

Alternative paths to peace - Restoring the local in Afghan peace-making

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I. Introduction

This study aims to draw attention to the potential for local peace initiatives in Afghanistan to contribute to the broader national peace process. It is based upon the experience of pilot support of local peace initiatives in five areas of the country during 2020 and 2021, along with reflections from Afghan practitioners of local peace-making¹.

II. Summary of recent experiences in local peace-making

For the purposes of the study, we consider a “local peace initiative” (LPI) to be an organised attempt to achieve peaceful transformation of key aspects of the conflict, within a defined area, typically at district or village cluster level. There is a long history of such initiatives, many of them spontaneous, initiated by local groups, outside the state². However, the official peace process in Afghanistan, which was intensified during the 2018-2021 period, has never acknowledged or encouraged action at the sub-national level.

Since spring 2020, local peace initiatives have been supported at a pilot scale, in five locations across Afghanistan, including areas in the south and north of the country³. For six months the pilot initiatives received modest financial support from the Government of Afghanistan. Thereafter the local initiatives continued, at a lower level of activity, without external support.

The pilots were successful in that they demonstrated effective approaches for working at the local level and claimed tangible effects on the dynamics of violence, some of which continued in the non-funded stage. In three of the districts, the local peace initiatives were led by “caucuses” – informal organisations which brought together combatants and influential civilians for the purpose of reducing or ending violence and mitigating civilian harm. In two clusters, in north western and north eastern Afghanistan, the Afghans involved in the local peace initiatives took a more movement-oriented approach to organising, among both civilians and armed groups around an agenda which explicitly involved conflict transformation and challenging conflict actors which opposed this.

In all areas, the groups leading the LPIs opted for a low-key approach of orchestrating “violence reduction”, rather than a high-profile approach of explicitly announcing a ceasefire. The low-profile approach allowed the caucuses and movement organisers to win the support and cooperation of armed commanders, whose high command was still trying

¹ The author conducted interviews with the Afghan advisers for each of the LPIs described. The advisers drew on their personal experience in accompanying local peace and engaging at the community level and documented observations from some of the members of the caucuses which they advised. For quantitative analysis of the impact of local peace initiatives, advisers drew on the ACLED database of security incidents in Afghanistan.

² (Cavendish, 2018), (Committee, 2007), (Reuters, 2021), (Roberts, 2018), (Safi, 2020), (Wafa, 2006) (Wafa, 2006) as examples of reporting and analysis on local peace initiatives over the past decade and a half

³ (Larson, 2018) For background on perspectives of the local figures behind the LPIs described

to escalate the conflict. In all five pilot areas, the groups involved reported having averted multiple attacks and attempts to escalate the violence, without provoking any violent backlash. In all five areas, the groups reported that they had achieved a high degree of cooperation between influential local civilians and the armed networks operating in their areas. All of them had ambitious plans to progress from violence reduction to ceasefire and to raise the profile of their work, so that the caucuses and movements could operate openly and explicitly. However, all five groups felt obliged to hedge – to desist from operating in the open, until they had received convincing offers of external support which they calculated they required, to offset the anticipated backlash from the Taliban against openly declared local peace-making. The hedging and pinning of hopes on various forms of external assistance or reassurance are classic features of the Afghan local peace-making scene. Nevertheless, the local influential civilians involved found a modus operandi for socially useful cooperation with the armed networks in their areas. After the six months of limited support, analysis of violence in the pilot areas suggested that violence had been suppressed relative to appropriate comparator districts. The groups' narrative reporting suggested that this was the case. However, there are multiple analytic challenges inherent in validating and replicating the quantitative results. Impact monitoring is one of the areas worthy of further investment.

III. Reflections on the local in Afghan peace-making

The experience of the small-scale LPI pilots generated a series of insights relevant to the broader Afghan peace process.

