

TALK OF PEACE AND PEACE TALKS IN AFGHANISTAN:  
A POLITICAL HISTORY, 2001-2019

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by  
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# The OSCE Academy in Bishkek

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## **ABSTRACT**

Inspired by the Peace Talks between the United States and the Taliban, begun in secret in Qatar in July 2018 and come to a halt in September 2019, this thesis studies the idea of peace in Afghanistan from the perspective of evolution of U.S. attitudes towards the Taliban and the possible influence of such attitudinal changes in ultimately bringing about a potential peace accord to war-torn Afghanistan. Aside from the changes in attitudes, the all-around focus on the necessity of peace has been revolutionary in the sense that it not only has attracted the attention of national and international bodies and media, but also lead to a nationwide grassroots activism by the Afghan citizenry. Although there are different dynamics to the perceptions about the Taliban as terrorists, enemy, and ultimately political adversaries, the 14-month process of U.S.-Taliban Peace Talks demonstrated both an evolutionary change in U.S. perceptions, and also showed that Afghanistan's National Unity Government (NUG) had a weak to non-existent role in the peace process and Peace Talks. This thesis concludes that the 2018-2019 Peace Talks, despite having apparently failed, have nonetheless been a promising beginning for real negotiations, what can ultimately lead to new peace talks and a peace accord among the U.S., the Taliban, and the Government of Afghanistan.

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## ACRONYMS

DDR	Demobilization, disarmament, and reintegration
EU	European Union
HPC	High Peace Council
IEA	Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (under the Taliban regime)
IMF	International Monetary Fund
IO	International organization
ISAF	International Security Assistance Force
MP	Member of Parliament
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NGO	Nongovernmental organization
NUG	National Unity Government (of Afghanistan)
OSCE	Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe
RFE	Radio Free Europe
UN	United Nations
UNAMA	UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan
UNSC	UN Security Council
U.S.	United States (of America)
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (The Soviet Union)
FTO	Foreign terrorist organization
GWoT	Global War on Terror



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## Chapter I

### WHY A FOCUS ON PEACE TALKS IN AFGHANISTAN?

“Peace cannot be kept by force; it can only be achieved by understanding.”  
—Albert Einstein<sup>1</sup>

In the few thousand years of Afghanistan’s history, many wars have been fought to either preserve or gain political dominance, with all wars having the hope of eventually arriving at some sort of peace. Yet, in the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries—a good 40 years—peace has remained a mere fantasy for one generation to another in Afghanistan. Nonetheless, as war continues in the post-Taliban era, a new wave of talk of peace and peace talks have risen with the government in Kabul and the international community wanting to reintegrate what may become former fighters and dissidents into the government.<sup>2</sup> This wave has continued to the present where it has attempted to unlock questions on the *how*, *who* and *why* of an Afghan peace and its pre-conditions. This thesis attempts to focus on the complexities of peace and peacemakers in Afghanistan since the fall of the Taliban in December 2001 up until today (December 2019)—an 18-year period.

#### Background

The collapse of the Taliban regime in 2001 (an armed political force that rose up in 1994 and took over power in Afghanistan in September 1996)<sup>3</sup> brought forth both opportunities and obstacles. From one side, Afghanistan had all kinds of tools, economic, strategic and humanitarian support of the international community, to

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Martijn Lak, “Book Review: *A Political History of the World: Three Thousand Years of War and Peace*. By Jonathan Holstag. London: Pelican Books, 2018. 639 pp.,” *Journal of World History* 30, no. 4 (2018): 643.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Barfield, *Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010).

<sup>3</sup> Ahmad Rashid, *Taliban: Islam, Oil and the New Great Game in Central Asia* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2002).

rebuild its economy and the state. Despite initial hopes, however, the unstable conditions of politics and security have hardly changed, and in many ways even worsened. Given the ongoing war involving the Afghan Government and the United States-led forces against the Taliban insurgents and now other radicals, as well (such as the Islamic State terrorists), insecurity continues to remain the greatest challenge for the government and the people of Afghanistan, leaving peace a still distant dream. The war with the Taliban has been the biggest source of instability in contemporary Afghan history, possibly comparable only to the 1979-1989 Soviet-Afghan War in its devastating effects on the social and political environments of the country.

There are a number of stakeholders involved in the political dynamics of Afghan politics. Overall, they can be divided into external and internal clusters. The external players include the U.S., Russia, India, Pakistan, China, and some other states, while the internal group are the Afghan people, the Government of Afghanistan, the Taliban leadership and their intermediaries.<sup>4</sup> For the purposes of this thesis, there are three entities of particular concern: the U.S. Government, the Taliban, and Afghanistan's National Unity Government (NUG). Looking at the role of each group, there is an enigma of specifying the central authority among them. For example, the NUG, despite being the representative of a sovereign state by modern definitions, has had a weak position in establishing full territorial control as well as struggling to prove its stand with regard to convincing the Taliban to direct peace talks.

After the September 11, 2001 Al-Qaeda terror attacks on the U.S. (hereafter '9/11'), the U.S. invaded Afghanistan because the then ruling Taliban regime refused to hand over Osama Bin Laden (head of Al-Qaeda), the entity responsible for the 9/11

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<sup>4</sup> Dawood Azami, "Will Talks with the Taliban Bring Peace or Chaos?" *BBC News*, 3 April 2019, accessed 3 June 2019, [bbc.in/2WGNPd6](http://bbc.in/2WGNPd6).

terrorist attacks.<sup>5</sup> After the collapse and defeat of the Taliban regime in December 2001 and the holding of the International Conference on Afghanistan in Bonn, Germany, in the same month, Afghanistan entered into an interim and new path. The U.S. and its primarily Western allies decided to rebuild the country. Soon after, however, the Taliban re-entered the scene by way of armed resistance, spreading fear by violent means of both conventional combat and terrorist attacks, targeting both security forces (Afghan police and military and foreign troops) and civilians.<sup>6</sup>

Peace negotiations have been the last resort for the U.S. after 18 years of fighting the Taliban. There is now the supposed realization that the most powerful military in the world has been unable to defeat the Taliban, a ragtag, yet battle savvy, army of fundamentalist Wahhabi Muslims of mostly Pashtun ethnicity,<sup>7</sup> who appear to have been able to successfully practice the violent art of “asymmetric warfare”<sup>8</sup> against the U.S. military, its international allies, and the Afghan National Army (ANA). Although war is still ongoing between the Taliban versus the ANA and the U.S. forces, the American side (which has been under increasing pressure from its domestic political constituency to end its engagement in Afghanistan), has concurrently taken the encounter to the next level, by calling for and engaging the Taliban in peace negotiations.

The on-again, off-again negotiations between the U.S. and the Taliban have put the global spotlight on Afghanistan. Open and direct negotiations between the

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<sup>5</sup> Mathew D. Jacobs, “A Paradigm of Prevention: United States Counterterrorism Strategies in a Transnational World,” in *The Palgrave Handbook of Global Counterterrorism Policy*, ed. Scott N. Romaniuk et al. (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2017), 170.

<sup>6</sup> Theo Farrell and Michael Semple, “Making Peace with the Taliban,” *Survival* 57 (6): 79-110.

<sup>7</sup> As adherents to a strict Islamic sect, Wahhabis originated in Saudi Arabia whose fundamentalist reformist agenda match the Taliban’s version of order and justice. The Taliban rule of the 1990s in Afghanistan has been described as “a harsh interpretation of Islamic law commonly associated with Wahhabism,” Michael R. Dillon, “Wahhabism: Is It A Factor in the Spread of Global Terrorism?” Naval Postgraduate School, Monterey, California, September 2009, 54.

<sup>8</sup> Tomáš Čížik, “Asymmetric Warfare and Its Impact on the Military Presence of the United States in Afghanistan,” Center for European and North Atlantic Affairs, 13 pp., January 2014, accessed 9 November 2019, [tiny.cc/rqyzfz](http://tiny.cc/rqyzfz).

U.S. and the Taliban began in July 2018 following the appointment of U.S. diplomat and ethnic Pashtun Afghan-American Zalmay Khalilzad as the special envoy of the U.S. on Afghanistan reconciliation.<sup>9</sup> As of May 2019, there had been nine rounds of talks between the two sides, nearly all held in Doha, Qatar,<sup>10</sup> where the Taliban had been represented by Sher Mohammad Abbas Stanikzai, the group's chief, and Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, a co-founder of the Taliban and former "right-hand man of [original Taliban leader] Mullah Omar."<sup>11</sup>

In the meantime, Moscow as a potential regional power is also striving to resolve and put an end to the war in Afghanistan. In the November 2018 Moscow Summit, in addition to the NUG which had sent a representative from the High Peace of Council (HPC),<sup>12</sup> there were in attendance representations from the Taliban, political opposition from former Northern Alliance, and other high ranking politicians, including ex-President Hamid Karzai.<sup>13</sup> Moscow had thus held its first peace conference on Afghanistan a few months after the first U.S. and Taliban Peace Talks convened in Doha.<sup>14</sup> The Moscow Summit served as a leverage for the Taliban to push for U.S. withdrawal as well as having been an opportunity for the Taliban to be curry favor with Russia, a United Nations Security Council (UNSC) member.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Michele Kelemen, Diaa Hadid and Vanessa Romo, "Zalmay Khalilzad Appointed as U.S. Special Adviser to Afghanistan," NPR, 5 September 2018, accessed 6 June 2019, [n.pr/2MvzxyP](https://www.npr.org/2018/09/05/658444400/zalmay-khalilzad-appointed-as-us-special-adviser-to-afghanistan).

<sup>10</sup> *Al Jazeera*, "U.S.-Taliban Talks End in Doha with 'Some Progress': Taliban," 9 May 2019, accessed 5 June 2019, [bit.ly/2LlidU6](https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/05/20190509-us-taliban-talks-end-doha).

<sup>11</sup> *Al Jazeera*, "U.S.-Taliban Talks: Who is Mullah Baradar?," 2 May 2019, accessed 9 November 2019, [tiny.cc/q46zff](https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/05/20190502-us-taliban-talks-who-is-mullah-baradar).

<sup>12</sup> Established in 2010 by former President Hamed Karzai, HPC was responsible for reconciliation and negotiate with the Taliban commanders and former fighters. Omar Sadr, "The Fallacy of Peace Processes in Afghanistan: The People's Perspectives," Afghan Institute for Strategic Analysis, AISS-P-020-2018, 23.

<sup>13</sup> *Al Jazeera*, "U.S.-Taliban Talks for Peace in Afghanistan: What We Know so Far," 11 May 2019, accessed 3 June 2019, [bit.ly/2JSaLnu](https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/05/20190511-us-taliban-talks-for-peace-in-afghanistan).

<sup>14</sup> *Al Jazeera*, "Afghanistan Peace Conference Kicks off in Moscow," 9 November 2018, accessed 5 June 2019, [bit.ly/2KvbjPQ](https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/11/20181109-afghanistan-peace-conference-kicks-off-in-moscow).

<sup>15</sup> Arkady Dubnov, "What Game Is Russia Playing in Afghanistan?" 14 November 2018, accessed 5 June 2019, [bit.ly/2wGD9QE](https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/11/20181114-what-game-is-russia-playing-in-afghanistan).

The U.S.-Taliban Peace Talks can be extremely important for the political future of Afghanistan in that they can have a decisive role in the power distribution among political groups and armed factions who are predominantly the cause of conflict and stability at the domestic level. A sustainable peace deal, however, would require a comprehensive agreement between both sides, including a potential

timetable for the withdrawal of the remaining American and coalition troops ... in return for assurances that the Taliban will break from international terrorist groups and start direct negotiations with Afghan officials over Afghanistan's political future.<sup>16</sup>

The above thus leads to the focus of this thesis.

### **Research question**

Upon the collapse of the Taliban regime in late 2001, Afghanistan experienced major regime transformation from authoritarianism towards a transitional government to a presidential republic and finally towards the so-called National Unity Government of today. Karzai was head of the state for the first three periods (December 2001-September 2014). The current NUG is led by President Ashraf Ghani and Chief Executive Officer (CEO) Dr. Abdullah Abdullah. None of the past governments, despite some attempts in taking steps towards peace and reconciliation, have been successful to bring the Taliban to the negotiating table. That primarily has to do with the perceived illegitimacy of the post-9/11 regimes of Afghanistan in the eyes of the Taliban and is likely the reason why they (the Taliban) have so far preferred direct talks with the U.S., instead.

There thus exists a political scenario that has not gone through much change for the past 18 years, a phenomenon worthy of investigation in relation to the perceptions and attitudes of the stakeholders in Afghanistan in the post-9/11 era. And yet, the

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<sup>16</sup> Mujib Mashal, "U.S. Deal with Taliban Meets Afghan Resistance as Violence Intensifies," *The New York Times*, 5 September 2019, accessed 10 November 2019, [tiny.cc/sj8zf](https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/05/afghanistan/peace-talks-taliban.html).

rhetoric of peace through negotiations implies the transformed nature of perceptions and treatment of the parties. Henceforth, this thesis revolves around the following key questions: *How can the political history of Afghanistan be divided (periodized) vis-à-vis Peace Talks since the fall of the Taliban regime in December 2001 up until December 2019?* In addition, the evolution of attitudes and perceptions of the U.S. against the Taliban or vice versa leads to the following sub-question: *How did the Taliban, which had been identified as an insurgent group by the U.S.<sup>17</sup> and a ‘terrorist organization’ by the UN Security Council,<sup>18</sup> evolve into an opposition group and adversary worthy of negotiations in the eyes of the U.S.?*

## **Hypotheses**

This thesis will test the following two hypotheses:

**H<sub>1</sub> (Evolving image of enemy):** There has been a transformation in the rhetoric of peace as regarding the U.S. and the Afghan Unity Government’s perceptions and attitudes towards the identity of the Taliban from a widely known brutal and violent (if not officially a ‘terrorist’) organization to a considerable mark as a political opposition, which in turn has positively affected the discourse and prospects for peace in Afghanistan.

**H<sub>2</sub> (Material reasons behind Peace Talks):** The causes behind the 2018-2019 U.S.-Taliban negotiations (Peace Talks) are: (a) the strengthening of the Taliban resistance on the war and political violence fronts against the Afghan National Army and U.S. forces and (b) the mounting costs of war and casualties on side of the U.S.

## **Methodology**

The research design adopted for this thesis includes a set of in-depth **interviews** (N=5) with experts and an attempted **discourse analysis** of selected speeches of

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<sup>17</sup> Masood Farivar, “Why Isn’t Afghan Taliban on U.S. List of Foreign Terror Groups?” *Voice of America*, 20 February 2017, accessed 7 November 2019, [bit.ly/32rJBIS](http://bit.ly/32rJBIS).

<sup>18</sup> Following the refusal of the Taliban to surrender Osama Bin Laden and his associates to the U.S. for their role in the August 1998 bombings of U.S. Embassies in Kenya and Tanzania, the UNSC passed Resolution 1267 (1999) designating the Taliban and associated entities as “terrorist groups” and imposed “targeted travel and arms embargos, and financial/assets sanctions” on them. See UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), “Counter-Terrorism 1: Introduction to International Terrorism,” 32 pp., 2018, accessed 17 November 2019, [tiny.cc/w6rdgz](http://tiny.cc/w6rdgz).

stakeholders. The interviews were conducted both online and in-person. In case of online interviews, the interviewees were approached using email and social media platforms of WhatsApp and twitter.

As a method, discourse analysis looks “at patterns of speech, such as how people talk about a particular subject, what metaphors they use, [and] how they take turns in conversation ...”<sup>19</sup> To accomplish the rhetoric around peace and U.S. attitude towards the Taliban, speeches of U.S. presidents (Bush, Obama, and Trump) were studied to show the trend in U.S. attitudes. Doing so was to help allow us to focus on the relevance of speech and to understand the pattern of identity transition of Taliban as perceived by the U.S.

In addition to interviews and discourse analyses, secondary sources, namely academic journals, articles, news, and books about Afghanistan and on peace and conflict resolution served as important sources for this study. Official speeches and records of peace related meetings held in Doha (2018-2019) and the Moscow Summit (November 9, 2018) were equally important to keep track of the peace negotiations and useful for the analysis and hypotheses testing phase of this thesis.

