to decide who should be the mediator, for example... So without any agreement on who the conflict is really between and who the stakeholders are, it is hard to be a mediator, it is hard to see where the process should begin... And you need to begin somewhere, but whatever step you take at the beginning of the process you need to reassure the other actors their interests are addressed. Nobody would get everything they want but that's part of the complexity of the peace.

Negotiation in Difficult Times

A unilateral military solution to a conflict is an ideal option for combatant parties. Therefore, governments and armed groups prefer to end a conflict unilaterally, where they can be in control of decisions and do not have to bend to other parties' interest.⁴⁹ However, when the resolution of the conflict is beyond the parties' unilateral means, they draw on negotiations.⁵⁰ A military stalemate, in this sense, is an opportunity for a negotiated settlement of the conflict.⁵¹ In many cases including El Salvador, Guatemala, South Africa, and Lebanon, stalemates ended by negotiations. In case of Northern Ireland, both the British state and the Provisional Irish Republican Army reached a mutual stalemate after 25 years of conflict and had to resolve it by negotiations.⁵²

It is also worth noting that despite the key role of negotiations in resolving stalemates, only a quarter to a third of modern civil and extra-systemic wars found their way to negotiation.⁵³ In most cases, disputant parties, mainly the insurgency, refuse to negotiate for three reasons as follows:

1. A long historical record of using violence to address political grievances
2. A assumed zero-sum outcome for internal wars

⁴⁹ William Zartman, "Conflict Resolution and Negotiation," in Jacob Bercovite, Victor Kermenjuk, and I. William Zartman (eds.), *The Sage Handbook of Conflict Resolution*, 322-339 (Los Angeles, London, and New York: SAGE, 2009), 324.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ William Zartman, "Dynamics and Constraints in Negotiations in Internal Conflicts," in I. William Zartman, ed., *Elusive Peace: Negotiations and End to Civil Wars*, (Washington D.D.: Brookings Institution, 1995), 8; Connable and Libicki, *How Insurgencies End*, 18-19.

⁵² Connable and Libicki, *How Insurgencies End*, 19.

⁵³ Zartman, "Dynamics and Constraints in Negotiations in Internal Conflicts," 3; Connable and Libicki, *How Insurgencies End*, 18.

3. Unwillingness to forgo opportunities for lucrative plunder.⁵⁴ The case of Sri Lanka is a clear example in which the LTTE refused a negotiated settlement, in which the organization's leader played a critical role. Observers believe that the LTTE's leader, Velupillai Prabhakaran, refused negotiations because he did not believe in becoming an ordinary political figure in an integrated post-conflict Sri Lanka.⁵⁵ This, in turn, indicates the role of radical leaders in destructing efforts for a peaceful settlement. When all efforts for negotiations failed and the violence escalated, the government of Sri Lanka defined another solution, "to oust Tamil terrorism."⁵⁶ Thus, the government sought to generate a favorable tipping point by investing intensively in the army and military campaigns. The conflict of Sri Lanka finally ended in May 2009 when the army conquered the last LTTE conclave and all guerrilla leaders.⁵⁷ This unilateral end was the outcome of a series of failed efforts for negotiations and the two sides' disagreement on issues of the conflict and details of a post-conflict settlement.

Thus, while negotiation is the most ideal way out of a stalemate, it is the most difficult approach. The likelihood of a negotiation depends on a variety of factors including the structure of the conflict, the pre-negotiations efforts, causes of the conflict and the way they are addressed, the relative strength of the government and insurgency, and many other issues as discussed above. Unless these factors are considered in pre-negotiations

⁵⁴ Connable and Libicki, *How Insurgencies End*, 19.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 32.

⁵⁶ Mirjam Weiberg-Salzmänn, "Ending Ethnic Civil Wars: Negotiations or by Military Defeat? Lessons on Security from Sri Lanka," *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 50 (2), 2015: 148.

⁵⁷ Weiberg-Salzmänn, 149.

phases and included in a conflict resolution agenda, a negotiation may not lead to peace.