Local peace as an Afghan solution

The core idea of local peace-making in Afghanistan is that halting the armed conflict within the country's four hundred districts, or smaller localities, is possible, even at a time where national efforts to end the conflict are deadlocked. The local peace-making efforts can draw on the civilian consensus in favour of an early end to the conflict and mobilise forms of traditional local civilian authority, which have a long history in Afghanistan. Attempts at national-level peace-making have empowered and incentivised the warring parties, in particular the Taliban, to maximise the military leverage which they obtain from sustaining a violent campaign across the country. Local peace-making draws on the assumption that a sustained guerrilla-style military campaign depends upon obtaining a degree of consent from the civilian population in the areas where that campaign is mounted. By withdrawing that consent, local peacemakers render it more difficult for the warring parties to operate in their area. This reduces civilian harm in their area and enables some parts of the country to reap a peace dividend before the blockages to a national level settlement are overcome. In a sense, a localised strategy could be considered the classic Afghan approach to peace-making, given the strong local dimension which has often been observed within the nominally national-level conflict. To wage war in Afghanistan, state and opposition actors alike have had to mobilise multiple local actors and networks and to engage with a proliferation of local conflicts. The same logic can be applied to peace-making.

How local dropped off the agenda - understanding the neglect of local peace during the 2018-2021 peace initiative

The period 2018-2021 has seen a remarkable intensification of peace-making efforts in Afghanistan, with both the Afghan government and its international allies adopting the

attainment of sustainable peace as a top policy goal and broadening the envelope of actions considered admissible in pursuit of this goal⁴. The Taliban Movement periodically invoked a rhetoric of peace, although its case to have embraced this as a goal is less convincing. However, all of these actors pursued top-down, national-level strategies, at the heart of which was the attempt to secure an elite bargain. Thus, the US pursued agreement with the Taliban leadership, on the basis that this leadership would oblige its base to comply with any deal, thus delivering the country. No side seems to have contemplated an alternative bottom-up approach, whereby changes at the base – a *modus vivendi* attained in multiple districts – might nudge the national leadership towards accepting compromise, before its military leverage dissipated.

Neglect of local initiatives– state actor concerns

The state actors have neglected bottom-up peace-making rather than actively opposed it. But, because Afghan local actors have assumed that some degree of state blessing is a requirement of success in local peace-making, this has deterred local initiative. Reservations by the state actors about bottom-up have been driven by five principal concerns - *scale & feasibility, Taliban cohesiveness, state-focused thinking, sovereignty and ethnic dynamics*.

Probably most important, for both the US and Afghan governments have been the concerns around feasibility, scale and timescale. A key characteristic of the 2018-2021 Afghan peace process was that the US desired national-level transformation within a tight timeframe, shaped by the US political cycle and concern to end a military engagement which had dragged on longer than anticipated. Insofar as they even contemplated sub-national approaches, policy-makers doubted that local peace-making could be delivered on a scale or timetable relevant to what the US was trying to achieve. Previous episodes of local peace-making had not graduated beyond the single district level and so it seemed safe to assume that any future initiative would require a protracted period to deliver any effects on a scale meaningful for the national-level effort.

Once the US opted to open its own negotiating track with the representatives of the Taliban leadership, and to pursue a treaty-like agreement with the Islamic Emirate, the issue of preserving Taliban *cohesiveness* became a key concern for the US. In the 29 February agreement, the US obtained a limited set of undertakings from the Taliban. This US engagement strategy with the Taliban was based on the assumption that the movement was potentially open to a negotiated settlement with the Afghan government. In effect, the US selected the Taliban movement as one of its key counterparts in the pursuit of peace in Afghanistan and thus acquired some interest in the movement maintaining its cohesiveness. The US negotiators hoped the Taliban were on course to negotiate a political roadmap and ceasefire and eventually to agree to join a power-sharing interim government. Therefore, the US had an assumed interest in maintaining the cohesiveness of the movement, to ensure the leadership's ability to deliver on commitments.

The problem of *state-focused thinking* affected both the US and Afghan teams working on the peace process. They were accustomed to operating through elite bargains and were sceptical of any route to agreement which ceded agency to non-elite groups. The US team

⁴ (Ruttig, 2019) an early explanation of the top-down peace agenda pursued in the 2018-2021 initiative

expressed this simply: “It is not that we are opposed, it is just not what we do”. The Afghan government prioritised retaining its centralised control over all key decision-making and representation on the Republic side, fearing that tolerating any initiative beyond its control would lead to unacceptable compromise and erosion of government authority and legitimacy.