Bringing peace is surrounded by various discourses that require deep attention. Likewise, there are different players and influential stakeholders in the Afghan case with their own priorities and interests. Each actor undoubtedly follows its individual interests and decides accordingly. This requires the untangling of the complexity of each side of the discourse. Thus, this research aimed at analyzing discourses from three main sides involved in the process. That said, the official speeches from the NUG, the Taliban and the U.S. envoy and excerpts of presidents’ speeches regarding Afghanistan were studied to from the post-9/11 to 2019.

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<sup>19</sup> Catherine Dawson, *Practical Research Methods: A User-friendly Guide to Mastering Research Techniques and Projects* (London: How to Books, 2002), 119.



Finally, expert semi-structured interviews with individuals with a respective background in history, research, diplomacy, government, strategic and political fields were conducted for this study (see Appendix B for list of interview questions). The essence and importance of the interviews were that they added to the value of this research in analyzing the complexities of nearly two decades of war and struggle for peace in Afghanistan. Interviews with knowledgeable and experienced professionals brought to light new ideas and concepts relevant to this study which I as a researcher may not have been able to identify on my own.

### **Research significance**

**First**, this research seeks to respond to wider as well as particular range of purposes. At a wider level, the essence of this thesis is to fill the gap of a recent historical analysis. There has been a variety of research done on contemporary and old histories of Afghanistan. However, from a peace negotiation process, there are minute amounts of political historical literature and this thesis is hoped to fill part of that gap in the social scientific literature.

**Second**, this thesis hopes to show the peculiarities of political interaction and political treatment in light of rhetoric versus practical dialogue in the Afghan peace process. Towards that end, it will study the evolution of speeches turning into dialogues and into further decisions towards a potential peace. Finally, **third**, Peace Talks between the Taliban and the U.S. may mark an important turning point in the contemporary social and political destiny of Afghanistan and thus highly worthy of investigation at this time in history.

## **Research limitations**

I encountered four limitations in this research. First, despite a well-planned schedule, there were problems that this research encountered. Some interviewees' unwillingness to respond to emails and inquiries had a negative impact on completing the full aspired data collection. Some of the experts contacted agreed to be interviewed but did not cooperate further, while some others did not respond to inquiries. Therefore, only three face-to-face and two interviews via email could be conducted. (See Appendix A).

The second limitation was that of the overall volatility of the topic and constant change of events in the peace process. This left me to follow the Peace Talks until September 2019 when they were suspended by U.S. President Donald Trump who called the negotiations "dead" after a suspected Taliban suicide bomber in Kabul killed 12 people, including an American soldier.<sup>20</sup> Third, the insecurity problem in Afghanistan during the conducting of this research was a main obstacle which influenced the fewer face-to-face interviews than originally desired. And lastly, insufficient time was a key obstacle during this research in way of seeking additional interviews and more rare documents, a factor which forced me to largely rely on available secondary sources of information.

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<sup>20</sup> Lara Jakes, "Trump Declares Afghan Peace Talks with Taliban 'Dead'," *The New York Times*, 9 September 2019, accessed 17 November 2019, [tiny.cc/kbudgz](https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/09/us/politics/trump-declares-afghan-peace-talks-dead.html).

## Chapter II

### LANGUAGE, DISCOURSE, NEGOTIATIONS AND THEORIES OF PEACEBUILDING

“Nobody can claim himself to be practically proficient in a science and yet disdain its theory without revealing himself to be an ignoramus in his area.”  
—Emmanuel Kant<sup>21</sup>

This chapter explores the academic studies around peace and conflict and scientific research relevant to Afghanistan. Anthropologist Clifford Geertz stated that one should not look at the theoretical notion of peace, but that one must pay attention to what the masters or “practitioner[s]” of peace do.<sup>22</sup> Having that in mind, from Kant’s “Perpetual Peace” to Norwegian sociologist Johan Galtung’s “positive and negative peace,” most peace theories bring disappointment upon facing actual cases. Theories usually visualize situations from a broader level, but each conflict presents a different case, which separates it from others in one degree or another. To discover what kind of peace is meant or implied by the parties in Afghanistan, one must unpack respective events accordingly. Therefore, this chapter focuses on expanding a conceptual and theoretical essence of peace and its importance in the given Afghan and American perceptions along with respective cultural and linguistic connotations.

#### **Conceptual definitions of peace**

As an abstract concept, peace does not owe its existence to any individual or event in history. Despite that, the modern concept has roots in “post-conflict peacebuilding” stated in many international platforms. One is the Agenda for Peace and “emphasis on preventive diplomacy,” as told by the UN secretary-general Boutros Boutros-Ghali in

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<sup>21</sup> Emmanuel Kant, *Perpetual Peace and Other Essays on Politics, History, and Morals*. Translation and Introduction by Ted Humphrey (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1983), 61.

<sup>22</sup> Mikkel Vedby Rasmussen, “The Ideology of Peace: Peacebuilding and the War in Iraq,” in *Palgrave Advances in Peacebuilding*, ed. Oliver Richmond (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 180.

1992.<sup>23</sup> In the early 1990s, per Charles Call, the concept of peacebuilding meant facilitating conflict resolution, a concept which evolved depending on the context of events. Call argues that peacebuilding was realized through state-building, or in other word, peacebuilding and state-building were to be inseparable in such cases like Afghanistan and Iraq.<sup>24</sup> The roots of this concept goes to liberal peacebuilding standards.

Liberal peacebuilding is defined as a “peace strategy that promotes democracy, human rights, the respect for the law and a less restricted economy, all of which contain strong characteristics of liberal thinking.”<sup>25</sup> The largely Western and liberal peace-making theory, as told by Nicolas Lemay-Hébert, relies on constructing the state based on two main values of liberal democracy and market economy.<sup>26</sup>

Theoretical discourse relevant to this thesis can be divided into two: the notion of “peace,” its definition, and “phases of peace,” such as in the case of Afghanistan, the eras of talk of peace and peace talks since the fall of the Taliban until today. Peace is widely known but is also among the most abstract terms. According to Charles Webel and Galtung, peace is usually put in line with other philosophical terminologies that do not fit the conventional definitions, such as “love, justice, freedom, and harmony,” concepts that are best known in their absence or opposite situation.<sup>27</sup> Nevertheless, the theory of peace concerns sustaining, maintaining and building stability in a war-torn state. Galtung introduces two types of peace: “curative

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<sup>23</sup> Dietrich Fischer, “Peace as A Self-regulating Process,” in *Handbook of Peace and Conflict Studies*, eds. Charles Webel and Johan Galtung (New York: Routledge, 2007), 195.

<sup>24</sup> Charles T. Call, “The Evolution of Peacebuilding: Improved Ideas and Institutions.” UN University Centre for Policy Research (2015), 2.

<sup>25</sup> Stephen Ryan, “The Evolution of Peacebuilding,” in *The Routledge Handbook of Peacebuilding*, ed., Roger Mac Ginty (New York: Routledge 2013), 32.

<sup>26</sup> Nicolas Lemay-Hébert, “Critical Debates on Liberal Peacebuilding,” *Civil Wars*, 15: no. 2 (2013): 242, accessed 7 November 2019, [bit.ly/2IdINzq](http://bit.ly/2IdINzq).

<sup>27</sup> Charles Webel, “Introduction: Toward a Philosophy and Metapsychology of Peace,” in *Handbook of Peace and Conflict Studies*, eds. Charles Webel and Johan Galtung (New York: Routledge, 2007), 5.

and preventive in light of positive and negative.”<sup>28</sup> He further stresses that “peace is the absence and reduction of violence of all kind.”<sup>29</sup>

### **Linguistic characteristics of peace**

The linguistic essence and connotations of peace is complex, even subjective. In Persian or Dari, the word for peace is صلح (“solh”). In a broader sense, many Dari speakers would define “solh” as an end to war. For instance, Waliullah Rahmani, an Afghan political and strategic analyst, states that “peace is a multilateral context and process, and to have peace you just need not have war. Basically, in the graveyard, there is no war, everything is calm.”<sup>30</sup>

On a similar note, Said Ali Amiri states that peace in the Afghan context means “compromise, anti-corruption and elimination of hatred while from a political science [perspective] it means tranquility, calmness and public security in the country.”<sup>31</sup> “Solh” is originally an Arabic word, referring to “reconciliation and peacemaking.”<sup>32</sup> Besides, there is some latent understanding attached to the term as well. In a veiled sense, a peace deal or agreement can imply forgiving both sides, going beyond atrocities and disregarding both sides’ actions, as well as ignoring causalities and probably forgetting losses. “Solh” can also mean ceasefire. The possibility of forgiving is a whole different discussion requiring a research of its own.

Furthermore, a potential Afghan peace resulting from further U.S.-Taliban negotiations would only be a partial success without Afghanistan’s NUG’s involvement. This is so because the objective of the Taliban is eliminating the so-

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<sup>28</sup> Johan Galtung, *Peace by Peaceful Means: Peace and Conflict, Development and Civilization* (London: Sage Publications, 1996), 2.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>30</sup> Interview with Waliullah Rahmani, Security and Political Expert, Director of Khabarnama Media, 24 September 2019, Kabul.

<sup>31</sup> Said Ali Amiri, “The Need for Peace and Security in Afghanistan,” Afghan Voice Agency, November 2012, accessed 3 September 2019, [bit.ly/2m5YjpG](http://bit.ly/2m5YjpG).

<sup>32</sup> United Religious Initiative, “The Etymology of Salam: An Insight into the Arabic Word for Peace,” 26 October 2010, accessed 3 September 2019, [bit.ly/2pjuGHo](http://bit.ly/2pjuGHo).

called infidels and Westerners and, thus, upon the U.S. exit, the Taliban could declare themselves as the winning side without feeling the need to negotiate with the NUG. Many would argue that the Taliban are seeking a military victory over the territory of Afghanistan, what could potentially lead to the re-establishing of the collapsed Islamic Emirate.<sup>33</sup>

As the local press *Etilaate-Roz* argues, the Taliban knows no limit to their military objective and nothing can stop them because they are talking about peace from one side, and on the other side they have their war machines actively operating in many provinces of Afghanistan.<sup>34</sup> If negotiations were to fail indefinitely or, worse, if the Taliban were to prevail in the war, what happens to the initial worldwide proclamation of the U.S. and partners on the so-called Global War on Terror (GWOt) and the emancipation of Afghan women as the main victims of the Taliban's rule?<sup>35</sup> In addition, if a peace accord were to be reached, what and who would be its guarantee and guarantor and what relations will it have with the "Bilateral Security Agreement" already signed in 2014 between the U.S. and the NUG,<sup>36</sup> especially so, when the current NUG has no legitimacy for the Taliban. Additionally, the initial purpose of the 2018-2019 U.S.-Taliban Peace Talks was to end the 18-year war.<sup>37</sup> Logically ending war would mark the potential coming of peace, but parties appear not to have been on the same page regarding the purpose behind the Peace Talks.

Another important issue is the question of "ripeness" of dispute as articulated by I. William Zartman, where he claims that both sides (in this case the U.S. and the

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<sup>33</sup> Ashley J. Tellis, "Reconciling with the Taliban? Toward An Alternative Grand Strategy in Afghanistan," vol. 4, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2009, accessed 9 November 2019, [tiny.cc/n2uzfz](http://tiny.cc/n2uzfz).

<sup>34</sup> *Etilaat Roz*, "The Taliban Paradox," 2 September 2019, accessed 10 June 2019, [bit.ly/2MfW8cp](http://bit.ly/2MfW8cp).

<sup>35</sup> Iris Marion Young, "The Logic of Masculinist Protection: Reflections on the Current Security State," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 29, no. 1 (2003): 3.

<sup>36</sup> Sune Engel Rasmussen, "U.S. and Afghanistan Sign Security Deal," *The Guardian*, 30 September 2014, accessed 17 November 2019, [tiny.cc/hv5dgz](http://tiny.cc/hv5dgz).

<sup>37</sup> *RFE*, "U.S. Envoy Ready to Sign 'Good Agreement' With Taliban As Qatar Talks Resume," 3 August 2019, accessed 8 November 2019, [tiny.cc/v6lxfz](http://tiny.cc/v6lxfz).

Taliban) must have met the “hurting stalemate.”<sup>38</sup> This implies the notion that to reach a comprehensive agreement of peace and reconciliation, parties must acknowledge that there is no benefit left in prolongation of the war. Following Zartman’s argument in the Afghanistan case, the U.S. and Taliban parties have not realized the hurting stalemate for three reasons: First, the Taliban’s war is initially both against the NUG and U.S., but they have no interest in recognizing the NUG as it remains their conflicting side. Second is the fact that the presidential election has either accidentally or intentionally fallen in parallel with the Peace Talks, adding to more complications in the legitimacy of the new president. The occurrence of two big historical events can lead to a clash possibly compromising one over the other. Finally, the third reason as to why the two sides have not reached the hurting stalemate is the occurrence of the Peace Talks with the U.S. and not with the NUG. Envoy Zalmay Khalilzad had revealed that the intra-Afghan (i.e. NUG-Taliban) talks would happen after the U.S.-Taliban agreement.<sup>39</sup> Based on the above, it can also be said that peace has two faces in Afghanistan: Afghan-led peace and the U.S.-led peace.

### **Afghanistan and peacebuilding**

Since 2001, much policy and scientific sources have discussed the concept of peace in Afghanistan through the lenses of security revival, actors’ involvement, and effective reconstruction of the state. Ensuring security has been the key reason for the hardcore international military presence in Afghanistan. According to Jonathan Goodhand et al., the pre-9/11 history can be divided into four eras, namely (1) the Soviet period (1979-1989),<sup>40</sup> (2) the period of inter-ethnic and ideological war with the post-Soviet

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<sup>38</sup> I. William. Zartman, “The Timing of Peace Initiatives: Hurting Stalemates and Ripe Moments,” *The Global Review of Ethnopolitics* 1, no. 1 (2001): 8-18, accessed 10 November 2019, [cutt.ly/aeUS4C3](http://cutt.ly/aeUS4C3).

<sup>39</sup> *Al Jazeera*, “Intra-Afghan Negotiations to Follow US-Taliban Deal: Khalilzad,” 28 July 2019, accessed 30 July 2019, [bit.ly/2LS6BwI](http://bit.ly/2LS6BwI).

<sup>40</sup> BBC, “Afghanistan Profile – Timeline, 9 September 2019, accessed 7 Nov. 2019, [bbc.in/2NpRoCE](http://bbc.in/2NpRoCE).

Afghan communist regime of President Mohammad Najibullah (1989-1992), (3) the period of intra-Mujahidin civil war (1992-1996), and (4) the Taliban era (1996-2001).<sup>41</sup> Goodhand sees these eras from a political economy prism to determine the causes and costs of war. In a similar manner, the set periods can be used to analyze the ongoing situation of Afghanistan, whereby in each period there has been a consecutive emphasis on building the state, promoting peace in the aftermath of conflict, and reconstructing what had become in essence a failed state.<sup>42</sup>

National and international actors at times work in cooperation to realize a common outcome which could lead to collective success, but also failure, unless commitments are ensured. Afghanistan has seen many peacebuilding projects to reintegrate the local combatants and those who have been fighting against the government for various reasons. These projects have hardly met their expected results. Barnett Rubin, a prominent expert on Afghanistan, argues that the international community is partially to blame for the failure of such projects, besides the ethnic division and internal fragmentation.<sup>43</sup> According to Rubin, the superpowers want to transform countries and, to do so, they use common tools of power and transformation, chiefly “coercion, capital, and legitimacy.”<sup>44</sup>

The mentioned tools are not new to Afghanistan as the country has seen such scenarios of intervention in the past. Cumulatively, such tools are also like weapons for the ruling regime to seize and enjoy its own power and resources. On the other hand, while many scholars had emphasized cooperation with the Taliban during their rule, Rubin has had a different take on relations with them, describing the era of

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<sup>41</sup> Jonathan Goodhand, “Corrupting or Consolidating the Peace? The Drugs Economy and Post-conflict Peacebuilding in Afghanistan,” *International Peacekeeping* 15, no. 3 (2008): 407.

<sup>42</sup> Patrick Travers and Taylor Owen, “Between Metaphor and Strategy: Canada’s Integrated Approach to Peacebuilding in Afghanistan,” *International Journal* 63, no. 3 (2008): 685.

<sup>43</sup> Barnett Rubin, “Peace Building and State-Building in Afghanistan: Constructing Sovereignty for Whose Security?,” *Third World Quarterly* 27, no. 1 (2006): 175.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 178.