Negotiation or bargaining as a common method of conflict resolution is the process of combining competing positions into a joint agreement.⁵⁸ Initially, parties of conflict prefer direct negotiation but after failing to influence the behavior of their opponent, they turn to mediation for negotiation as a last resort.⁵⁹ Mediation turns the dyadic relationship between the parties into a triad in which the third angle serves to facilitate negotiations between the two by overcoming the obstacles that keep them from a direct negotiation. Negotiations focus both on means and ends of the conflict and aim to build trust, create the conditions for talks, and settle differences between disputants.⁶⁰ Negotiation enables disputant parties to settle their differences; clarify their issues, positions and objectives; and, discuss their demands.⁶¹ Negotiations, in general, entail three goals and interdependent phases: a ceasefire to reduce hostility between parties, a partial agreement to make future agreements easier, and a full settlement.⁶² Depending on the structure, dimension, complication, and intensity of a conflict, a negotiation takes different forms including formal and informal, direct and mediated negotiations.

In more complicated cases, such as Afghanistan, in which the conflict has a complicated structure and multi-level causes and

⁵⁸ William Zartman, "Conflict Resolution and Negotiation," in Jacob Bercovitz, Victor Kermenyuk, and I. William Zartman (eds.), *The Sage Handbook of Conflict Resolution*, 322-339 (Los Angeles, London, and New York: SAGE, 2009), 323.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 325.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 330.

⁶² Michael Greig & Paul Diehl, *International Mediation* (Cambridge: Polity, 2012), 10-12.

dimensions, all types of negotiations could be used simultaneously. Therefore, negotiations in difficult circumstances should take a multi-level and multi-faceted form. Findings of this research support the employment of any type and level of communication and negotiation between the Taliban and the government in order to start a peace process. The two parties, too, have reached to the point where they consider negotiations as the only way out of the conflict but they have serious disagreements in pre-negotiation phase. More critically, the Taliban's rigid pre-condition of talking directly to the United States has blocked the process to move forward.

In a most recent instance, in his message "on the occasion of Eid-ul-Fitr," the Taliban's Supreme Leader, Mawlawi Haibatullah, called upon the US to begin a direct negotiation with the Taliban on the presence of US troops in Afghanistan.⁶³ This seems that the Taliban have put forward a direct talk with the US officials as a pre-condition of negotiations with the government of Afghanistan. The issue is frequently raised by the former elements of the Taliban. Following Haibatullah's message, in an interview with the media, Mullah Abdul Salam Zayef, the Taliban's former Ambassador to Islamabad, expressed the same understanding of the conflict and conditions for negotiations. Zayef highlighted the presence of foreign forces in Afghanistan as a main cause of the conflict and emphasized it should be discussed between the Taliban and the Americans before expecting a direct negotiation between the government and the Taliban. According to Zayef, Americans should talk to the Taliban on two issues before the beginning of a meaningful negotiations process between the Afghan parties. The

⁶³ Hibatullah Akhundzada, "Message of Felicitation."

issues, according to Zayef, include the withdrawal of foreign forces and a guaranteed peace process following it.⁶⁴

Considering the issue, a unilateral move by the government does not seem to contribute to the progress. For instance, the government's unilateral ceasefire in June 2018 ended with no clear achievement or progress toward a long-lasting peace process. The findings of this research suggest that a series of mediations are required in pre-negotiations phase in order to facilitate talks on agreements, disagreements, and a potential peace agenda. Taking the complex dimensions of the conflict into consideration, all levels of mediation could be used as means to facilitate direct negotiations.

There are four different types and levels of mediation (i.e. conciliation, consultation, pure mediation/facilitation, power mediation/mediation with leverage) which could be discussed and used as means to facilitate direct negotiations.⁶⁵ Conciliation or "light mediation," at a minimum level would help develop informal communication linkages and to provide a foundation for formal negotiations.⁶⁶ This type of mediation could be fulfilled at the community level and also by a neutral government or international organization with logistical responsibilities. The second level of mediation, consultation, will require the technical contribution of experts in communication and conflict management, to support disputants in finding a middle ground for talks.⁶⁷ Mediation, at this level, in Afghanistan can be carried out by individuals who have