The *sovereignty and ethnic dynamics* concerns were relevant for the Afghan government. Some proposals for sub-national peace-making have suggested that the Taliban could be ceded control of one or more provinces, as a way of enabling them to extricate their leadership from Pakistan⁵. Such proposals have encouraged Afghan government leaders to suspect that any effort to establish a “zone of peace” on a part of the territory is, in effect, a way of handing over sovereignty in that area to the Taliban, resulting in a diminution of the sovereignty exercised by the government. Similarly, Afghan government leaders have been concerned that encouraging local peace deals by Taliban of a particular ethnic profile could be seen as an effort to privilege that ethnic group and thus stoke ethnic grievances. More concretely, the main ethnic politics question arising from local peace-making is would ethnic Pashtun minorities in northern Afghanistan become vulnerable if predominantly non-Pashtun Taliban were to assert themselves relative to the movement’s national leadership and impose a local ceasefire. For the US side, Afghan concerns around sovereignty severely restrict the US’s ability to act on its own initiative. Independent engagement by the US with actors at the local level would be likely to be resisted by the Afghan government on sovereignty grounds. But the US has managed to frame its engagement with the Taliban leadership as international diplomacy. As, during the 2018-2021 period, the US wanted to accelerate progress, maintaining its autonomy of action has been a priority.

The absence of convincing progress towards a national level settlement after two and a half years of focus on exclusive pursuit of an elite bargain warrants a re-examination of the assumptions under-pinning the state actors’ five principal objections to local peace-making. While the US tried to accelerate progress in the peace process, it experienced successive missed deadlines in the face of apparent stone-walling by both the Taliban leadership and the Afghan government. This challenges the earlier assumption that bottom-up approaches are inherently slower than the top-down approach. The Taliban leadership succeeded in maintaining the movement’s cohesiveness during negotiations and was aided in that process by the acceptance by all state actors that only the delegation introduced by the leadership could represent the movement. But the Taliban leadership refused to extend violence reduction measures and chose instead to sustain its military campaign. Therefore Taliban cohesiveness arguably helped to defer a resolution of the conflict rather than assisting progress towards it. Meanwhile, one of the features of LPI’s has been a softening of the frontlines between government-held and opposition-held territory, facilitating civilians and government personnel in moving between them. This can be considered as a contribution to the reintegration of national territory and building of ethnic solidarity, thus countering the balkanisation which has resulted from the continuation of the conflict.

⁵ For example, Gulbadin Hekmatyar for a while proposed this idea of “zones of peace” e.g., <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/hekmatyar-calls-for-providing-safe-zones-to-taliban/1098446>

The neglect of local initiatives in the 2018-2020 Afghan peace process – Taliban concerns

The Taliban leadership's opposition to bottom-up peace initiatives, while its representatives are engaged in a track one process, is relatively straightforward⁶. Throughout the Taliban's 2018-2021 engagement with the US and Afghan government, its leadership insisted on sustaining the armed campaign (jihad) against the government. Thus, any locally negotiated move to pause the conflict would threaten the Taliban's unity of command and, potentially, diminish its military leverage. The history of the Taliban's war provides additional reasons for the leaders to be suspicious of local initiatives. Power within the movement is highly concentrated in the hands of networks which emerged in the Taliban's early days, in the mid 1990's. For appointed local officials, or commanders with a support base in their native districts, to act autonomously of the centre, on fundamental issues concerning the pursuit of the war, could threaten the power monopoly within the movement. The Taliban leadership was generally convinced that the 29th February deal with the US favoured the movement. However, the agreement exposed them to a key vulnerability. The Taliban committed to a suspension of hostilities against US forces, but they insisted on continuing the fight against the "puppet" Afghan government. This has been raised by local actors advocating the suspension of hostilities. They have argued that the Taliban's insistence on fighting on rendered them guilty of an illegitimate power struggle. The Taliban leadership is determined to continue asserting the legitimacy of its continued "jihad". Furthermore, the leadership is informed by a long history of covert counter-insurgency efforts. It is highly suspicious that what are presented as local peace initiatives could actually be covert action to subvert the movement's military. In contrast, in its conduct of the track one talks the Taliban leadership has always been able to assert full authority over the negotiating team and avoid any concessions. Thus, while the Taliban leadership remains committed to a strategy of militarily defeating or pressurising the Afghan government, it can be expected to consider any local arrangement, to park the armed conflict, as an unwelcome diminution of that military pressure. And, any move by traditional civil society, or the Afghan government, to accommodate or reconcile with Taliban locally may be regarded by the leadership as a threat to the hierarchy which is an essential characteristic of the movement.