Taliban rule both as a “rogue” and “failed state” for Afghanistan.<sup>45</sup> Elaborating further, Rubin argues that similar sources of power were given to manipulate Afghanistan’s former monarch Abdul Rahman Khan (1880-1901)<sup>46</sup> during the “Great Game” era,<sup>47</sup> with a dangerous composition of “power, money, and weapons.”<sup>48</sup> Similar tools are applicable to the U.S. intervention of 2001 and can be compared with the Great Game period of expansions, with the difference that the latter has characteristic of an alternative conditionality. Under the U.S. invasion or “intervention,” Afghanistan must follow many international norms and conditions to survive as a state, while under the Taliban, the country had been considered as a threat to the international community both as an extremely authoritarian regime and as a failed state, with the 9/11 terror incidence becoming a justified reason for U.S.-led invasion.

Regarding conditionality, it is possible to bring the role that international organizations such as the UN, the World Bank, and the European Union (EU) play in pushing conditions in exchange for regime security. The conditions may be underlined as various norms of human rights implementation, including women’s rights, and other basic liberal and neoliberal requirements. Another reason may be directed towards the nature of U.S. foreign policy which differs from that of the British Empire. While the British were seeking territorial expansion, the contemporary era is about the spread of ideology and liberal norms.

Table 1 is an illustration of Rubin’s concepts of state-building and stakeholders in Afghanistan after 9/11. Even though all of these elements exist in the country, they predominantly benefit the “warlords,” politicians, and their patrons. State

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<sup>45</sup> *Idem.*

<sup>46</sup> Barfield, *Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History. Op. cit.*, 110.

<sup>47</sup> Peter Hopkirk, *The Great Game: The Struggle for Empire in Central Asia* (New York: Kodansha International, 1994).

<sup>48</sup> Rubin, “Peace Building and State-Building in Afghanistan ...,” *op. cit.*, 178.

**Table 1: Rubin’s concepts of state-building in Afghanistan<sup>49</sup>**

Coercion	Capital	Legitimacy
ISAF	U.S. and others	Bonn Conference on Afghanistan.
NATO	IO funds	Other international conferences on Afghanistan.
ANA (army)	World Bank	UNSC resolutions (military coalition).
ANP (police)	IMF	“Loya Jirga” and elections.

authorities have not been institutionally effective enough to consolidate the regime in the post-9/11 era nor have they had social and economic policies to benefit the majority of the populace. Similar tools worked in the 19<sup>th</sup> century in preserving as well as practicing authority and abundant resources and yet in the post-Taliban era, the central government has not been able to enjoy a wide influence over Afghanistan.

It is widely believed that with the help of international organizations, the spread of democracy and capitalism reinforces peace. In the case of Afghanistan, the country has been showered with billions of dollars of aid and development projects in the aftermath of 9/11 and U.S.-led invasion, albeit the results have been far less successful than hoped for. The unsuccessful state and peacebuilding case of Afghanistan paves the way towards the critiques of liberal peacebuilding.

Some scholars believe that the “indigenous” and “traditional” way of peacemaking is the solution because it emerges from within the particular state and follows local norms and values. According to Roger Mac Ginty, many international organizations (IOs) have begun to explore and support indigenous ways of peacemaking as opposed to the Western liberal model.<sup>50</sup> On the other hand, Pearson and Olson Lounsbury emphasize the role and significance and challenges of

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 141.

interference by outsiders. They write:

One of the most interesting questions regarding the outcome of civil wars is the role played by outside parties—states, powers, and organizations—in either promoting or dampening the combat and facilitating solutions.<sup>51</sup>

With regard to the role of third parties, one of the preconditions of interference is that the troubled state should request help from outsiders. For example, the UN Assistance Mission to Afghanistan (UNAMA) was established to help rebuild and restore peace by the request of the Afghan Government in 2002,<sup>52</sup> while that is not the case with regards to the U.S.-led invasion in 2001 as a response to 9/11. There are different understandings that come with intervention, particularly a military one. Multilateral interventions, as was the U.S.-led invasion, have supposedly less selfish interests behind them than unilateral actions.<sup>53</sup> Pearson and Lounsbury state that given weak institutions, poor governance, and entrenched corruption, most intervened states like Afghanistan, Iraq, and sub-Saharan African countries largely fail to consolidate democracy.<sup>54</sup>

Likewise, in today's ongoing attempts in peacemaking, the Taliban insurgents are not interested in talking with the government but are with the U.S., while the government demands the process to be "Afghan led"—i.e. peace talks that are between the Taliban and the NUG.<sup>55</sup> Since the Taliban consider the NUG as a puppet government, in their mind it is enough to resolve the matter with the main source of power, i.e. the U.S. Perhaps once the sides agree on mutual terms, the issue of legitimate government will also be solved for them. However, it can also be argued

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<sup>51</sup> Fredric Pearson and Marie Olson Lounsbury, "Post-Intervention Stability of Civil War States," in *Critical Issues in Peace and Conflict Studies: Theory, Practice, and Pedagogy*, eds. Thomas Matyok, Jessica Senehi, and Sean Byrne (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2011), 43.

<sup>52</sup> UNAMA "Mandate," undated, accessed 5 November 2019, [tiny.cc/bidrfz](http://tiny.cc/bidrfz).

<sup>53</sup> Pearson and Olson Lounsbury, "Post-Intervention Stability ...," *op. cit.*, 44.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>55</sup> Syed Salahuddin, "U.S. Wants Afghan-led Peace Talks with Taliban, Ghani Says," *Arab News*, 17 July 2018, accessed 8 May 2019, [bit.ly/2VPaM1c](http://bit.ly/2VPaM1c).

that the indigenous method of peacebuilding could be applicable if the Taliban were to agree to negotiate with the NUG and find common ground.

### **The discourse of peacebuilding**

The concept of peace has had many discourses built around it throughout history. Among the most well-known and acknowledged debates is the question of whether peace comes from outside through a third party, any recognized body or is its emergence from within the conflicted groups. Liberal peacebuilding as the name suggests, is a theory that is linked and derived from the liberal school of thought in international relations. Scholars from this school believe that peace can be achieved through liberal and democratic standards. Rehabilitation of a war-ravaged country is considered as the remedy which comes with “political and economic liberalization,” claims Roland Paris.<sup>56</sup>

Similarly, Lemay-Hébert believes that peace can be achieved only through democratic values. He asserts that “liberal peace focuses on social engineering meant to constitute the foundations for a stable society,”<sup>57</sup> and that liberal peacemaking is not only for democracies, but for non-democracies, as well. Since the fundamentals of this model is a strong government, thus state-building comes first. The post-9/11 series of events show that Afghanistan followed the same path. There were foreign aid and development projects under the state-building flag. But it is not only foreign aid and investments which are of interest to analysts, but internal unfathomable politics which deserve even more of their attention. Perhaps that is why insecurity is the main challenge to all the mentioned aspects, hindering and affecting the realization of state-building and peacebuilding.

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<sup>56</sup> Roland Paris, “Saving Liberal Peacebuilding,” *Review of International Studies* 36, no. 2 (2010), 340.

<sup>57</sup> Lemay-Hébert, “Critical Debates ...,” *op. cit.*, 242.

Considering that the Taliban are not interested in talking with the government but with the U.S. despite many including the NUG demanding the process to be “Afghan-led,”<sup>58</sup> winning the war against the presence of Western powers or negotiating with the U.S. to seek an advantageous peace is more important for the Taliban, according to Günter Knabe et al.<sup>59</sup> This puts forward a critical question that concerns the exit of U.S. forces as part of a potential deal coming from negotiations with the Taliban.

As mentioned above, Mac Ginty refers to an “indigenous versus liberal Peace Making.”<sup>60</sup> As Afghanistan has a culture of dispute resolution, indigenous methods of peace may have applicability with it. However, it requires national involvement and legitimate authority that is inclusive, responsible and accountable. There are community gatherings called *shura* (council) and as well as other councils known as *jirga* that show the culture of dispute resolution in the country. These institutions have at times been effective at the community level and continue to be seriously considered by decision makers. *Shuras* are usually a community of elders and authorities of an area. In case of family conflicts, or disputes over land or similar cases, for example, the *shura* can discuss and attempt to resolve the matter. *Jirgas*, in turn, can be used for a nation-wide solution for peace. Such an attempt has already been made. The most recent peace consultative “Loya Jirga” was held in April 2019. Finally, the applicability of both indigenous and liberal methods of peace seems to be dependent on internal politics. Perhaps in case of a united culture of tolerance, either of the schemes could work both to fight the Taliban and solve internal conflicts. But, given the ongoing war and the tussle and tension over power and legitimacy, peace remains uncertain.

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<sup>58</sup> Salahuddin, “US Wants Afghan-led Peace Talks ...,” *op. cit.*

<sup>59</sup> Günter Knabe et al., “Afghanistan Imbroglio: An Appraisal,” *Policy Perspectives* 8, no. 1 (2011): 2.

<sup>60</sup> Mac Ginty, “Indigenous Peace-Making ...,” *op. cit.*

## **Peace talks: ‘The President, the Envoy, and the Talib’<sup>61</sup>**

Negotiation is often the most important if not an effective tool to ending or uniting parties in conflict. Usually, when two individuals or groups clash because of their interests, negotiation is used to find a third solution that would serve both sides’ demands. The well-known American political figure and diplomat, Henry Kissinger, defines negotiation as “a process of combining conflicting positions into a common position, under a decision rule of unanimity.”<sup>62</sup> In the case of today’s Afghanistan, only two parties have negotiated face-to-face about peace—the U.S. and the Taliban. The intra-afghan talks had been the expected next step; but since the first step of talks did not end successfully, the fate of the intra-Afghan talk remains undetermined.

As the initiator of the Peace Talks, the U.S. is inevitably one of the most powerful actors in the Afghanistan scenario. Then comes the Taliban because they have the means of sabotaging the negotiations through ongoing terror incidences. As for the NUG, despite President Ghani’s persistence on representing a strong democratic government, it seems to have the least influence in this scenario, nor does the Taliban consider them as a legitimate authority, calling the NUG as an American puppet.<sup>63</sup>

Despite obvious differences, each representative has a few traits that connect them to the other. “Afghan” as identity or origin is an example of their connection. Even the U.S. envoy Khalilzad has Afghan origins—having been born in the northern Afghan town of Mazar-e-Sharif in 1951. The other common issue that connects the parties closely is the notions of war and peace in Afghanistan. One way or another, all

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<sup>61</sup> Mujib Mashal, “The President, the Envoy and the Talib: 3 Lives Shaped by War and Study Abroad,” *The New York Times*, 16 February 2019, accessed 10 November 2019, [tiny.cc/pb20fz](https://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/16/opinion/the-president-the-envoy-and-the-talib.html).

<sup>62</sup> Quoted in Tanya Alfredson and Azeta Cungu, “Negotiation Theory and Practice: A Review of the Literature,” *EASYPol*, Module 179, 6, accessed 8 November 2019, [tiny.cc/xrxzfz](https://www.easypol.org/Module/179/6).

<sup>63</sup> Eisa Khan Ayoobi, “The Afghan Government Is Failing to deliver on Its Promises,” *Al Jazeera*, 25 September 2018, accessed 26 April 2019, [bit.ly/2vlqeD9](https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/09/25/afghan-government-failing-deliver-promises/).

three representatives (Ghani, representing the NUG; Khalilzad, the U.S.; and Stanikzai, the Taliban) claim that they want to change the status quo by bringing peace. But as much as U.S. Envoy Khalilzad and President Ghani talk in a positive tone about “bilateral relations,”<sup>64</sup> the Taliban insist on withdrawal of Western troops and no direct talks with the NUG. The key concerns of the three sides revolve around the conceptualization of peace and the U.S. troops’ withdrawal from Afghanistan.

To begin with, given the parties’ complex demands and unclear position, peace seems a rather complex phenomenon to be achieved. President Ghani is firm on his stand saying, “Peace is imperative” and that “[a] war that has gone on for 17 years must come to an end.”<sup>65</sup> Likewise, Khalilzad, states regarding the U.S.-Taliban Peace Talks that “we see a chance for reaching peace in Afghanistan and want to make use of that chance.” The term *chance* is a pivotal term here. It raises many issues, including exiting Afghanistan and reducing the financial cost of a badly-gone war. Meanwhile, the Taliban representative Stanikzai says that “Peace is more difficult than war,” perhaps because of its complexities and that the Taliban have been advocating violence for a few decades. These complexities can be the Western influence and troops’ withdrawal. In this regard, one of the Taliban’s main criticisms is the very Constitution of Afghanistan, which, according to Stanikzai has been “imported from the West” and is thus perceived to be one of the “obstacles to peace.” The current Constitution is a combination (and contradiction) of both international norms and human rights on the one hand and sharia law on the other, while the Taliban advocate the implementation of institutions and sharia law and codes in their fundamentalist interpretations.

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<sup>64</sup> *Tolo News*, “Special Interview with Khalilzad about His Meetings with Taliban,” 21 December 2018, accessed 19 June 2019, [cutt.ly/ieJeegX](http://cutt.ly/ieJeegX).

<sup>65</sup> Government of Afghanistan, Office of the President, “CNN Anchor Fareed Zakaria’s Conversation with President Mohammad Ashraf Ghani during World Economic Forum’s Annual Meeting (2019) in Davos, Switzerland,” 25 January 2019, accessed 8 November 2019, [cutt.ly/NeYHs4b](http://cutt.ly/NeYHs4b).

## **Women's voices and Peace Talks**

War has had a price and peace has a price that eventually Afghans both men and women must bear. However, women have been the most vulnerable group to violence, exploitation and all sorts of dehumanization not only under the Taliban regime, but also under Afghanistan's existing cultural norms. For President Ghani, women's rights, achievements, contribution, and their sacrifices supposedly holds a strong place in a potential Peace Talks and future Afghanistan. Ghani claims that women and youth are the main forces of democracy in Afghanistan.<sup>66</sup> He favors a path towards democracy and development through inclusive policy reforms. Stanikzai and Khalilzad also discuss women's issues. As expected, the Taliban representative makes no mention of women's rights based on the modern values and international norms. He has merely stated that "women should not worry" and fear a Taliban-dominated regime because they will supposedly have access to education and work under Islamic values and sharia law—even though sharia law as practiced during the Taliban era was a clear violation of basic internationally-recognized human rights norms and ideals. Khalilzad calls the 1996-2001 Taliban period a "debauchery" regarding women's rights and, particularly, the practice of capital punishment by way of violent public executions. And yet, there appear to have been no progress or any clear direction on women's rights in the U.S.-Taliban Peace Talks.

Taliban see the withdrawal of foreign troops as an indispensable condition for a cease-fire. Speaking on behalf of the Taliban, Stanikzai has said that "we would not agree to a ceasefire until foreign forces are withdrawn from Afghanistan." He has

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<sup>66</sup> In his interview with Zakaria, Ghani said: "Afghanistan *is* turning the corner. My first tribute is to the Afghan women. Afghan women have come to voice their own. In 33 provinces of Afghanistan, there have been discussions, and the last one is taking place now. We are going to have the first Jirga – the gathering – of all Afghan women in the coming month. These are people who grow, come from the grassroots. What do they want? A democratic, orderly system. Second is the youth, the youth of Afghanistan has come to its own," Ibid.



further said that only “when the American forces announce the withdrawal of their troops” will there be further “intra-Afghan dialogue.” At this stage, one can notice two important trends: The U.S. is both willing to help and assist Afghanistan in the future and to resolve the conflict, but this is only possible by reconciliation between the NUG and the Taliban. On the other hand, the constant emphasis on the Western “withdrawal” and “West” as enemy implies that the Taliban want regime change and perceive the U.S. troops and ultimately political withdrawal as a non-negotiable and de facto condition for peace.

### **Conclusion**

The purpose of this chapter was to provide an analysis of discourses on peace in Afghanistan. As stated above, the Taliban see peace as being solely dependent on the exit of the Western powers and systematic institutional change by altering the current sharia-weak Constitution. On the other hand, President Ghani seems to be defending his authority by justifying his regime and emphasizing its democratic character. And though he sees peace as being extremely important, he also views the intra-Afghan peace as imperative, but also a peace led by a democratically elected legitimate government, such as the NUG. Finally, the U.S. envoy Khalilzad is hopeful about a peace deal between the Taliban and the U.S., one which would lead to an intra-Afghan peace deal, as well. As has been highlighted for each case, the discourse of peace does not have a straight or clear path but varies based on interests and grievances. Each party seems to be on board regarding the need for peace but differs about the specifics of how to arrive at a peace deal, what the details of an agreement should entail and with whom should such an agreement be negotiated with.