⁶⁴ "Special Interview with Mullah Abdul Salam Zaef," *Tolo News*, June 13, 2018 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XNOfXxUI0nQ>

⁶⁵ Michael Greig & Paul Diehl, *International Mediation* (Cambridge: Polity, 2012), 7.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 7-8.

played effective role in the country and have gained the trust of the two parties. Furthermore, a third level of mediation or facilitation, if needed, will require a mediator in position of strong power to motivate the disputant parties to narrow down negotiation topics by excluding challenging issues and to expand focus on topics of mutual interest to both.⁶⁸ A mediator, at this level, could motivate the Taliban to exclude their rigid pre-conditions from talks at earlier stages. In negotiations in Northern Ireland, the US as a mediator, limited the talks only to disarmament issues.⁶⁹ Finally, since there are a variety of domestic and regional factors involved in the conflict, an arbitration or power-mediation could help to bring in a more powerful mediator who is capable of using its power and resources to manipulate the Taliban and their supporters to cooperate for negotiations and leverage the two parties to sign an agreement.⁷⁰

Thus, the current difficult circumstances for negotiations in Afghanistan could be addressed on multiple levels of mediation as articulated. However, despite the requirement of a range of measures, all mediators should follow a single agenda and perform under a specific leadership. In this case, the United Nations, often, plays a critical role in making sure that the process is led by a single mediator.⁷¹ Such a “leader actor” could be the United Nations or an individual or country, advised by the UN.⁷² Nevertheless, no mediation would produce a successful result unless the conditions

⁶⁸ Ibid., 8.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 9.

⁷¹ Connie Peck, “United Nations Mediation Experience: Practical Lessons for Conflict Resolution,” in Jacob Bercovite, Victor Kermenyuk, and I. William Zartmen (eds.), *The Sage Handbook of Conflict Resolution*, 411-434 (Los Angeles, London, and New York: SAGE, 2009), 417.

⁷² Ibid., 419.

for negotiations are provided. Therefore, despite the critical role mediation could play in Afghanistan, the government's policy in providing the conditions of negotiations by changing the status quo in its favor and addressing the domestic and regional causes of the conflict would be decisive.

Conclusion

This research finds multiple perspectives on conflict, conflict resolution, and negotiations in Afghanistan. The research indicates that the status quo of the conflict in Afghanistan is a stalemate. The Taliban are not in their weakest position to be defeated and the government is not strong enough to eliminate the insurgency militarily. Negotiation is the only way out of the stalemate. Both the Taliban and the government have not closed the negotiations gate, however, there is no agreement among parties on the modalities and agenda of a negotiated settlement of the conflict. The government seeks to directly negotiate with the Taliban and integrate the insurgency in the post-2001 political process. In contrast, the insurgency seeks to negotiate with Americans, remove the foreign troops from Afghanistan, and establish a Sharia based regime in Kabul.

The conflict entails complex domestic, regional, and international causes and dimensions which influence the insurgency's policies and its approach to negotiations. Thus, while the government of Afghanistan and its allies seek to open up a negotiations gate with the Taliban, the peace efforts confront obstacles at both local and international levels. Hence, the main policy issue in Afghanistan today is how to converge competing perspectives on an 'ending the conflict' scenario and making a negotiated settlement possible.

In addition to a variety of factors, the way a conflict ends depends on the comparative strength of the disputant parties. Today, the government of Afghanistan's strength includes popular and international support, while its weakness is a reactive military and diplomatic position, and incapability in enforcing authority and providing justice, security, and public services. By contrast, the

Taliban's strength includes resilience for survival, a proactive position in the battleground, cross-border sanctuaries, and foreign support. While its weakness is lack of popular and international support, ethnic and tribal limitations, and lack of a democratic legitimacy base in Afghanistan. The findings of this research show that the Taliban, compare to 2006, when they were being hunted by international forces as a terrorist group, have gained relative legitimacy in international community circles and are being recognized as a political-military reality in Afghanistan's conflict. Hence, the Taliban is in a position of strength, compared to a decade ago, but still weak enough to win on the battleground.