The extent of untapped potential

Many of those involved in LPIs asserted that there is significant potential for replication and expansion. The issue of untapped potential is relevant to the question of scale and strategic significance. Reduction of violence and transformation of the relationship between the conflict actors must cross a yet to be defined critical threshold if they are to impact on progress towards to a broader sustainable peace. However, given that there has been no systematic effort to deliver support to local peace at scale, the issue of the extent of the untapped potential remains hypothetical. There are good grounds for suspecting that conditions for the success of LPIs exist in multiple provinces and that there is potential for achieving a rapid demonstration effect. Taliban involved in the movement-based approach to local peace reported at least some level of support for extending activities to some twelve provinces, which would already account for a third of the country. Those involved in the pilots in Paktia and Badghis reported interest from Taliban and traditional civil society actors in neighbouring provinces, who were linked through informal networks. The central narrative of Afghan local peace-making, which asserts that initial intra-Afghan reconciliation

⁶ (Crisis Group, 2020) for an account of Taliban stance in peace process

can proceed at a local level, in advance of a national settlement as long as there is some external backing for this process, has resonance even in areas where the insurgency is most active.

Gradualist approaches to local peace

The Afghans behind LPs have adopted a range of approaches and this variety is inherent in decentralised and organic peace-making. Local peace-making is a profoundly political process, in which the protagonists must decide how to relate to competing power-structures and to the conflict actors' efforts to coerce the civilian population. The range of approaches which have been adopted in initiatives to date has reflected the balance of power within the area where the LP operates and the status and preferences of the local figures behind the initiative. One of the key issues faced by Afghans developing an LP is the extent to which they should confront and challenge the Taliban. Many LPs adopt a gradualist and non-confrontational approach. In the gradualist approach, local activists seek the cooperation of Taliban officials and commanders in their area and work with them to get agreement on measures to protect civilians and mitigate the conflict, trying to "push the envelope", while avoiding precipitation of a confrontation with the Taliban central leadership. The approach of the Badghis caucus in the summer of 2020 provides a classic example of the gradualist non-confrontational approach. The caucus wanted to reduce violence and the threat of IED blasts in the district centre, to enable civilian IDPs to return to nearby villages and shopkeepers to reopen their businesses. In consultation with the senior-most cooperating Taliban official, the caucus organised the district ulema to gather and petition the Taliban district authorities. The Taliban official was then able to use the petition as a pretext for restricting activities of armed Taliban in the areas that civilians wanted to return to. The LP thus sought the cover of the Islamic Emirate authorities for activities designed to mitigate the conflict effects on civilians but used pressure from influential civilians and influence within the Taliban structures to expand the envelope of what the Taliban were prepared to tolerate.

Where an LP is based on a gradualist approach, the organisers have a strong preference for maintaining a low profile, in the sense that they are unlikely to declare themselves as involved in a formal or organised initiative and prefer to operate through recognised traditional, individual authority figures, such as members of the ulema. Likewise, in a gradualist approach to an LP, the organisers tend to prefer promoting de-escalation rather than announcing a ceasefire. Allowing a low level of violence to continue during an LP, rather than announcing a ceasefire, maintains a degree of ambiguity and avoids drawing the attention of the Taliban leadership to an unauthorised initiative. The key reason that local activists cite for adopting a non-confrontational and gradualist approach is the fear of violent backlash from hostile Taliban higher authorities, a fear which is all the more germane because activists have next to no expectation that the national authorities would intervene on their behalf in the event of a hostile Taliban attack.