## Chapter III

### A BRIEF HISTORY OF AFGHANISTAN'S WARS, 1979-2019

“Victory is impossible in Afghanistan [and President] Obama is right to pull the troops out. No matter how difficult it will be.”

—Mikhail Gorbachev, October 2010<sup>67</sup>

The purpose of this chapter is laying out the overview of the history and dynamics of peace and conflict in Afghanistan. The current talk of peace and Peace Talks have roots not only in the past 18 years of conflict and clash of interests, but even prior to that. To understand the ongoing situation, therefore, one must go back not 18 or 20 years but at least four decades.

#### Background

Throughout the years, scholars, researchers and ordinary folk have mentioned the significance or misery of the geographical location of Afghanistan. The country's strategic location is partially blamed for its decades of violence, which have also involved a proxy war between the superpowers. Gompert et al. write:

As the Cold War approached the climactic 1980s, the Kremlin's increasing interest in Afghanistan was mainly geostrategic and defensive: to prevent the United States from obtaining an advantageous location from which to observe and threaten the Soviet Union.<sup>68</sup>

The 2018-2019 Peace Talks between the U.S. and the Taliban have revived hope for peace amid nonstop terroristic attacks by the Taliban and conventional violence by the U.S. and Afghan militaries. President Ghani stated in an interview in August 2019 that “three years ago peace was marginalized but now everyone is

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<sup>67</sup> *The Telegraph*, “Mikhail Gorbachev: Victory in Afghanistan is ‘impossible’,” 27 October 2010, accessed 9 November 2019, [cutt.ly/JeUE2gp](http://cutt.ly/JeUE2gp).

<sup>68</sup> David C. Gompert, Hans Binnendijk and Bonny Lin, “The Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan, 1979,” in *Blinders, Blunders, and Wars: What America and China Can Learn*, Rand Corporation, 2014, 130, accessed 8 November 2019, [cutt.ly/WeYJMv6](http://cutt.ly/WeYJMv6).

involved.”<sup>69</sup> Indeed, the discourse of peace has been discussed in the Afghan public domain going back to the Cold War, including the time of the once communist President Najibullah’s National Reconciliation Policy initiative and the ongoing peace dialogues. In a sense, peace is in the public discourse in a way that is often discussed but without any operational consequences. War, on the other hand, has become part of a habitual routine, a notion and modus operandi that people have taken for granted.

A comprehensive track of peace journey entails efforts in unfolding certain pages of Afghan history. Although the journey of peace and war go way back, this chapter aims at briefly going back by no more than four decades. One of the main speculations widely spread is that the U.S. wants to exit Afghanistan which is why there are Peace Talks taking place with an entity which ordinarily would be labeled as a terrorist group. A rather similar situation was happening in Afghanistan in the late 1980s during the Soviet-Afghan war.

### **Soviet invasion and occupation of Afghanistan (1978-1988)**

The U.S-USSR rivalry during the Cold War and respective policies left many countries affected positively (given foreign aid), but also very much negatively due to right- and left-wing political repression and the numerous proxy wars engaged by the two sides. Both superpowers were on the verge of extension of territorial influence, military superiority as well as soft power mightiness, to that extent that third parties, i.e. anyone except the two polar powers of the eras had to suffer the consequences of their rivalry and consequently adjust their own policies accordingly.

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<sup>69</sup> *Tolo News*, “Exclusive Interview with President Ashraf Ghani,” 23 August 2019, accessed 8 November 2019, [bit.ly/2Zo96te](https://bit.ly/2Zo96te).

As mentioned earlier, given the geographical location of Afghanistan, sometimes referred to as “the heart of Asia,”<sup>70</sup> the country has been negatively affected by foreign interferences and invasions for centuries. In more recent times, though the often positive remnants of the Soviet legacy are visible in its former Soviet republics, Afghanistan had a particularly different relationship with the Soviet Union and its rival, the U.S., in the last decade of the Cold War. Coming back to its geostrategic location, Afghanistan has been a doorway to Central and South Asia and has been of importance to Great Powers who have time and again attempted to impose their will and ideology on the country. In more recent times, one such Great Power has been the Soviet Union.

On 25 December 1978, the Soviet invasion and soon after occupation of Afghanistan surprised its patron government of the time with an attack which shook the whole country including Afghanistan’s communist President Hafizullah Amin, who was soon killed by Soviet agents along with male members of his household in the presidential palace. According to Mohammad Kakar, the Soviet invasion was well planned. The USSR, the then chief ally of Afghanistan, had already in place 5,000 of its troops at the Kabul airport, and per Kremlin’s plan, they had prior to the invasion attempted to eliminate President Amin alongside other important official figures they had found as problematic for Soviet designs.<sup>71</sup> The story goes that a fabricated Soviet report to President Amin told that the U.S. was planning to invade Afghanistan through the Persian Gulf, due to which Amin requests for help of the Soviet military. This is how the Soviet military gets placed in the country before the surprise larger invasion and the murder of Amin and his replacement by a more trustworthy Soviet

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<sup>70</sup> Thomas Ruttig, “Afghanistan Conference in Istanbul: The Clogged Arteries of the Heart of Asia,” Afghanistan’s Analyst Network, 1 November 2011, accessed 10 November 2019, [cutt.ly/OeIqTdk](http://cutt.ly/OeIqTdk).

<sup>71</sup> Mohammad Kakar, *Afghanistan: The Soviet Invasion and the Afghan Response, 1979-1982* (Oakland: University of California Press, 1995), 19.

ally, Babrak Karmal. Amin, who up until hours before his death by Soviet agents, had trusted the Soviet Union, was soon after his death labeled by his successor, President Karmal, as a “professional criminal and recognized spy of U.S. imperialism.”<sup>72</sup>

The reason behind the Soviet invasion was because Afghanistan was by default close to Kremlin in the tussle between Moscow and Washington at a time when the U.S. had lost Iran due to the Islamic Revolution which had overthrown Shah Muhammad Reza Pahlavi. There are two general connotations to the Soviet invasion. One is Soviet distrust towards Amin, and the second is the U.S. involvement in supporting the anti-Communist Mujahidin guerrillas.<sup>73</sup> While the Soviet military invasion was “an act of aggression” from the American point of view, their presence was praised by the new ruling regime in Kabul who sought the Soviet forces in suppressing its armed opponents, the Mujahidin.<sup>74</sup>

The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan had many angles, including the Cold War bipolar rivalry, while Afghanistan’s internal scenario was one of those angles. The domestic political situation of the time revolved around key political figures between pro-communist and anti-communist forces. The People’s Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA), an Afghan communist party founded in 1965, came to power in 1978 and was later divided into two factions or wings: the *Parcham* (Banner) and the *Khalq* (People).<sup>75</sup> Both the *Parcham* and *Khalq* supporters had undergone a similar system of education of Marxist Ideology. The two wings claimed and contested what each considered to be the true PDPA.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> *Kabul New Times*, “Proclamation of General Amnesty,” 2 January 1980, accessed 10 November 2019, [tiny.cc/jjh1fz](http://tiny.cc/jjh1fz).

<sup>73</sup> Kakar, *Afghanistan: The Soviet Invasion ...*, *op. cit.*

<sup>74</sup> Gregory Feifer, *The Great Gamble: The Soviet War in Afghanistan* (New York: Harper, 2009), 2.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>76</sup> Kakar, *Afghanistan: The Soviet Invasion ...*, *op. cit.*

Parchamis were a diverse group of individuals from, among other groups, well-off Uzbek and Tajik families of bureaucrats and landlords headed, controlled and managed by Babrak Karmal. Khalqis, on the other hand, were considered more “radical”<sup>77</sup> and contained mostly rural and economically less powerful class of individuals, primarily of Pashtun ethnicity, and at one point headed by Nur Muhammad Taraki, who became Afghanistan’s president in 1978 via a coup and died a year later in a power struggle with Amin. The clash between the two PDPA factions represented the complexity of Afghanistan’s conflict of interests based on regional, religious and ethnic backgrounds.

#### Key players of the Soviet decade

Leadership and leaders overthrowing each other through violent protests and coups is what shaped and created events and eras in Soviet-allied Afghanistan of the 1970s. Historical analysis of Afghan politics is challenging because of the diversity of historical trends and political dynamics. The internal dynamics of domestic politics have always had different rival groups and subgroups with respective patrons, but those at the top of the political hierarchy have played a crucial role in expected and unexpected terms. Kakar claims that leaders have been the main characters and conspirators against each other. Leaders from every faction, in government or opposition have enjoyed enormous amount of authority over their constituency and followers. In most cases, the successors are the younger generation enjoying the same influence left from predecessors.

In the decade-long Soviet occupation, both ruling sides (i.e. the USSR and the revolutionary council of Afghanistan) had many power-holders. As much as the Soviet side may have had a gradual power transition, the Afghan side was in deep

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<sup>77</sup> Feifer, *The Great Gamble ...*, *op. cit.*, 22.

internal conflict. The key communist leaders, some more reformists and some less, were Daoud Khan (killed in 1977) Nur Mohammad Taraki (killed in 1978), Amin (killed in 1978) and Karmal (deposed in 1986 and died in Moscow in 1996). It was in 1973 when in a palace coup, Daoud Khan, deposed his cousin, Zahir Shah (the King), and thus ended the country's last monarch and the first-ever constitutional monarchy, which had been established in 1926.

Daoud took over power when Zahir Shah had been on a medical leave in Italy. Daoud, who had maintained relations with both the U.S. and the USSR, enforced press censorship and other autocratic measures, in turn, prompting criticism and protests from students and leftists in urban centers, particularly in Kabul.<sup>78</sup> Daoud's policies and dictatorial rule gave rise to both Islamist and communist oppositional forces. Taraki took power after the so-called "Saur revolution" and Daoud's death. Likewise, Amin came to power after Taraki, overthrowing him, despite being partners in the PDPA.<sup>79</sup> Subsequently, the ensuing two leaders—Karmal and Najibullah—ruled while Afghanistan was under the Soviet occupation.

Come 1989, however, the Soviets were forced to retreat by the U.S.- and Saudi Arabia-backed Mujahidin. David Gompert compares Afghanistan to the winning prize of the Cold War between the two superpowers.<sup>80</sup> In reality, however, Afghanistan, herself, was one of the major victims of the Cold War, having lost, conservatively speaking, 1.25 million people during the Afghan-Soviet war, with at least two million others having become refugees, primarily in Pakistan and Iran.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Feifer, *The Great Gamble ...*, *op. cit.*

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>80</sup> Gompert et al., *Blinder, Blunder, and Wars ...*, *op. cit.*

<sup>81</sup> Feifer, *The Great Gamble ...*, *op. cit.*

### **The intra-Afghan wars (1989-1996)**

Afghanistan's civil war between different internal factions broke out after the Soviet Union had been defeated in 1989. The civil war was among prominent leaders and their supporters who were dissatisfied with one side's share of power and resources and also driven by powerful warlords.

Zalmay Khalilzad, the current U.S. peace envoy, had in 1995 discussed in detail the causes of inter-ethnic conflict which according to him was intangible power rather than that of material gains. This was after the Soviet troops exited but before the rise of the Taliban. Although material gains were also significant as a key cause of the war, according to Khalilzad, the conflict that ended up in the brutal war between different regions over the capital Kabul after the Soviet troops' withdrawal was over the question of leadership as its main factor. Khalilzad states that "the war has turned into a brutal civil conflict fought not over ideological, sectarian, or ethnic differences—although these factors are part of the setting—but over who should govern."<sup>82</sup>

Khalilzad introduces a number of power factions in Afghanistan predominantly based on ethnic and religious affiliations. The main warring sides were: A coalition made up of Burhanuddin Rabbani, an ethnic Tajik, with "Jamiat-e-Islami" (Islamic Group) and Afghanistan's president of the time (1992-1996), in alliance with Abdul-Rab Rasul Sayyaf from "Ittehad-e-Islami" (Islamic Coalition), Ahmad Shah Massoud, also an ethnic Tajik, and former leader of the anti-Soviet Mujahidin and later anti-Taliban Northern Alliance. On the other side were Gulbuddin Hekmatyar (an ethnic Pashtun) from "Hizb-e-Islami" (Islamic Party) in partnership with Abdul Rashid Dostum (an ethnic Uzbek from the National Islamic Movement),

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<sup>82</sup> Zalmay Khalilzad, "Afghanistan in 1994: Civil War and Disintegration," *Asian Survey* 35, no. 2, (1995), 147.



Abdul Ali Mazariof “Hizbe Wahdat” (Unity Party) and Sebghatullah Mujadidi of the “Jabheye Nejate Milli” (National Salvation Front).<sup>83</sup> Other remaining parties or groups were the “neutral coalition” made up of Mohammad Asef Mohseni of the Shiite Islamic Front, Pir Ahmad Gelani (“Mahaz-e-Islami”) and Nabi Mohammadi (Revolutionary Islamic Movement).<sup>84</sup> As stated, not all parties were directly involved in the war over power. However, affiliations could be used to either support or counter a given side.

Kabul is depicted as the torn heart of a fragile and prone to collapse country, a country that was left with a destroyed youth, destroyed infrastructure, and under an extremely chaotic regime transition. Alliance and loyalty between major groups were never sustainable due to the volatility of warring factions’ political and military interests.<sup>85</sup> In this regard, Gilles Dorronsoro argues that the conflict was the result of a “failed transition,”<sup>86</sup> which is like Khalilzad’s argument of conflict over leadership.

No matter what the driving factor for the civil war was, the resumption of the conflict in the post-9/11 era is a matter of concern. Many of the former Mujahidin, warlords and powerful authorities are controlling the government today, and the struggle for power is still the main cause of internal conflict which leaves no space for neutral citizens.

### **Taliban’s emergence and re-emergence**

Afghanistan was topped among the most insecure or hostile countries in 2019, having been ranked the world’s least peaceful country among 163 countries surveyed by the

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 148-149.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 148.

<sup>85</sup> Gilles Dorronsoro, “Kabul at War (1992-1996): State, Ethnicity and Social Classes,” *South Asia Multidisciplinary Academic Journal*, 14 October 2007, accessed 8 November 2019, [tiny.cc/wt3xfz](http://tiny.cc/wt3xfz).

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., paragraph 4.

Global Peace Index.<sup>87</sup> The country's deteriorating security condition has many reasons, with the key factor being related to the Taliban insurgency—the rise to power (1996), fall (2001), and once again rise of the Taliban as insurgents in the post-9/11 era. The Taliban insurgency has immensely affected the political visage, economy, and statehood of Afghanistan.

As much as the Taliban's current situation is complex, its original emergence is equally multifaceted. Daniel Sullivan calls the rise of the Taliban as a “Mysterious origin.”<sup>88</sup> The movement was founded by Mullah Mohammed Omar in the mid-1990s.<sup>89</sup> And the Taliban have undergone many phases since the establishment of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan in 1996,<sup>90</sup> from an alliance with a global violent group like Al-Qaida<sup>91</sup> to being overthrown in 2001 and fighting back against the U.S. and the NUG and finally engaging in Peace Talks with the U.S. during 2018-2019.

Since a few years prior to 2001 when the Taliban had provided refuge to Osama Bin Laden, their main enemy had become the U.S., and after their downfall in December 2001, the NUG, as well had become another chief enemy of theirs. Given the provided generic phases, below I will discuss the political and religious interests of the Taliban before 2001 in order to find the patterns of their attitude and relationships. The main questions are: How does the Taliban preserve or prioritize its political versus religious interests and has there been any sort of intra-Taliban rifts? The hypothesis proposed is that there might be no distinctive line between the

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<sup>87</sup> RFE, “Study Ranks Afghanistan as World's Least Peaceful Country, Points To 'De-Escalation' In Ukraine,” 12 June 2019, accessed June 15, 2019, [bit.ly/36APMhb](https://bit.ly/36APMhb).

<sup>88</sup> Daniel P Sullivan, “Tinder, Spark, Oxygen, and Fuel: The Mysterious Rise of the Taliban,” *Journal of Peace Research* 44, no. 1 (2007): 93-108.