No insurgency theory supports that the Taliban would come to negotiations table under the current circumstance which favors the insurgency. From a proactive position in the battleground, the Taliban perceive that they are gaining what they want by coercion, so what would justify negotiation. Therefore, the group's current policy is to disturb governance, increase political leverage, and turn the status quo further in its favor (i.e. the government and its army's erosion as a result of reduction if foreign aid, the withdrawal of foreign forces, increase its bargaining power as a political rather than insurgent/terrorist force, and an elite fragmentation due to ethno-sectarian and political disputes among government allies. Therefore, unless the government shifts the status quo in its favor by taking a proactive military position in the battleground and a dynamic diplomacy in the region, enforcing authority in providing security and justice, and performing capacity in providing services and good governance, the Taliban would not come to the negotiation table. In other words, the government, in order to bring the Taliban to negotiations table and to reach a peace agreement, needs to increase pressures on the battleground, launch a dynamic diplomacy to address the regional causes of the conflict, and

perform authority and good governance. By contrast, from a proactive position on the battleground, the Taliban play the negotiation card in order to open up a political space for increasing legitimacy and bargaining leverage. Therefore, unless a fundamental shift in the balance of power occurs, a negotiated settlement does not seem likely.

Furthermore, reaching to a negotiation phase requires the formulation of a step-by-step peace agenda and a comprehensive conflict resolution policy to incorporate the pre-negotiation requirements, steps of the negotiations process, and the post-negotiations settlement. This would clarify the starting point, the process, and the parties' expectations of the outcomes. Unless there is enough clarification as to how negotiations would be formulated and what mutual demands the parties have, the insurgency will not move forward in confidence.

Also, considering the complex and multi-dimensional characteristics of the conflict, a comprehensive conflict resolution policy in Afghanistan goes beyond a superficial negotiations between the government and some elements of the Taliban. The conflict entails domestic and regional dynamics, which needs to be discussed and addressed before and during the negotiations. On domestic level, a plan for reducing obstacles such as poverty, unemployment, poor rule of law, insecurity, drug economy, and poor governance should be discussed, if not formulated. On regional level, the government needs to discuss and formulate the way it seeks to reconcile contradicting regional interests in Afghanistan. Findings of this research suggest that the government of Afghanistan lacks the capacity to manage such a diplomacy. In this regards, the United States and its allies can play a positive role in supporting the government at least at the earlier stages. But the support should not provoke regional powers. At best, the

government needs to develop the capacity to convince the intervening powers in Afghanistan that they gain more from peace than the war in the country.

When negotiations begin, they should follow a step-by-step agenda in order to avoid chaotic interventions and disruptions. Negotiations should be directed towards achieving an agreement at least for further discussion on more serious issues. Thus, the beginning of negotiations does not mean a conflict resolution in a sense that peace is consolidated. However, if managed appropriately, they could lead toward a meaningful peace process. Negotiation opens up the door to a peace agreement and opens up the political space for peace to be consolidated. When an agreement is reached, the parties involved in negotiations should make sure that it lasts long and provides a political space for consolidation of a permanent peace. Agreements that last only a brief time fail to provide sufficient opportunity for effective political changes and political space necessary for consolidation of peace. Therefore, it is important to make an agreement that lasts longer and provides conditions for a permanent peace.⁷³ Evidence shows that there is a 25 percent likelihood of recurrence of conflict following negotiated agreements in cases in which the root causes of the war are not addressed appropriately.⁷⁴

Negotiations and peace agreements are primary steps towards peace. For achieving a permanent peace, it is necessary to make sure the structure and culture of conflict are transformed through a step-by-step process of reconciliation.⁷⁵ In this process,

⁷³ Gartner et al., "Assessing Outcomes," 566.