There are important limitations also in gradualist approaches to local peace-making. The violence against government targets is only one, rather superficial, aspect of the Taliban's use of coercion. The movement also imposes authoritarian controls on civilians in areas which it controls. For example, Taliban rule often entails their officials operating checkpoints and humiliating or killing people who pass through them, restricting movement of civilians,

imposing arbitrary rules on morality and security and extorting resources. A gradualist approach to local peace-making requires that civilians selectively lobby against the most overt forms of violence, such as allowing access for humanitarian agencies, while tolerating the authority structure which imposes this structural violence. A gradualist approach, which avoids steps likely to be opposed by the Taliban leadership, severely limits the extent to which an LPI can include confidence-building measures with government, such as freedom of movement between government and opposition-held area. The more ambitious the conflict mitigation measures, the more likely they are to attract unwanted scrutiny and opposition from Taliban hard-liners. Attempts to operate within the limits set by Taliban authorities are also vulnerable to the Taliban's centralised appointments procedure. An LPI which depends upon an understanding between the local Taliban officials and civilian organisers can be de-railed if the Taliban leadership simply replaces those cooperating officials with loyalists committed to the armed campaign. Historically, most LPIs in Afghanistan have adopted a gradualist approach, thus ensuring that policy makers have low expectations of what can be achieved through local peace-making. It is often assumed that the effects of local peace-making will be humanitarian and small-scale, with few implications for the wider conflict. However, other approaches to LPIs are more political and offer promise of delivering effects at scale.

Transformational approaches to local peace

In transformation approaches to local peace, local peace actors consciously challenge the Taliban leadership's authority in their area and seek an end to both the armed conflict and structural violence in the area covered by the LPI. However, transformational approaches do not necessarily involve a confrontation between civilians and the armed opposition. Indeed, the most consistent proponents of a transformational approach to local peace have been Taliban in northern Afghanistan. In adopting a "movement approach" to their transformational local peace-making, Taliban in northern Afghanistan articulated a political critique of the violence commanded by the leadership. They objected to the commanders appointed by the central leadership as well as the policy of sustaining violence against the Afghan government, despite the ceasefire with international forces, and described this leadership-mandated fighting as an externally imposed conflict. The opposition to the armed conflict was thus located within the Taliban movement, rather than being articulated by critics of the Taliban. And rather than manoeuvring to obtain the blessings of Taliban officials for actions taken under the LPI, as happened in Bala Morghab, pro-peace Taliban in northern Afghanistan sought to strengthen their ability to act autonomously of the leadership.

Taliban involved in LPIs in northern Afghanistan articulated a more ambitious version of local peace than caucuses involved in a gradualist approach. They styled themselves as a movement, aiming to organise across multiple provinces, guided by a set of grievances and demands, which amounted to a vision of sustainable peace, with social justice. Informed by this vision, the northern Taliban formally proposed a general ceasefire, confidence building measures and a move to political dialogue on the core issues. The vision and actions proposed by Taliban in the north went far beyond any authority which had been delegated by the leadership to local officials and which might have been attainable through a gradualist approach. However, in practice, there was some overlap between gradualist and transformative approaches and potential for them to converge over time. Taliban in

northern Afghanistan also hedged in their challenge to leadership, by avoiding attributable public criticism of the leadership, while they waited to assess the government response to their ceasefire proposals. Although the LPI in the north clearly did amount to a far-reaching challenge to the Taliban movement's authoritarian hold over the area, this challenge was conditional upon the availability of convincing external support. Until they received assurance of such support, the Taliban behind the LPIs in the north also restricted their actions to undeclared de-escalation – withholding fighters from the armed conflict – along the lines of the actions favoured by caucuses in other areas, pursuing a gradualist approach. In Badghis and Paktia also Taliban and civil society figures involved in the LPIs claimed that they could afford to be more ambitious in their transformation of the conflict in the event of external backing.

Local peacemakers and the state

Many of those involved in LPIs, while prepared to cooperate with the Afghan state, were reluctant to identify too closely with the government. They explicitly tried to mobilise support in their communities or armed networks for the idea of peace rather than for the idea of submitting to a government authority.