<sup>89</sup> Jonathan Cristol, *The United States, and the Taliban before and after 9/11* (New York: Springer, 2018), 11.

<sup>90</sup> Neamatollah Nojumi, *The Rise of the Taliban in Afghanistan: Mass Mobilization, Civil War, and the Future of the Region* (New York: Palgrave, 2002).

<sup>91</sup> Robert L. Canfield, “Fraternity, Power, and Time in Central Asia,” in *The Rise of the Taliban in Afghanistan: Mass Mobilization, Civil War, and the Future of the Region*, eds. Robert D. Crews and Amin Tarzi (New York: Palgrave, 2002).

religious and political identities of the Taliban and that the goal of reestablishing the lost political authority is still in place.

#### Taliban's religious identity

Sullivan defines religious ideology as a set of beliefs that reveal the social needs and expectations of a group and shape its political and economic system.<sup>92</sup> A Pashtun dominated ethnic group, the Taliban from a religious view belong to the Sunni branch of predominantly Hanafi school of Islam, as Ahmad Rashid describes 80 percent of the Taliban to be.<sup>93</sup> Sunni is the largest branch of Islam having its own sub-factions. If one wants to see the religious prominence of the Taliban, a deeper look is needed on sub-factions which have also had political linkages, accordingly. In this regard, Rashid points at the sub-Sunni branch influences in Afghanistan during the rise of the Taliban.<sup>94</sup> Each sub-branch has had a significant impact and played serious roles. For instance, the Deobandi sub-branch came from British India, which was the intellectual sanctuary and religious schooling (*madrasa*) of the Taliban in Pakistan. Wahhabism, in turn, has its roots in Saudi Arabia, some of whose fighters had originally fought a holy war in alliance with Afghan counterparts (Mujahidin) against the Soviet occupation.

As insurgents and rulers, the Taliban have proclaimed allegiance to justice and order according to sharia law. The Taliban regime (1996-2001) was built on a radical Islamist movement that fits Mohammed Ayoob's "[Islamic] transitional jihadists" constituting land-purifiers from Western invaders, including the Soviets and later the U.S.<sup>95</sup> Kristian Berg Harpviken further studies the Taliban through the

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<sup>92</sup> Sullivan, "Tinder, Spark, Oxygen, and Fuel ...," *op. cit.*, 100.

<sup>93</sup> Rashid, *Taliban: Islam, Oil ...*, *op. cit.*, 83.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>95</sup> Mohammed Ayoob, *The Many Faces of Political Islam* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2006), 132.

“Transnationalization framework” and illustrates the Afghan Taliban relations with beyond-border violent groups based on common characteristics such as “organization, resource mobilization, tactical repertoire, and ideological framing.”<sup>96</sup> Berg Harpviken claims that regardless of how much a dissident group wants to capture state power, a larger political ideology is there that frames the overall political perception.<sup>97</sup> In particular cases in pre-9/11, the Taliban militants were not only Afghan but had foreign fighters from Pakistan and Arabic countries, such as Bin Laden.<sup>98</sup> On the other hand, Sullivan argues that despite its growth, the Taliban remained mostly religiously motivated.<sup>99</sup> The movement was initiated by a composition of religious clerics (mullahs) and students (Talibs, i.e. “Taliban”) and local powers in the rural parts far earlier than their official rise.<sup>100</sup>

#### Taliban’s political identity

The Taliban’s political priorities were focused mostly around domestic power establishment and expansion within the national boundaries. As for the political ideology, they believed in the rule of the Islamic caliphate,<sup>101</sup> which they had supposedly already established in a state they called the “Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan” (IEA) In such a system, power is exercised by a strong centralized incumbent “Amir-ul-Muminin” (Master of the Believers).<sup>102</sup> Under Taliban rule, Islamic sharia ruled and regulated both the public and private lives of citizens. Following that principle, Mullah Omar was the first Caliph and Amir (Master). According to this system, every individual is obliged to follow the caliphate.

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<sup>96</sup> Kristian Berg Harpviken, “The Transnationalization of the Taliban,” *International Area Studies Review* 15, no. 3 (2012): 208.

<sup>97</sup> *Idem.*

<sup>98</sup> Barfield, *Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History*, *op. cit.*, 275.

<sup>99</sup> Sullivan, “Tinder, Spark, Oxygen, and Fuel ...,” *op. cit.*, 101.

<sup>100</sup> Nojumi, *The Rise of the Taliban in Afghanistan ...*, *op. cit.*

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, 152.

Neamatullah Nojumi argues that the Taliban simply rejected any form of modern government type or the model following “moderate interpretation of Sharia.”<sup>103</sup> For them, the implementing body of Islamic laws was ensured by an organization called “Amr-e-bil-Maarouf wa Nahi Anil Munkar,” or “the General Department for the Preservation of Virtue and the Elimination of Vice.”<sup>104</sup> In general, every individual activity, including performing religious duties of prayers, Islamic taxation (*zakat*), or committing any unlawful act can be judged according to the above organization.

The main objective of the Taliban had been establishing Islamic law and order based on sharia, and the rules were implemented through violence. During the four years of the Taliban-ruled IEA, the country was dominated by extremists who controlled the people’s daily lives. Forced imposition of the strict hijab (*burqa* and *chadari*) on women and forbidding them from receiving an education, in addition to shutting down schools for girls and young women were among the Taliban’s policies. Another example is women’s guardianship, requiring them to be accompanied by a male *guardian*, particularly father or husband, when venturing outside of home. In short, the regime was an extreme version of Saudi Arabia-type Islamic theocracy and authoritarian rule. Sharia law as the main constitutional source, religious police,<sup>105</sup> as well as the imposition of the Islamic judiciary system, and the forceful requirement of religious education only for men and boys all reflected the religious identity of what Sullivan calls the Taliban’s version of the “Pashtun-dominated Afghan state.”<sup>106</sup> As such, identifying the religious interests of the Taliban would not be hard. A subservient society in compliance with the sharia law-based rules is a society that the Taliban struggled for.

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<sup>103</sup> Ibid., 153.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid., 154.

<sup>105</sup> Idem.

<sup>106</sup> Sullivan, “Tinder, Spark, Oxygen, and Fuel ...,” *op. cit.*, 103.

There are two final points to consider about the Taliban: The first is that religion and religious interests, priorities, and agendas initially seemed dominant over political interests. A state and society can contain both religious and secular, but for the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, as the name suggests, politics could not be anything non-religious. Secondly, the movement came to exist as resistance and defeat of the impure, unjust, anti-Islamic rules and it was considerably welcomed by the Afghan society to begin with. However, seeing the extensive violations of human rights of women and men implied that the IEA was another, albeit extreme, authoritarian regime with an effective *instrumentalization* of religion. The Taliban as a national and somewhat transnational movement did have relations close to similar religious extremist anti-Western and ‘anti-infidel’ groups like Al-Qaida, and Pakistani religious fundamentalist organizations. As a result, religion played a catalyst role in forming the Taliban’s holistic view, ideology, identity, and connectivity of its members. Yet, the religious identity of the Taliban reserves a strong position to cover political identity as it shapes for them every other aspect of society and politics.

## Chapter IV

### TALK OF PEACE AND PEACE TALKS IN THE POST-TALIBAN ERA

“The best thing we could have done for Afghanistan was to get out of our Humvees and drink more green chai. We should have focused less on finding the enemy and more on finding our friends.”

—Craig M. Mullaney<sup>107</sup>

The post-9/11 era was a crucial turning point for Afghanistan. It was significant because it has had different outcomes for the involved parties. The parties have been the U.S Government, the Taliban insurgency, and the Government of Afghanistan (the NUG). This period began from December 2001 onwards with toppling of the Taliban regime under the American project of the “Global War on Terror” and it continues until today. The period serves as the focus of this research and thus reserves high attention here. The political nature, events, and trends of this period have differed significantly from previous eras of conflict. Following the U.S.-led invasion, both ideology and the political regime were transitioned.

As for the political transition, one can hardly identify the change for good or bad because the main challenges do not vary fundamentally. Insecurity, ethnic tensions, stagnant economy, corruption, and unimproved foreign ties remain critical. Still, regime transition did happen, and Afghanistan’s political system transitioned towards a fragile democracy. Since then, it has seen an initial interim government and afterwards had two presidents, Hamid Karzai, and Ashraf Ghani. Afghanistan has been experiencing or, in other words, suffering in the fundamental steps of democracy, going through a number of controversial elections, relatively vibrant and free media, and access to education and, most importantly, far more respect for human

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<sup>107</sup> Craig M. Mullaney, *The Unforgiving Minute: A Soldier’s Education*. New York: Penguin Group, 2009, 362.

rights. And despite many defects, Afghanistan's new democratic system has tried to regulate itself through various state institutions. However, the government still lacks the legitimacy that it claims as to its authority, given its inabilities, dependencies, insecurity, corruption, and lack of real territorial control over the whole of Afghanistan and against the insurgency. The Taliban, in turn, claim control, if not fully over the country, but hold heavy influence over 70 percent of Afghanistan, which, if true, leaves a mere 30 percent for the government to fully lead.<sup>108</sup> That, too, in an atmosphere of insecurity, economic malaise, and political tensions.

Since 9/11, which ironically brought about a new somewhat democratic era for Afghanistan, given the insurgency, peace has had a vague and lost meaning for the country. It has existed on agendas and speeches, without substantial visible and effective implementation. Omar Sadr is a researcher on the peace process in Afghanistan. He describes the post-Taliban peace efforts as a "phase of uncertainty, a two-pronged approach: high-level political negotiations and low-level reintegration efforts; [and] hasty efforts for a political agreement with the Taliban."<sup>109</sup> Sadr's description represents different periods of the post-Taliban era that can be effectively used here for the sustenance of my arguments.

Sadr rationalizes the first phase of the new era as being a joint effort between President Karzai, the international community and national Shura of Afghanistan, a phase which began following the post-9/11 2001 Bonn Conference.<sup>110</sup> Different sides had their own objectives to be fulfilled by the agreement: state-building and reconstruction funded by the international community, legitimacy for the incumbent

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<sup>108</sup> Shoaib Sharifi and Louise Adamou, "Taliban Threaten 70 percent of Afghanistan, BBC Finds," *BBC*, 31 January 2018, accessed 8 November 2019, [cutt.ly/2eY1yww](http://cutt.ly/2eY1yww).

<sup>109</sup> Omar Sadr, "The Fallacy of Peace Processes in Afghanistan: The People's Perspectives," *Peace Studies IV*, Afghan Institute for Strategic Studies, 2018, 12, accessed 8 November 2019, [cutt.ly/KeY1KiW](http://cutt.ly/KeY1KiW).

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*



president, and the end of war for the national Shura. All of these led to the 2001 “Shah Walikot Agreement,” where the Taliban fighters were to surrender and leave Kandahar and neighboring regions, in exchange for amnesty.<sup>111</sup> In fact, by 2007, the “Wolesi Jirga” (Parliament of Afghanistan) passed a bill of Amnesty for all insurgents and groups involved in alleged war crimes, but also “recognized ... victim’s right to seek justice.”<sup>112</sup>

President Karzai (in office during 2001-2014) had a compassionate and rather soft policy approach toward the Taliban describing them as victims, claims Sadr. Under Karzai, Afghanistan’s National Security Council (NSC) was established in 2003 to reintegrate the Taliban and engage them in the political system and commissions of arriving at peace.<sup>113</sup> The program had welcomed the return from hiding of many former Taliban combatants. Finally, there were also counterinsurgency programs supported by the international community in early 2000s. As Matt Waldman states, however, reintegration programs can never be successful unless there is a legitimate and functioning government and insurgents’ sanctuaries are dissolved.<sup>114</sup>

### **Early 2000s reconciliation operations**

After defeating the Taliban, two things were important to restore stability: reconciliation and reconstruction. To reintegrate the Taliban, there were some joint programs initiated to bring back the fighters to normal life, while a series of other projects were initiated to reconstruct government institutions. Rathnam Indurthy states that in late-2002, the U.S. and the rest of the alliance initiated the first project of

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<sup>111</sup> Ibid.

<sup>112</sup> Zeeshan Haider, “Afghan Parliament Passes Revised Amnesty Bill,” *Reuters*, 10 March 2007, accessed 7 November 2019, [reut.rs/2lDw91k](https://www.reuters.com/article/afghanistan-id1Dw91k).

<sup>113</sup> Sadr, “The Fallacy of Peace Processes ...,” *op. cit.*

<sup>114</sup> Matt Waldman, “Tough Talking: The Case with Negotiations with the Taliban,” *The RUSI Journal*, no. 6, (2010): 60-66.

Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs), small joint regular citizen and military associations supplanting the Coalition Humanitarian Liaison Cells (CHLCs), intended to advance good governance, security, and reconstruction, initially in four provinces. Along these lines, the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) extended the PRTs to the rest of the country. Afterwards, the allies shared and divided certain responsibilities on Afghanistan's state-building in a G-8 meeting among themselves. This way, the U.S. took responsibility to rebuild the Afghan National Army; Germany to strengthen the Afghan National Police; Japan to focus on Demobilization, Disarmament, and Reintegration (DDR) of local militia forces; Britain to oversee the counter-narcotics programme; and Italy was responsible for "institutionalizing the justice system."<sup>115</sup>

At first, sharing the burden of responsibilities seemed promising. However, like many critiques of international commitments, Indurthy argues that America's George W. Bush administration failed to fulfill its rosy promises.<sup>116</sup> The U.S. and allies along the post-Taliban established Afghan Government had to fight the mostly Taliban militias as well as reconcile them. Deedee Derksen states that different groups were armed to fight the Taliban during the initial U.S.-led invasion and war, poetically labeled "Operation Enduring Freedom," and after the initial objectives of the mission was accomplished (i.e. the Taliban toppled), the local militias had to be disarmed, including mid-level Taliban members and former Mujahidin. Although DDR existed since the beginning of international community's intervention in Afghanistan, other programs were also initiated to bring about normalcy in former fighters' lives. Examples are the "Program-e Tahkim-e-Sulh" (Strengthening of Peace Program, PTS) and the Afghanistan Peace and Reintegration Program (APRP). Each

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<sup>115</sup> Indurthy Rathnam, "The Obama Administration's Strategy in Afghanistan," *International Journal on World Peace* 28, no. 3 (2011): 9.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid.

of these projects lasted for years with multi-billion dollar/euro budgets.

PTS, as Derksen articulates, was functioning from 2005 until 2010 with the main objective of reintegrating mid-level Taliban commanders.<sup>117</sup> She argues that while this program was part of the “military campaign” of ISAF to decrease the insurgency, it was not much effective. The APRP, in turn, later called the National Priority Program (NPP), was established after the Consultative Jirga in 2010 and ended in 2016 with several outcomes reported in the programs report,<sup>118</sup> with the following objective:

Pursue peace through political means and reconcile and reintegrate ex-combatants, develop the capacity of critical institutions to implement peace-building activities, ensure security and freedom of movement for reintegrees and communities, and consolidate peace by promoting community recovery initiatives, social services, justice, and employment. The three main components of the project were: Community Reintegration, Demobilization and weapons management, and Community Development.<sup>119</sup>

Meanwhile, in 2010, the High Peace Council was established following the National Consultative Jirga under President Karzai.<sup>120</sup> The HPC was a national institution on a broad level to deal with big issues like negotiation with the Taliban, while APRP was a program specifically for local and lower-level fighters with the main responsibility to lay the foundation for Afghan Peace and Reintegration Process.<sup>121</sup> In July 2019, however, the HPC was replaced with the Ministry for Peace by President Ghani.<sup>122</sup> Such programs had their impact and outcome only to a limited extent. For instance, in the case of APRP, initially, most of its preset purposes were

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<sup>117</sup> Deedee Derksen. “Reintegrating Armed Groups in Afghanistan,” *Peacebrief* 168, 7 March 2014, accessed 8 November 2019, [tiny.cc/lf8xfz](http://tiny.cc/lf8xfz).

<sup>118</sup> UNDP, “Afghanistan Peace and Reintegration Program (UNDP Support), Project Completion Report,” April 2017, 8, accessed 8 November 2019, [tiny.cc/ho8xfz](http://tiny.cc/ho8xfz).