⁷⁴ Oliver Ramsbotham, Tom Woodhouse, Hugh Miall, *Contemporary conflict resolution: the prevention, management and transformation of deadly conflicts*, 3rd Edition (Malden, MA, Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2011), 198.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 246.

conflict resolution policies should incorporate measures that address the root causes of the conflict and restore the broken relationships in a way that disputants learn to overcome polarization, manage contradictions, celebrate differences, and live non-violently with radical past.⁷⁶ The findings of this research indicate that this long-term process is not a priority of the parties in the current situation in Afghanistan in which stopping the violence and reaching an agreement is the main concern. While this prioritization is understandable for the reason of the urgency of a ceasefire and a negotiated settlement, for a meaningful peace process, it is necessary to incorporate measures for transforming the structure and culture of the conflict in a long-term in a comprehensive conflict resolution policy. A major lesson of the consequences of overlooking the importance of a long-term vision for peace during conflict resolution could be learned from Afghanistan itself. In a most recent case, the resurgence of the Taliban was the outcome of overlooking conflict resolution as a long-term concern. In the absence of a comprehensive vision, short-term counterterrorism and counterinsurgency campaigns following the fall of the IEA in 2001, did not eliminate the problem. As a result, after a temporary drawback, the Taliban quickly returned to the battleground. This scenario could be repeated unless the root causes of the problem are addressed and the peace process is treated as a long-term and complex process from the beginning.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 246.

Appendix A: Questionnaire

Questions are divided into two categories: a set of general questions for every participant, and a set of specific questions that are relevant to each targeted source.

(I). General Questions:

This part includes questions for all participants in the interview. Questions are divided into three parts (i.e. the Taliban, previous talks, and the future opportunities).

Questions on the Taliban

1. Why does the Taliban fight?
2. What are the causes of the conflict and the Taliban's ultimate objective?
3. Why has the Taliban conventionally preferred violence over negotiation?
4. Is the Taliban a domestic insurgent group or does it have regional and global aspects? Please explain it.
5. What are specifically the domestic causes and aspects of Taliban's insurgency?
6. What are the regional causes and aspects of Taliban's insurgency?
7. What are the international causes and aspects of the Taliban insurgency?
8. Under what condition the Taliban would change the violent method to a non-violent one?
9. Will the group change its conventional violent approach if the pressures increase on both the Taliban and Pakistan?
10. Is the Taliban capable of winning the conflict militarily? How?
11. Is the government of Afghanistan capable of winning the war militarily? How?

Questions on Previous Efforts for Dealing with the Taliban

12. Why did previous efforts to settle the conflict (i.e., negotiation and coercive efforts) fail?
13. Why did previous talks with the Taliban fail without a clear result?
14. Why did the Taliban unilaterally terminate most of the peace talks in the past?
15. How do you explain the role of the government of Afghanistan in previous peace talks and their ultimate failure?
16. What were the domestic causes of the failure?
17. What were the regional and international reasons for the failure of previous talks?
18. How do you evaluate the role of mediators (e.g. Turkey, Qatar, and Maldives) in previous negotiations and their ultimate failure?
19. How do you explain the role of UNAMA in previous negotiations and their failure?

Questions on Possible Options in Future

20. Considering the background of the conflict and previous efforts to settle it, what obstacles (domestic, regional, and international) do you identify confronting a successful peace process in Afghanistan, today?
21. Considering the three major conflict resolution strategies (i.e. coercion, negotiation, and a combination of the two), and the resources at hand, which approach do you recommend for settling the conflict in (the) future? Why?
22. Do you think a simultaneous military coercion and offensive diplomacy would force the Taliban to negotiate? How?

23. How do you evaluate the United States' recent military pressure on the Taliban and its political pressure on Pakistan (Would it help or further complicate the peace process)?
24. Is the government of Afghanistan capable of launching a "coercive diplomacy," parallel to the US pressures, in order to force the regional countries to contribute to the peace process?
25. If the Taliban is forced to negotiate, where is the Taliban's leadership exact address to reach out?
26. If the Taliban admits negotiating, should the negotiation be conducted directly between the government of Afghanistan and the Taliban, or through a third party mediator?
27. Who do you recommend as an ideal mediator – internal or external? Please specify a political party, a domestic organization, a specific country or an international organization and explain why you think they could be an ideal mediator.
28. What about a domestic mediator? Who do you recommend?
29. What role can the United Nations play in organizing negotiations with the Taliban?
30. How do you evaluate the capacity and efficiency of the HPC in dealing with the Taliban?
31. Do the Taliban consider HPC as a credible institution for peace talks?
32. How do you evaluate the role of Pakistan in the Taliban's position concerning the peace process?
33. How would the US pressure on Pakistan affect conflict resolution in Afghanistan?
34. How does the Hezb-e-Islami's integration affect negotiation with the Taliban?