The theory of change linking local peace with the national process

Those involved in the pilot LPIs considered their actions significant for the potential to contribute to national level transformation of the conflict, rather than just because of the change which they effected within their own locality. A notable aspect of the LPIs was that Taliban engaged in peace-making at the local level continued to dialogue with their peers in leadership positions of the movement through the process. However, the discourse around local peace has included different ideas on the mechanism through which it can impact on the national level. This indicates the need for a well-articulated theory of change linking local level action to progress in the national level peace process.

The LPI experience suggests several elements which should be included in a plausible theory of change. These include:

- Circumventing blockages to negotiations progress – the launch and successful implementation of an LPI depends upon decisions made by the conflict actors at the local level. To proceed locally, it is sufficient for the Taliban commanders and officials plus their civil society or state counterparts can seek tacit approval from their national level structures or act independently of them. This decentralisation of peace-process decision making insulates local action from the failure to achieve agreement which has characterised most of the attempted intra-Afghan peace-making during 2018-2021. Inherent to the decentralised approach is the possibility of LPIs being attempted in multiple locations. They can move forward at locally specific paces, while the national process is deadlocked as long as any one party chooses to hold it up.
- Generate quick return benefits to civilians and combatants alike – well-designed LPIs should produce tangible benefits, such as reduced conflict losses, expanded livelihoods opportunities and access to services or patronage. These quick returns provide an incentive to sustain the initiatives and generate a demonstration effect. This is one of the mechanisms which can drive horizontal expansions of LPIs.

- Demonstration effect in confidence-building – the network linkages among conflict actors ensure that some of the local level experience is passed onto national level figures, including negotiators. In concrete terms, Taliban involved in LPIs talk by phone with Islamic Emirate negotiators in Doha. This allows for a demonstration effect and confidence building at the level of the national negotiating teams. If the parties to LPIs manage to adhere to agreements, restrain their spoilers and achieve win-win outcomes, these examples strengthen the hands of those in the national delegations arguing in favour of a negotiated agreement.
- Atrophying military leverage – expansion of LPIs and increased willingness of Taliban in the field to cooperate with them and pause the military campaign provides a mechanism whereby Taliban military leverage gradually diminishes. This in turn offsets one of the barriers to progress in peace negotiations. Taliban leaders have hitherto been confident that, over time, the military balance is tilting in their favour, which has encouraged them to pursue maximalist positions in negotiations. A reduction of the Taliban military's ability to generate violence places pressure on the national negotiation team to pursue a settlement in case they lose their critical military leverage.
- New format for intra Afghan reconciliation – the experience of insurgent, civil society and state cooperation in local peace-making can be used to create a forum in which the parties who proved their local credentials can dialogue to address conflict root causes and issues around sustainable peace. The amount of investment to develop such a new bottom-up reconciliation mechanism would depend upon the extent of progress in the national level negotiation process.

The importance of the source of authority for local peace

Taliban wanting to participate in peace initiatives turned to traditional informal civilian power structures to provide them with the authority they required to resist the Islamic Emirate's pressure to step up the fighting. The political process under-pinning the launch of LPI's thus involved substituting local and civilian authority for the centralised and militarised authority of the Islamic Emirate command structure. This process was most clearly articulated in the initiatives in northern Afghanistan. The Taliban fighters involved in the movement approach in the north eastern provinces organised public meetings attended by traditional civil society figures, including tribal elders, respected former mujahideen commanders and religious figures – the ulema. Taliban linked to the LPI provided the security for these public meetings and flew the white flags of the Islamic Emirate. But the messages delivered by the civil society figures in the meetings ran counter to the line generally propagated by the Islamic Emirate, as they expressed hopes for peace, questioned the rationale of waging war on Afghans while observing a ceasefire against international forces and called for social justice. The mentor responsible for LPIs in the north east decoded the messaging in the public meetings there by explaining the narrative around which Taliban had been mobilised for the LPI. According to this narrative, the original call for jihad in the region against the US was given by local clerics. This early mobilisation was practically supported by the communities, who urged their young men to join the fight and provided the wherewithal, such as weapons, to enable them to do so. The locally mobilised fronts merged with the Islamic Emirate and its centralised structures several years after the launch of the jihad. Therefore, with the Islamic Emirate having suspended the jihad against the US, it is fit and proper for Taliban in the north to extricate themselves from the authority