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*, 5

<sup>120</sup> Care, “Pathways to Peace: New Directions for An Inclusive Peace in Afghanistan,” 30 April 2012, 2, accessed 8 November 2019, [bit.ly/3482suO](http://bit.ly/3482suO).

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>122</sup> Afghan Bios. “Who is Who in Afghanistan?—High Peace Council,” accessed 8 November 2019, [bit.ly/344SRod](http://bit.ly/344SRod).

thought to have been fulfilled, and Peace as a concept and priority became more vibrant through institutions and programs.<sup>123</sup>

As stated, APRP had a similar fortune to PTS and the outcome of this program was against the high initial expectations and the impacts can hardly be considered as lasting. For example, HPC could not effectively act as a political institution to deal with the Taliban. Sadr argues that it lacked “strategic leadership”<sup>124</sup> And that it could not even be expected to last until the U.S.-Taliban Talk peace result. Finally, the biggest step for peace has been the U.S.-Taliban Peace Talks. Afghan-American Khalilzad was appointed as envoy for peace in September 2018 by U.S. President Donald Trump to end the 18-year-old war in Afghanistan. He traveled back and forth between the U.S., Qatar, and Afghanistan. The Taliban and the U.S. had nine rounds of negotiations, most held in Doha, the capital of Qatar, a country which has been hosting the Taliban representative office since 2014.<sup>125</sup>

The first round of Peace Talks began on 12 October 2018 and lasted for over a month. At the end of the first round, Khalilzad visited Afghanistan, Pakistan, Qatar, UAE, and Saudi Arabia to gain support for the talks. The purpose of the first round of the Peace Talks appear to have been for the U.S to bring the Taliban to the negotiation table with the Afghan NUG—a failed effort. The second round of negotiations also happened in Qatar commencing on 16 November, while the third round of Peace Talks started in the UAE on 17 December of same year.<sup>126</sup> The fourth round of Peace Talks began on 19 January 2019, at which stage, the talks became more mysterious as

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<sup>123</sup> UNDP, “Afghanistan Peace and Reintegration Program ...,” *op. cit.*, 5.

<sup>124</sup> Sadr, *The Fallacy of Peace in Afghanistan*, 86.

<sup>125</sup> Afghan Bios. “Who is Who in Afghanistan?—Office of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan,” accessed 8 November 2019, [bit.ly/2kRkNdB](http://bit.ly/2kRkNdB).

<sup>126</sup> *Hasht-e-Sobh*, “Safar-e dah mah’e Khalilzad; Ravand-e Solh-e Afghanistan be koja reseed? [Khalilzad’s 10-month Journey; Where Has the Peace Process of Afghanistan Reached?],” 21 August 2019, accessed 22 August 2019, [bit.ly/2Ns2MOT](http://bit.ly/2Ns2MOT).

they took place behind closed doors.<sup>127</sup> The Peace Talks became more intriguing as Khalilzad met Mullah Ghani Baradar, the political deputy of the Taliban.

The fifth round of the Peace Talks lasted for 16 days in Doha, with the U.S side calling them “productive.”<sup>128</sup> Similarly, the sixth, seventh and eighth rounds of talks took place in Doha during April, June, and August 2019. To this point, both sides roughly agreed on the withdrawal of American forces from Afghanistan and the Taliban’s credible assurance to fight other insurgent and terrorist groups in the country.<sup>129</sup> The ninth round of talks had an unexpected twist waiting for the parties as it was suspended by President Trump right before the sides could meet at the preset secret meeting at Camp David in Maryland, USA.<sup>130</sup> The cancellation of the talks had to do with the recurring Taliban-orchestrated terrorist attacks in Afghanistan, with hundreds of Afghan victims, but with one incidence where an American soldier had also fallen victim and died.

The nine rounds of U.S.-Taliban Peace Talks during November 2018 to September 2019 was a U.S.-led initiative with Afghanistan’s NUG having no direct role in it, largely due to the Taliban’s intransigence on the issue. The ten months of Peace Talks mostly behind closed doors had raised enormous questions as well as discussions and expectations which will be discussed in the next chapter of this thesis.

### **Grass root initiatives for peace in 2019**

The year 2019 has been a very important year of talk of peace and Peace Talks in Afghanistan where they received nationwide and global attention. The U.S.-Taliban Peace Talks has been among the most debated and talked about topics in the history

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<sup>127</sup> Idem.

<sup>128</sup> Idem.

<sup>129</sup> Idem.

<sup>130</sup> *Al Jazeera*, “Trump Says U.S.-Taliban Peace Talks Are 'Dead,’” 9 September 2019, accessed 29 October 2019, [bit.ly/2JKd0aX](https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/09/09-trump-says-us-taliban-peace-talks-are-dead/).

of war and peace in post-2001 Afghanistan. Youths, politicians, opposition activists, NGOs, human rights activists and others have voiced their opinions either for or against the talks as supporters or critics. These voices in different ways have echoed mostly throughout the capital Kabul and some larger urban centers of Afghanistan. With continuing war and brutal suicide attacks, both of which have left massive numbers of civilian casualties<sup>131</sup> and ruined more of the country's infrastructure,<sup>132</sup> the public is simply waiting to see the end to their misery and fears. The outcome of the now suspended Peace Talks remains unclear, and no one knows how long it may take for an agreement to be reached, if at all. What is clear, however, is the desire of the population to see an end to war and terrorism. There have been a number of initiatives at the local level regarding peace. A few examples are as follows.

#### Peace March by People's Peace Movement

The Peace Movement is a public stance for peace and against the Taliban's violence and war, in general. The movement emerged as a result of one of many deadly suicide attacks in Helmand's Lashkargah district which led to people's antagonism and the creation of the movement through protests. The Peace March from Helmand to Kabul, also began from protest tents in Lashkargah where the suicide attack had happened, with sentiments soon spreading to other cities. The people's Peace Movement is inclusive in its membership and besides being a mass initiative, its members are local victims, advocates, and civil society activists.<sup>133</sup> One of most followed initiatives of the movement was a group march to the Taliban controlled zones like Musa Qala.<sup>134</sup>

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<sup>131</sup> Adam Taylor, "An Afghan Wedding Attack Adds a Tragic Twist to Peace Talks," *The Washington Post*, 19 August 2019, accessed 8 November 2019, [wapo.st/2IYSIXu](http://wapo.st/2IYSIXu).

<sup>132</sup> Khaama Press, "Taliban Says It Will Target the Sites, Employees, and SIM Card Holders of Salaam Telecom," 26 August 2019, accessed 8 November 2019, [bit.ly/2k3fXcW](http://bit.ly/2k3fXcW).

<sup>133</sup> Ali Mohammad Sabawoon, "Going Nationwide: The Helmand Peace March Initiative," Afghan Analyst Network, 23 April 2018, accessed 8 November 2019, [bit.ly/2zp3qVn](http://bit.ly/2zp3qVn).

<sup>134</sup> *Al Jazeera*, "Taliban Detain Afghan Peace Marchers During 100km Journey," 4 June 2019, accessed 8 November 2019, [bit.ly/2zsxpLS](http://bit.ly/2zsxpLS).

There are different perceptions about the peace caravan. While some international news agencies disseminate positive reports of marchers being treated well and showing willingness for peace at the lower level,<sup>135</sup> there is also news of marchers being detained by armed groups. The latter report by *Aljazeera* argues that the Taliban were against peace marchers, arguing that they are pawns of the NUG.<sup>136</sup> Nevertheless, the overall perception is that marchers have believed that they can exchange ideas with the Taliban and that they have been generally treated well by local Taliban commanders.

### Women and peace

Afghan women with the support of national organizations and IO activities have been trying to prove their existence and break the men-only Peace Talks. They have been holding meetings, conferences, summits, and press conferences to react and be heard. One of the most recent events was the “National Women’s Consensus for Peace,” held on 28 February 2019. This was by far the largest national gathering of its kind with 3,000 female participants discussing “women’s meaningful participation” in the Peace Talks. The main outcome of this gathering can be summed up in the prioritizing of human rights and women’s rights before a potential Peace Agreement is ever to be signed between the U.S. and the Taliban.<sup>137</sup> Women were also active participants of the “Grand Consultative Jirga” to discuss peace conditions where women comprised 30 percent of the participants.<sup>138</sup>

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<sup>135</sup> Fahim Abed, “Afghan Peace Marchers Meet the Taliban and Find ‘People Just Like Us,’” *The New York Times*, 10 June 2019, accessed 8 November 2019, [nyti.ms/2ZFKd0p](https://www.nytimes.com/2019/06/10/afghanistan/peace-marchers-taliban.html).

<sup>136</sup> *Al Jazeera*, “Taliban Detain Afghan Peace Marchers ...,” *op. cit.*

<sup>137</sup> Thomas Ruttig, “Women and Afghan Peace Talks: ‘Peace Consensus’ Gathering Left Afghan Women Without Reassurance,” Afghanistan Analysts Network, 15 April 2019, accessed 7 November 2019, [bit.ly/36cLxYR](https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/news/2019/04/15/women-and-afghan-peace-talks/).

<sup>138</sup> Fatima Faizi and David Zucchini, “‘You Should Be in the Kitchen’: At Afghan Assembly, Women Are Told They Don’t Belong,” *The New York Times*, 3 May 2019, accessed 12 May 2019, [nyti.ms/2MoK1wh](https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/03/afghanistan/women-assembly.html).

President Ghani and First Lady Rula Ghani have both emphasized women's active participation in their speeches. For instance, both attended the above-mentioned National Women's Consensus for Peace where female activists and other women in high positions from regions were present. The president has also called for special attention to women in the most recent peace plan presented in a conference in Geneva.<sup>139</sup> However, according to some in the local press, such as *Didpress Agency*, Ghani's involvement in such events were used by him as a way of campaigning for the September 2019 Presidential Election.<sup>140</sup>

Despite women's participation in the discussion and even leading some government committees, critics have complained of female participants' experiences as being "ignored, marginalized or patronized."<sup>141</sup> Women in official places often endure misogyny and sexual harassment, which reflects Afghanistan's patriarchic societal culture. Therefore, women's position in the Peace Talks has been a victim of similar treatment. The male-dominated biases have hindered women's rights and mobilization.

Women's recent active movements for peace, including on social media, such as #myredlineforpeace<sup>142</sup> and #code4peace<sup>143</sup> to some extent demonstrates their activism and awareness of their rights. Since the beginning of talks between the U.S and Taliban, discussions on the need for women's "meaningful participation"<sup>144</sup> had become common. Women's rights activists and NGOs were reminding the parties of the importance of their cause. The #myredlineforpeace social media campaign was

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<sup>139</sup> Ruttig, "Women and Afghan Peace Talks ...," *op. cit.*

<sup>140</sup> Akhtar Suhail, "Ashraf Ghani and Campaign; Official Trips Must Not Be Used for Electoral Purposes," *Didpress Agency*, 13 November 2018, accessed 12 May 2019, [bit.ly/2T9MoTx](https://bit.ly/2T9MoTx).

<sup>141</sup> Faiziand Zucchini, "You Should Be in the Kitchen' ...," *op. cit.*

<sup>142</sup> Farangis Najibullah, "Afghan Women Drawing #MyRedLineFor Peace with The Taliban," *RFE*, 31 May 2019, accessed 8 November 2019, [bit.ly/34fqW4t](https://bit.ly/34fqW4t).

<sup>143</sup> UN Women, "#Code4peace Hackathon Revolutionizes the Way Afghan Women Voice Their Priorities for Peace," accessed 8 November 2019, [tiny.cc/nzdxzfz](https://tiny.cc/nzdxzfz).

<sup>144</sup> Ruttig, "Women and Afghan Peace Talks ...," *op. cit.*



initiated by Farahnaz Forotan and was supported by UN Women in Afghanistan. The movement aimed at showing peace from the perception of women with different backgrounds. Through this movement, women set a limit to the talk of peace. As for the #code4peace, it was another initiative of the UN Woman in Afghanistan. This was a “hackathon” organized for female coders and programmers from around the country “aiming to create a national platform for rural and urban women to voice their priorities for peace.”<sup>145</sup>

Despite their efforts, the demand for meaningful participation of women still seems a mere dream. According to the New York-based Council on Foreign Relations, Afghan women make only five percent of active constituents in the peace efforts, while they are neither negotiators, mediators nor potential signatories.<sup>146</sup> This is not surprising because even those five percent are likely mere symbolic representation of women. Comments such as “you should be in the kitchen” can almost summarize the cultural opposition faced by women. Women are only seen by many in Afghanistan for the duties and fulfilling role as homemaker in society, a society which is mostly structured around men as the breadwinners and decision makers. Therefore, for most active and educated women and for feminists (whether women or men), it is extremely challenging to ignore these issues.

Still, there have also been significant steps convened by women in the last 18 years. They have reached ministerial positions, high political advisers, diplomats, civil society activists, and leading NGO leaders. They have made substantial gains despite all the disparities at the societal level due to the ingrained patriarchy.

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<sup>145</sup> UN Women, “#Code4peace Hackathon ...,” *op. cit.*

<sup>146</sup> Council on Foreign Relations, “Tracing the Role of Women in Global Peacemaking,” accessed May 12, 2019. [on.cfr.org/2C5F9Fe](https://www.cfr.org/2C5F9Fe).

## **Conclusion**

From the beginning of the U.S.-led invasion and war in 2001, there have not been genuine achievements in arriving at peace in Afghanistan. A few attempts that have been made have not been able to bear fruit. The exception could be in the last Peace Talks initiated by the U.S., for the results of which the jury is still out or suspended. Constant insecurity and weak governance appears to have led to a large wave of illegal migration to Europe and high dissatisfaction among citizens towards the status quo. Still, the attention that the key domestic and international parties and ordinary citizens have given to peace is worth mentioning. Talk of peace, Peace Talks and concerns of the stakeholders illustrate the importance and urgency for peace in Afghanistan. It may also mean the instrumentalization of the process for political purposes. However, among the most vital roles talk of peace and Peace Talks have played is expanding the forum, small as it may be, for ordinary citizens, peace activists, and women's voices on the necessity for peace in Afghanistan.

## Chapter V

### ANALYSIS AND HYPOTHESIS TESTING

“[War] may well be ceasing to commend itself to human beings as a desirable or productive, let alone rational, means of reconciling their discontents.”

—John Keegan, author of *History of Warfare*<sup>147</sup>

The purpose of this chapter is to analyze the U.S.-Taliban talks through different lenses and attitudes and scrutinize the potential journey towards peace in Afghanistan. The process of the suspended Peace Talks took ten months of efforts mostly behind closed door meetings to discuss an agreement.<sup>148</sup> Though the efforts could not succeed towards any tangible accomplishment, it did revive hopes for ending the 18-year war. Khalilzad, the U.S. envoy, was not the only actor wanting to bring a long-thought impossible achievement of peace to Afghanistan. President Ghani was also striving hard to demonstrate the strong position of the legitimate NUG on peace. Furthermore, the international community and regional players were also involved in and encouraged by the peace process.

This chapter tries to make sense of the hypotheses and questions raised in Chapter I. As stated earlier, both politicians and ordinary Afghan citizens were the main reactionaries to the process. Despite thoroughgoing uncertainty observed among citizens on the ground, as well as on the national media, there are issues about the peace process that deserve a deeper look. These are the *how* and *why* questions raised earlier. I will do so through exploring the expert interviews and respective secondary sources. Therefore, this chapter analyzes the hypotheses and provides answers to the research questions raised in Chapter I, that is: *How can the political history of*

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<sup>147</sup> Quoted in .Gregg Easterbrook, “The End of War?,” *The New Republic*, 29 May 2005, accessed 14 November 2019, [cutt.ly/LeDrV5b](http://cutt.ly/LeDrV5b).

<sup>148</sup> Interview with Dr. Sima Samar, former Chairwoman of the Independent Afghanistan Human Rights Commission (IAHRC), Kabul, Afghanistan, 10 November 2019, via email.

*Afghanistan be divided (periodized) vis-à-vis Peace Talks since the fall of the Taliban regime in December 2001 up until December 2019? How did the Taliban, which had been identified as an insurgent group by the U.S. and 'terrorist organization' by the UN Security Council, evolve into an opposition group and adversary worthy of negotiations in the eyes of the U.S.? Finally, this chapter will test whether there has been a change in the attitude and perceptions towards the Taliban as a factor leading to the Peace Talks.*

Afghanistan's political history's periodization is a challenging task. That is because of the evolving nature and chain of events. Still, there are several possible ways to do so. One is to try to organize eras in different circumstances following the consequent historical events that took place in the country. One could also categorize these events following the actors' moves and decisions. This type of categorization would be less relevant to this research because of the difference between leadership periods. For example, out of all the three eras of presidency, President Karzai led most of it while Ghani has just finished his first round of administration and is striving for his second round.