35. How does the emergence of ISIL in Afghanistan affect peace talks with the Taliban?
36. Overall, what are the requirements for putting an end to the Taliban's insurgency?

(2). Specific Questions:

This part includes specific questions, relevant to each source's interest and involvement in conflict and peace in Afghanistan. These questions should be asked at the end of the general questions separately from the cross-listed sources as below.

Questions for the government of Afghanistan

1. What lessons did you learn from previous negotiations and how will it affect your policy in the future?
2. Considering previous experiences and the complexity of the Taliban's structure, how do you identify individuals who claim to represent the Taliban in negotiations?
3. What is the government of Afghanistan's main policy for dissolving the Taliban's insurgency?
4. How do you assess the Taliban's political will for negotiation?

Questions for the Taliban

1. Please explain the Taliban's current preconditions for negotiations?
2. How do you assess the government of Afghanistan's political will for negotiation?
5. What lessons did you learn from previous negotiations that would affect your approach in future?

Questions for Civil Society

1. Should issues related to "transitional justice" be included in peace negotiations with the Taliban?
2. What are your concerns in this regard?

Questions for Pakistan Embassy

1. How do you explain Pakistan's relations with the Taliban?
2. What role can Pakistan play in ending the violent conflict between the Taliban and the government of Afghanistan?
3. What is your suggestion for a successful negotiation between the government of Afghanistan and the Taliban?

Questions for Regional and International Sources

1. Please explain your government's involvement in efforts for peace talks with the Taliban.
2. What is your government's suggestion for a peaceful end to the conflict between the Taliban and the Afghanistan government?

Appendix B: List of Interviewees

A former assistant to President Karzai. Spoke on the condition of anonymity

Azad, Rayhana. Member of the Parliament of Afghanistan

Embassy of the United States in Kabul. A Political Officer spoke on anonymity condition

Embassy of the United Kingdom in Kabul. An official spoke on anonymity condition

Gholipour, Alireza. Department of Asian Studies, Institute of Political and International Studies, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Iran

Gulzai, Gul Mohammad, a member of Hezb-e-Islami (Arghaniwal Faction)

Haidary, Mohammad Ashraf. Director of Policy and Strategy, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan

Mahdi, Mahiuddin. Member of the Leadership Council, Jamiat-e-Islami

Manali, Najib. Political Analyst in Kabul

Mansoor, Abdul Hafiz. Member of the Parliament of Afghanistan

Mayaudon, Pierre. The European Union Head of Delegation to Afghanistan

Mujahed, Abdul Hakim. Deputy Chair, High Peace Council of Afghanistan & former Head of the Taliban Delegation to the UN

Nasrullah Khan, Zahid. Pakistan's Ambassador to Afghanistan

Nateqi, Mohammad. Deputy, Hezb-e-Wahdat

National Security Council of Afghanistan. A senior advisor spoke on the condition of anonymity

Paramonov, Vladimir. Former Senior Researcher/Research Coordinator, Center for Economic Research & a former Advisor to the President of Uzbekistan on Social-Economic Policy

Rafiee, Azizullah. Executive Director, Afghanistan Civil Society Forum

Ravoosh, Daoud. Head of the National Progressive People's Party of Afghanistan

Salim, Attaurahman, Deputy Chair, High Peace Council of Afghanistan

Sekandari, Qasim Shah. Director of the Center for the Study of Afghanistan and the Region, Tajikistan

Shicheng, Hu. Director of the Institute of South and Southeast Asian and Oceanian Studies at the China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations

Tayanj, Bashir Ahmad. Member of Junbish e Mili e Islami

UNAMA. Political Officer spoke on anonymity condition

Yaftali, Zarqa. Director, Women, and Children Legal Research Foundation

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Modalities of Conflict Resolution in Afghanistan: A Negotiated Settlement Scenario

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