This thesis chooses a different path to categorize the history of Afghanistan with regards to war and peace through the division of the post-9/11 political history of Afghanistan into two decades: pre-2010 and post-2010. The first decade is accumulatively comprised of top-down approach to peace while the second decade also involved the bottom up approach to peace. If one pays attention to the pre-2010 events or the first decade of post 9/11, most of the reconciliation efforts either by the Afghan Government or the U.S. and its allies were done at the level of high authorities and often in secret. As Sima Samar, former chair of the Independent Afghanistan Human Rights Commission and one of the interlocutors for this study,

stated, talks between the Taliban and the U.S. existed before as well, but they were clandestine. Today's talks are open.<sup>149</sup> The significance of this periodization is in two factors: one is that the U.S exit strategy is the center of the peace line, first announced in 2009,<sup>150</sup> and the second point is the public involvement in the discussion of peace.

The next point to mention before commencing on the hypothesis testing is the notion of *peace*. Peace was differently approached by the interviewees of this research, albeit views also tended to converge. The respondents were asked to define peace personally and in general, thus from two different lenses or levels of analysis. Peace is mostly understood as the absence of war or as the Galtungian “negative peace.” In other terms, as defined by another interlocutor, Afghan security and political expert Waliullah Rahmani, peace is “just not to have war,”<sup>151</sup> or the absence of factions’ rivalry, a “settlement between oppositions and just being able to continue a normal life,” as told by another interlocutor.<sup>152</sup> Alternatively, per a former Afghan Member of Parliament (MP), Farkhunda Zahra Naderi, a different perspective on peace is that there is no individual or personal definition for it.<sup>153</sup> Still, the overall definitions were mostly similar which implies that peace despite its abstractness, has a common meaning for these selected Afghan experts and professionals.

The most common responses with regards to peace were the ability to lead a normal life and see an end to the ravaging war in Afghanistan. Another angle to the definition of peace was connected to the background of the experts interviewed, not all of whom were academics. In a sense, an academic's view of peace differed from a

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<sup>149</sup> Interview with Samar, *op. cit.*

<sup>150</sup> Sheryl Gay Stolberg and Helene Cooper, “Obama Adds Troops, but Maps Exit Plan,” *The New York Times*, 1 December 2009, accessed 10 November 2019, [nyti.ms/2rx16B1](https://www.nytimes.com/2009/12/01/afghanistan/01dec09-obama-troops.html).

<sup>151</sup> Interview with Rahmani, *op. cit.*

<sup>152</sup> Interview with anonymous international organization employee who had worked under the Mujahidin and Taliban regimes, 18 September 2019, Kabul.

<sup>153</sup> Interview with Farkhunda Zahra Naderi, former Member of Parliament of Afghanistan, 2 November 2019, Kabul.

politician or civil society worker. Rahmani, for example, saw peace as: “Doing away with war, arriving at a comfortable life in accordance with international norms with constitutional rights for citizens.” On the other hand, from a politician’s perspective, peace was defined as “the ultimate intension [of state and society]” and a concept beyond the individual and the nation, although, it is important that as individuals we know our rights and limitations but that such rights “should not violate the overall [societal] peace.”<sup>154</sup> In the latter case, peace is not only about ending war but there is a clear note pointing towards the reconciliation that concerns the domestic politics and it is needed not only with regards to the Taliban but within the existing political regime, as well, claimed MP Naderi.<sup>155</sup>

### **Analysis of Hypothesis 1**

The first hypothesis of this thesis was:

**H<sub>1</sub> (Evolving image of enemy):** There has been a transformation in the rhetoric of peace as regarding the U.S. and the Afghan Unity Government’s perceptions and attitudes towards the identity of the Taliban from a widely known brutal and violent (if not officially a ‘terrorist’) organization to a considerable mark as a political opposition, which in turn has positively affected the discourse and prospects for peace in Afghanistan.

As a group that is not considered as a terrorist organization by the U.S., despite what many would argue they meeting all the characteristics of a terrorist group,<sup>156</sup> the Taliban has managed to survive over two decades. Whether or not they should be in the foreign terrorist organization (FTO) list of the U.S. is an important discourse among scholars and military specialists. According to Masood Farivar, the titling of the Taliban and giving it the status of “terrorist” would impact on its relations with the U.S. and a potential Peace Accord and their future reconciliation

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<sup>154</sup> Ibid.

<sup>155</sup> Interview with Naderi, *op. cit.*

<sup>156</sup> Masood Farivar, “Why Isn’t Afghan Taliban on US List of Foreign Terror Groups?” *Voice of America*, February 20, 2017. [bit.ly/32rJBIS](http://bit.ly/32rJBIS).

with the Afghan government.<sup>157</sup>

Even if that would be a possible factor for peace, a potential peace accord with Taliban will likely not be easy because there is not a fully coherent entity of the Taliban to address, with rouge elements opposing such an accord be able to continue with acts of terror and violence in the country. Mona Sheikh and Maja Greenwood point to complications in the Taliban leadership, ground commanders and soldiers. According to them, a political settlement with the leadership would not mean the same at the lower levels.<sup>158</sup> The lower level commanders may be more extreme in their ideology and there may be a threat towards a split within the structure or their defection to the Islamic State of Khurasan Province (an affiliate of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, ISIS).<sup>159</sup> Antonio Giustozzi also points at a divided leadership of Taliban, arguing that it has lost its original coherence as an insurgency and is now loosely divided into faction and splinter groups.<sup>160</sup> At the same time, a former HPC member holds a contrasting view that it is hard to divide the Taliban due to their strong religious ties. For the Taliban, it is considered a “sin to disobey the leadership” and thus negotiations with the Taliban leaders can yield results, as they represent the entirety of the organization.<sup>161</sup>

With regards to the longest war in Afghanistan and U.S. history, the U.S. has taken different measures, policies and strategies to achieve its perceived interests. Three American administrations since 2001 each have had their own approaches towards war in Afghanistan. Similarly, there have been differing attitudes, praise and

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<sup>157</sup> Ibid.

<sup>158</sup> Mona K. Sheik and Maja T.J. Greenwood, “Taliban Talks: Past Present and Prospects for the U.S., Afghanistan and Pakistan.” *DIIS Report*, No. 2013: 06, 42 pp. 2013, accessed 14 November 2019, [cutt.ly/geS4oDa](http://cutt.ly/geS4oDa).

<sup>159</sup> J.P. Lawrence, “Experts: A Unified Taliban Could Bolster Peace Talks in Afghanistan,” *Stars and Stripes*, 22 June 2019, accessed 14 November 2019, [bit.ly/34EVyMI](http://bit.ly/34EVyMI).

<sup>160</sup> Antonio Giustozzi, “The Taliban and the 2014 Presidential Elections in Afghanistan,” *Conflict, Security and Development* 16, no. 6 (2013): 557-573.

<sup>161</sup> Gabriel Power, “Taliban Peace Talks Could Split Terror Group,” *The Week UK*, 27 August 2019, accessed 14 November 2014, [bit.ly/2NtC7kg](http://bit.ly/2NtC7kg).

criticisms, towards each president and their policies. There are commonalities, but also differences, among the three U.S. Presidents G.W. Bush, Barack Obama and Donald Trump vis-à-vis their approach to the war and peace in Afghanistan. For instance, the continuous justification of the U.S. presence (due to 9/11 attack) is commonly given by all three, while their attitudes differ in various other ways. One common denominator between Obama and Bush's speeches on Afghanistan are the justification of military intervention. Both attempt to remind the audience of the reasons the U.S. has embarked on its military presence and war: "Only after the Taliban refused to turn over Osama Bin Laden—we sent out troops into Afghanistan,"<sup>162</sup> was a typical Obama statement on Afghanistan. Before him, Bush had demanded from the Taliban regime to hand over "leaders of Al Qaida" and prevent Afghanistan from becoming a "terrorist base."<sup>163</sup>

Given the enormity of 9/11 and the Taliban leadership's refusal to hand over Bin Laden and other alleged culprits, the Bush administration had a punitive and vengeful attitude towards Taliban. The overall American attitude towards the Taliban (and to a lesser extent, Afghanistan, as a whole) in the early 2000s was thus nothing but animosity and grave hatred. The Bush administration, however, was proud of what some have called a "premature" victory. The toppling of the Taliban regime, as opposed to what was likely presumed by the White House and U.S. military, did not translate into a defeat of the Taliban movement. In fact, despite substantial human losses, it did not take long for the Taliban to re-establish themselves as a formidable fighting force. As Samar pointed out, it was not the Taliban who were the real enemy of the U.S., but Al-Qaeda. Obama understood this, claims Samar, given that he

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<sup>162</sup> CNN, "Transcript of Obama Speech on Afghanistan," 2 December 2009, accessed 27 October 2019, [cnn.it/2MGToEa](http://cnn.it/2MGToEa).

<sup>163</sup> *The Washington Post*, "Text: Bush Announces Strikes Against Taliban," 7 October 2001, accessed 21 October 2019, [wapo.st/2p2OVEO](http://wapo.st/2p2OVEO).



supposedly had “told president Karzai that for us the terrorist group is Al-Qaida, not Taliban.”<sup>164</sup>

The language used by U.S. presidents as reference towards Afghanistan as a government and people have on whole been understandably sympathetic. However, the tone towards the Taliban have consistently been harsh. Bush, in his post-9/11 key address to the American people in 2001, alluded that the Taliban are supporters of terrorism (despite the fact that the U.S. had never included them in its FTO list). In response to the U.S.’s unfulfilled demands made to the Taliban on return of 9/11 culprits, Bush stated in the same speech that “now, the Taliban will pay a price. By destroying camps and disrupting communications, we will make it more difficult for the terror network to train new recruits and coordinate their evil plans.”<sup>165</sup> Moreover, on January 29<sup>th</sup>, 2002, after four months of military intervention, Bush delivered another speech to the U.S. Congress, which was also televised on U.S. national TV stations, during which he gleefully announced America’s military successes in Afghanistan: “The American flag flies again over our embassy in Kabul. Terrorists who once occupied Afghanistan now occupy cells at Guantanamo Bay.” Bush further told of two big objectives, against nuclear weapons and terrorism, which the U.S is at war with, while using such terms as “disrupt, destroy, shut down and prevent” to accomplish the mentioned goals.<sup>166</sup> Looking at Bush’s speeches, one thing is clear, that the Taliban were no different than other terrorist groups, given their support and harboring of terror suspects. As Anthony Teitler argues, the overall U.S. policy narrative has been shaped by the post-9/11 defeating of terrorism.<sup>167</sup>

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<sup>164</sup> Interview with Samar, *op. cit.*

<sup>165</sup> *The Washington Post*, “Text of President Bush’s 2002 State of the Union Address,” 29 January 2002, accessed 18 September 2019, [wapo.st/2HksKQP](http://wapo.st/2HksKQP).

<sup>166</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>167</sup> Anthony Teitler, “Obama and Afghanistan: A Constructivist Approach to Shifting Policy Narrative and Practices,” *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, (2018): 1-21.

Obama, in turn, in his first presidential term had described the Taliban as a ruthless, repressive and radical movement that seized control of [Afghanistan] after it was ravaged by years of Soviet occupation and civil war, and after the attention of America and our friends had turned elsewhere.<sup>168</sup>

By the end of his second term, however, Obama was making overtures to the Taliban, reaching out for a political settlement:

By now it should be clear to the Taliban and all who oppose Afghanistan's progress that the only real way to achieve the full drawdown of U.S. and foreign troops from Afghanistan is through a lasting political settlement with the Afghan government. Likewise, sanctuaries for the Taliban and other terrorists must end.<sup>169</sup>

And it was during the Obama administration that the U.S. began downgrading its military support and political presence in Afghanistan.

Of the three U.S. presidents under consideration here, Trump's policies towards Afghanistan are among the most difficult to decipher. This is in line with Trump's personality, which has been described as "unpredictable".<sup>170</sup> When it comes to Trump, there is a visible change in the perception about mission and operation in Afghanistan but not about the Taliban. On Afghanistan and the Taliban, Trump had stated in August 2017:

I share the American people's frustration. I also share their frustration over a foreign policy that has spent too much time, energy, money, and most importantly lives, trying to rebuild countries in our own image, instead of pursuing our security interests above all other considerations.<sup>171</sup>

The above quote illustrates an impression or signals an end coming to something exhausting that has exceeded its time. Trump appears to pay attention to the role of strategy and policy and pay attention to "strategic options" to resolve the issue of U.S.

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<sup>168</sup> CNN. "Transcript of Obama Speech on Afghanistan," 2 December 2009, accessed 21 October 2019, [cnn.it/2MGToEa](http://cnn.it/2MGToEa).

<sup>169</sup> U.S. Government, "Pres. Barack Obama, Statement by the President on Afghanistan," The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, 15 October 2015, accessed 24 September 2019, [bit.ly/2qGwhmX](http://bit.ly/2qGwhmX).

<sup>170</sup> U.S. Government, "Remarks by President Trump on the Strategy in Afghanistan and South Asia," Fort Myer, Arlington, Virginia, 21 August 2017, accessed 13 September 2019, [bit.ly/33I1c0I](http://bit.ly/33I1c0I).

<sup>171</sup> Ibid.

engagement in Afghanistan. But even for Trump the Taliban as an insurgent group “remain a threat,” given their “evil ideology.”<sup>172</sup>

There is an implicit and explicit distinction of “us versus them,” and the notions of winner and loser and good versus evil in the speeches of the U.S. presidents in the post-9/11 era. For example, among the selected speeches of all three, Bush and Trump constantly ensure their victory in the war with terrorism in Afghanistan and the Middle East. “We will win this war,” claimed Bush in his 2002 State of the Union Address.<sup>173</sup> But except for some specific messages, Bush’s references to the Taliban leadership and organization does not point a finger at them as a terrorist organization. As alluded to, this can have two reasons; first, it could be due to the status of Taliban not being in the U.S. State Department’s FTO list. The main objective of the U.S military has been to fight not just the Taliban, but to eliminate any terrorist organizations harbored by them, specifically Al-Qaeda. The second reason for Bush not referring to the Taliban as terrorists can be due to the need to negotiate with them to end the war at one point or another. And though the Taliban are somewhat not different than other Islamist terrorist organizations, particularly in their abuse of religious ideology, use of violence against civilians and violating international human rights and international law, given realpolitik, the U.S. has preferred to refer to them as just an insurgent group and movement, or as ‘harborers’ and ‘supporters’ of Al-Qaeda, but not as a terrorist entity by themselves.

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<sup>172</sup> U.S. Government, “Pres. Barak Obama, Statement by the President on Afghanistan,” The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, 15 October 2015, accessed 24 September 2019, [bit.ly/2qGwhmX](https://bit.ly/2qGwhmX).

<sup>173</sup> *The Washington Post*, “Text of President Bush’s 2002 State of the Union Address.” 29 January 2002, accessed 14 November 2019, [wapo.st/2HksKQP](https://wapo.st/2HksKQP); U.S. Government. “Remarks by President Trump on the Strategy in Afghanistan and South Asia,” Fort Myer, Arlington, Virginia. 21 August 2017, accessed 13 September 2019, [bit.ly/33I1c0I](https://bit.ly/33I1c0I).

Bush's 2001 rhetoric of "If you are not with us, you are with the terrorists"<sup>174</sup> has not been repeated by either Obama or Trump. If anything, therefore, evidence show to the direction that despite animosity amongst them, the Taliban's de facto status have been upgraded from enemy (with allusions of terrorism) begun in 2001 to a political opposition by 2018. And despite the failed or stalled 2018-2019 Peace Talks, a draft agreement had nonetheless been discussed between the U.S. and the Taliban.<sup>175</sup> What may have also justified U.S. shifting policies towards the Taliban is the perception that they (the Taliban) are not a direct threat to the U.S. as are terrorist groups like Al-Qaeda and ISIS.<sup>176</sup>

When asked about this issue, Richard Ghiasy, a researcher and an ethnic Afghan with the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) responded:

There is a slight shift in the sense that the Taliban is not exclusively seen as a terrorist organization anymore but as a civil war actor that was excluded from the political reconciliation process in 2001 and onwards.<sup>177</sup>

Ghiasy further stated that the implications of such a shift in perceiving the Taliban by the U.S. is the Taliban's "receptiveness" the negotiation about the "peace process."<sup>178</sup> Rahmani, in turn, argued that there is a "gradual" but definite shift on how the Taliban are viewed in the perceptions not only on the state level in Afghanistan but among the local population as well. In this regard, he points at two dynamics; one is the transformation of Taliban, in that they have grown more complex as an organization and means of communications and diplomacy, and the other is the unpopularity of the Afghan war in the eyes of U.S Government and its citizens and the desperate need to

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<sup>174</sup> Alex Gelfert, "Random Realism," *Foreign Policy in Focus*, 1 July 2002, accessed 17 November 2019, [fpif.org/random\\_realism/](http://fpif.org/random_realism/).

<sup>175</sup> Nicole Gaouette, "U.S. and Taliban Reach Agreement 'in Principle' on Afghanistan, Envoy Says." *CNN*, September 10, 2019, accessed 1 June 2019, [cnn.it/2p3gGNL](http://cnn.it/2p3gGNL).

<sup>176</sup> Teitler, "Obama and Afghanistan ...," *op. cit.* 2.

<sup>177</sup> Interview with Mr. Richard Ghiasy, Associate Researcher, Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), Solna, Sweden, 17 September 2019 via email.

<sup>178</sup> *Ibid.*

arrive at a negotiated end. He argues that troop withdrawal has become a competing point in U.S politics: “Withdrawal is part of the big discourse and it shows how unpopular the Afghan war is.”<sup>179</sup>

## **Analysis of Hypothesis 2**

The second hypothesis of this thesis was:

**H<sub>2</sub> (Material reasons behind Peace Talks):** The causes behind the 2018-2019 U.S.-Taliban negotiations (Peace Talks) are: (a) the strengthening of the Taliban resistance on the war and political violence fronts against the Afghan National Army and U.S. forces and (b) the mounting costs of war and casualties on side of the U.S.

To be specific, material means behind the 2018-2019 Peace Talks are meant to be the intensifying financial expenses for a seemingly unending war. According to a study by Brown University, the cost to the U.S. of its war in Afghanistan will have reached US\$975 billion by end-2019.<sup>180</sup> The U.S. strategic, military, and political involvement in the war in Afghanistan, by now the longest war in American history, has had its toll on the unpopularity of the war with both the American Government and its public. The financial and mounting human costs, including the over 2,400 American soldiers killed in Afghanistan since 2001,<sup>181</sup> have influenced American interlocutors in convincing themselves that the Taliban, despite their brutality, are nonetheless part of the political solution to the Afghan war and to America’s eventual withdrawal from that country.<sup>182</sup>

In this regard, the experts interviewed in this study seemed to have differing perceptions. Some believed that there are material reasons to the Peace Talks and an eventual agreement that would include U.S. troop’s withdrawal. Others, on the other

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<sup>179</sup> Interview with Rahmani, *op. cit.*

<sup>180</sup> Niall McCarthy, “The Cost of the War in Afghanistan Since 2001,” *Forbes*, 12 September 2019, accessed 17 November 2019, [tiny.cc/p75fgz](https://www.tiny.cc/p75fgz).

<sup>181</sup> *NBC News*, “U.S. Says Two Troops Killed in Combat in Afghanistan,” Associated Press, 22 August 2019, accessed 17 November 2019, [tiny.cc/j76fgz](https://www.tiny.cc/j76fgz).

<sup>182</sup> Chris Johnson, and Leslie Jolyon. *Afghanistan: The Mirage of Peace*. London: Zed Books, 2013, 227.

hand, believed that it the lengthiness of war and loss of interest that are the actual reasons, rather than pure material costs. All in all, however, the weight of U.S. national and material interests was undeniable for the interlocutors. For instance, according to former Afghan MP Naderi, the U.S. has “invested” plenty of material and human capital in Afghanistan, and has its own logic of continuing or ending its involvement when considering such investments and America’s national interests.<sup>183</sup> Rahmani rejected the idea of material interests or costs being a major issue, despite touching on the fact that Trump, himself, coming from a business background and being a “real estate tycoon.” For Rahmani, besides deteriorated security conditions in Afghanistan, what matters for America is the loss of interest among its citizens on Afghanistan, a war, which unlike Bush, Trump does not believe in promoting any longer.<sup>184</sup> But the anonymous interlocutor interviewed argued that it is because of the very fact of Trump’s business background that he seeks peace through negotiations. He believes that war is not profitable for business, thus negotiations towards peace are incremental towards stability and potential ending of the war.<sup>185</sup>

For Samar, the Peace Talks had a partial material reason behind them. She stated that: “After 18 years of fighting with the Taliban, [the Americans] understood that they cannot win the war and that is why they have tried to talk to the Taliban, and at the same time tried to reduce the cost of war for Americans.”<sup>186</sup> Thomas Ruttig and Martine van Bijlert argue in favor of H<sub>2</sub>, in that reducing the costs of war and saving human lives have been the main objectives behind the U.S. negotiating with the Taliban and the NUG.<sup>187</sup> The same can be deciphered from a statement by U.S.

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<sup>183</sup> Interview with Naderi, *op. cit.*

<sup>184</sup> Interview with Rahmani, *op. cit.*

<sup>185</sup> Interview with Anonymous, *op. cit.*

<sup>186</sup> Interview with Samar, *op. cit.*

<sup>187</sup> Thomas Ruttig and Martine van Bijlert, “U.S.-Taleban Talks: An Imminent Agreement Without Peace,” Afghan Analyst Network, 30 August 2019, accessed 8 November 2019. [bit.ly/33LsdQZ](https://bit.ly/33LsdQZ).

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo:

Our desire is to create conditions on the ground where we can achieve what President Trump laid out, which is to reduce what is US\$30-35 billion a year in taxpayer money and the loss of American lives.<sup>188</sup>

## Conclusions

The definition for “peace” differs depending on the entity and beholder. Perhaps, the most common definition of it is the end of war, conflict, and animosity. Despite some difference, the experts interviewed for this study on the whole concurred with each other and the reasons behind the 2018-2019 U.S.-Taliban Peace Talks. Furthermore, it is confirmed that the attitudes towards the Taliban have gradually evolved over time. As Naderi stated, the talks are not new, as the Taliban, themselves, have always wanted to talk with the U.S. and they eventually got there.<sup>189</sup> One thing that must be mentioned is that aside from a military or non-military solution to the case of violent conflict in Afghanistan and evolution of perceptions towards Taliban is the concept of embracing the enemy by all sides. As was shown in this chapter, the fact that this war cannot be resolved militarily, the embracing the Taliban and encouraging them to do likewise with the NUG, to put an end to the intra-Afghan war, is even more important than the stalled U.S.-Taliban Peace Talks.

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<sup>188</sup> U.S. Government, Department of State, “Secretary of State Michael R. Pompeo with Joe Kernen, Becky Quick, and Andrew Ross Sorkin of CNBC Squawk Box,” 20 August 2019, accessed 14 November 2019, [bit.ly/2O9kGVs](https://bit.ly/2O9kGVs).

<sup>189</sup> Interview with Naderi, *op. cit.*

## Chapter VI

### CONCLUSIONS: WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

“The end of the war is not peace. The war will not finish even if they make a deal with the Taliban. There are other [terrorist] groups already functioning in the country who will continue the war unless there will be a very comprehensive program for ending the war and bring about sustainable peace.”

—Dr. Sima Samar, Kabul<sup>190</sup>

Despite being extremely unbearable, using public transportation is where you can meet ordinary Afghans from different ages and backgrounds. Women usually sit at the back and men at the front rows. Two things are very common while commuting in the public buses, either you listen to the driver’s favorite song collection or you get to be an observer in a hot debate about the future of Afghanistan. As a woman, you are not expected to join the discussion in a public place such as the min-bus, however, you have the opportunity to build great observation skills. This “bus-discussion” has always been very striking to me. Especially, in the past few months, as my ears and eyes have been unintentionally the recipient of people’s discussions and reactions over diverse issues facing Afghanistan. The most common bus discussion debates have been about the Peace Talks, the presidential election and the country’s leaders. Throughout such discussions, peace seems to remain a dream for people, mostly expressed through their frustration and disappointment, evident in nearly every bus discussion I have been privy to. On the whole, people are deeply religious and believers in their Islamic and cultural traditions in Afghanistan, and when it comes to peace, they only pray that it will arrive sooner or later, with some having more faith in this hope than others.

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<sup>190</sup> Interview with Samar, *op. cit.*



Peace, conflict and war have been shaping the political and historical fate of Afghans for centuries. Wars have come in different shapes, traditional and ultra-modern. In 2017, for example, the country was recipient of the GBU-43/B Massive Ordnance Air Blast (Moab or “Mother of All Bombs”), aka the largest non-nuclear bomb dropped ever anywhere on earth, a device which “can obliterate everything within a 1,000-yard radius.”<sup>191</sup> The wars of Afghanistan have sometimes been waged by foreign invaders, disrupting the normal lives of the country’s inhabitants, while at other times, it has been the local authorities, power holders and those vying for power that have sought to overthrow the system and regime or fight the invading armies for their tangible and intangible grievances and gains.

One such case has been the rise and temporary demise of the Taliban. After the collapse of Taliban regime in 2001, the country went from an Islamic Emirate back to an Islamic Republic (a form of government ironically formed under the last communist leader, Dr. Najibullah, as cash and material subsidies from the USSR had dried up). In the post-2001 era, much of the people gradually became able to freely express their ideas using different platforms, including newspapers, television, radio and social media. This fact is a bright spot for Afghanistan despite, or perhaps because, of the post-9/11 military intervention of the U.S. and its allies. However, soon as the Taliban was declared dead, it rose again, causing havoc and fiercely and brutally resisting the U.S.-led and NUG forces. And after years of war and attempts of ending the state of permanent war in Afghanistan came the 2018 Peace Talks between the U.S. and the Taliban.

The purpose of this thesis was to study the rhetoric of peace, the attitudes of peace makers and to trace the trajectory of peacebuilding in Afghanistan. To do so, it

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<sup>191</sup> Helen Cooper and Mujib Mashal, “U.S. Drops Mother of All Bombs on ISIS Caves in Afghanistan,” *The New York Times*, 13 April 2017, accessed 17 November 2019, [tiny.cc/axhggz](http://tiny.cc/axhggz).

first explored the conceptual and linguistic as well as theoretical essence attached to the term “solh”—meaning “peace” in Persian and Dari. Then, it went back to the historical dynamics of violent conflicts in Afghanistan’s domestic politics. Following that, the post-9/11 war but also efforts towards reconciliation and reintegration of former Taliban fighters were discussed. And finally, the analysis and hypotheses testing provision centering on the real causes behind the 2018-2019 Peace Talks were undertaken. The analysis provided a largely generic and broad test of the hypotheses using existing both secondary data by way of social scientific literature and primary data by way of in-depth (N=5) semi-structured expert interviews

The findings of this research largely confirmed (or failed to reject the null) hypothesis (H<sub>1</sub>) that the evolution of U.S. attitudes towards the Taliban served as a positive catalyst leading to the 2018-2019 Peace Talks. The said talks, despite their suspension by order of U.S. President Trump in September 2019, have nonetheless provoked the discussion on peace in Afghanistan. In addition to that, the process has led to a nationwide indirect grassroots involvement on the talks. There is also hope that the talks will resume. As Rahmani, one of the interlocutors of this study, mentioned, both Trump’s tweets after calling off the talks and the Taliban’s statements show that the talks will in all likelihood resume.<sup>192</sup>

The other hypothesis (H<sub>2</sub>) regarding material reasons behind the Peace Talks was also confirmed (or its null hypothesis failed to be rejected, as well) by both the experts interviewed and secondary sources cited. Given the U.S. interests to lessen the cost of war and troop casualties, withdrawal from Afghanistan serves as the material reasons behind the talks. Therefore, even though the ten-month talks technically failed, they have evidently positively induced the concept and likely hope for peace

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<sup>192</sup> Interview with Rahmani, *op. cit.*

among the key domestic and international players and the people of Afghanistan.

One of the main points about the Taliban, which is clear by now, is that they were never the direct enemy of or threat to the U.S. and there had always been room for negotiations. The main intransigent enemy had been Al-Qaeda (and perhaps now more so ISIS and its local affiliate). This is indeed from a view that does not include the violations and cruelties that the Taliban had committed as a regime against ordinary civilians and continue to do so via terrorist acts as I write this thesis. As much as the U.S. claims to be a defender of human rights and promoter of democracy in Afghanistan, it also has its own perceived national interests. And in the pursuit of such interests, it may not be bothered by the brutality of the war on the Afghan people or to take up the responsibility to resolve Afghanistan's internal conflict. Perhaps that is a matter of a potential intra-Afghan (NUG-Taliban) discussions to resolve their common grievance among each other. At the end, the U.S. war in Afghanistan and its intransigence to have negotiated with the Taliban earlier had to do with the fact that the Taliban did not hand over Osama Bin Laden, leader of Al-Qaeda and the alleged mastermind behind 9/11 to them.<sup>193</sup> This fact alone inspired the U.S. to defend its national security and engage in a near US\$1 trillion now 18-year war in Afghanistan as part of its GWoT project.

The main purpose of this thesis was to contribute to the Afghan peace with specific focus on the 2018-2019 Peace Talks and thus to pay attention primarily on the Taliban and the U.S. as they were the main stakeholders of the talks. On the other hand, the NUG had a rather weak position throughout this process. As another interlocutor, Samar, stated: "The NUG did not have a serious role in the Peace Talks and as the talks between the Americans and the Taliban were largely behind closed

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<sup>193</sup> Adam Taylor, "Even in the Midst of Afghan Peace Talks, the Taliban Still Deny Al Qaeda Was behind 9/11," *The Washington Post*, 22 August 2019, accessed 11 November 2019, [wapo.st/2O9Kgd4](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/energy-environment/wp/2019/08/22/even-in-the-midst-of-afghan-peace-talks-the-taliban-still-deny-al-qaeda-was-behind-9-11/).

doors, I think no one in the government knows about their details.”<sup>194</sup> That said, to say that the 2018-2019 the Peace Talks were to end years of war would likely have been wishful thinking, but they may inevitably have been the beginning of a new beginning of changes for Afghanistan.

Finally, this study has been a small contribution to the huge arena of war and peace in Afghanistan. Further questions of what will happen next, where we will go from here or whether the NUG will be able to accomplish intra-afghan talks are all valid questions the investigations of which will add value to the discourse of peace in Afghanistan. Answering such questions require a whole new set of research to be done with broader number of participants from diverse categories and groups.

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<sup>194</sup> Interview with Samar, *op. cit.*

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## **APPENDIX A: LIST OF INTERVIEWEES**

1. Anonymous, international organization employee in Kabul who had worked under the Mujahidin and Taliban regimes, 18 September 2019, Kabul.
2. Mr. Richard Ghiasy, Associate Researcher, Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), Solna, Sweden, 17 September 2019, via email.
3. Ms. Farkhunda Zahra Naderi, former Member of Parliament of Afghanistan, 2 November 2019, Kabul.
4. Mr. Waliullah Rahmani, Security and Political Expert, Director of Khabarnama Media, 24 September 2019, Kabul.
5. Dr. Sima Samar, former Chairwoman of the Independent Afghanistan Human Rights Commission (IAHRC), Kabul, Afghanistan, 10 November 2019, via email.

## **APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS**

1. How would you define peace personally and generally in the Afghan context?
2. Do you think the 2018-2019 negotiations were a considerable sign of hope for ending war in Afghanistan?
3. Do you think peace with Taliban is possible?
4. How has the U.S. perception towards Taliban changed from early 2000s till now, if at all? Do you think this change in perception has any implication over concept of peace?
5. How can elections and other events affect the process of peace talks?
6. How do Afghans feel about the 10-month hectic U.S.-Taliban Peace Talks commencing in 2018?
7. How do you think the Peace Talks' termination by U.S. President Trump can influence a future intra-Afghan peace talks which was supposed to follow the unfinished U.S-Taliban talks?
8. How do talk of peace and peace talks differ from one another?