of the Islamic Emirate and return to the authority of their home communities. In the case of Taliban seeking a path to peace in northern Afghanistan, this substitution of the authority to which they subject themselves has enabled them to adopt an ambitious transformational approach. They developed a far-reaching critique of Islamic Emirate rule and conduct of the war and pursued a sophisticated approach to ensuring the local fighters held back from military operations sanctioned by the Emirate command structure. However, even in the districts where local caucuses preferred a gradualist approach, this too depended on reference to local civilian authority. Zurmat and Janikhel invoked tribal authority, while Bala Morghab invoked the authority of the district ulema. Organisers of LPIs worked on the assumption that the Islamic Emirate leadership would always use its authority over Taliban in the districts to sustain the war and crush any attempts at accommodation.

The successful mobilisation of local, civilian sources of authority to mandate LPIs has important implications for understanding local political dynamics within Afghanistan's insurgency. Some of the earliest accounts of Taliban mobilisation portrayed Taliban networks as subverting traditional authority structures within communities⁷. As part of this process, Taliban have waged campaigns of assassination against tribal elders or ulema considered to have been critical of them and have practised an authoritarian intolerance of independent voices in areas they control. Taliban involved in LPIs who find themselves in opposition to the movement's hierarchy have had to build new alliances, which push them into a new *modus vivendi* with traditional civil society, that contrasts sharply with the movement's habitual antagonistic relationship.

History of patronage politics and the notion of an external backer

Another strong finding from the study of LPIs is that the notion of external backing looms large in all actors' perceptions. Even among traditional civil society actors, with good standing in their communities and a track record of successful conflict mediation, there is predominant assumption that some form of external backing is a prerequisite for the success of any LPI. Civil society and Taliban assumptions about the role of external backing are so ingrained that understanding these expectations would be key to any attempt to programme support for LPIs.

Civil society and Taliban have a range of expectations from the external backing which they envisage. They expect external backing to contribute:

- Resources
- Security back-up
- Protection from government harassment
- Legitimacy
- "Signalling"

The expectation of resources is relatively straightforward and explicable. All LPIs involve some degree of mobilisation, whether of fighters or community members. This involves direct costs, at a minimum for food and logistics. Sustainability concerns ingrained in western aid practice might push towards some form of self-help approach to covering such costs. But well-established traditions of patronage mean that, securing such costs through

⁷ (Dorransoro, 2009)

an external backer can enable a local leader or activist to boost his authority and convening power. In such a context, even if a network has a real sense of purpose, a local leader feels he is only able to activate and direct the network when he accesses resources for it. Opportunity cost provides another strong rationale for those involved in LPIs to expect resources from external backing. While the civilian population may stand to gain materially from reduced violence, ceasefires and the opening up of commercial activity. Local insurgents meanwhile face reduced revenues from extortion and, if they directly challenge the Islamic Emirate, they can expect to be cut off from patronage and supply lines. Thus, civil society and Taliban alike look to external backing to enable them to repurpose insurgent networks in support of peace after losing access to the resources which had mobilised them for war.

The Islamic Emirate has a track record of ruthlessly suppressing suspected dissent, through demotions, boycotts, arbitrary arrests, summary executions and full-scale military operations⁸. Those involved in or contemplating LPIs are acutely aware of the threat that they could face such actions from hostile elements in the Islamic Emirate. Peace activists have deployed quite sophisticated diplomatic approaches to forestalling violent spoiling activity. Typically, these involve canvassing support within Islamic Emirate official structures and portraying actions in the least confrontational manner possible. However, for all those involved in promoting LPIs there is a residual concern that they could face a violent backlash from Islamic Emirate, beyond their ability to resist locally. Therefore, one of the expectations of external backing is that, once local actors have ended the violent conflict within their area, they should be able to appeal for security support if they subsequently face a backlash from violent spoilers outside the area. However, the security related expectations of external support focus as much on threats from the government as on threats from insurgents. Actors involved in LPIs fear harassment and spoiling actions from security agencies or local administration who may fear that independent initiatives undermine their authority or rents or who may be manipulated by malign actors in the Taliban, who are adept at passing on coordinates of targets they want eliminated. In terms of protection from government, local actors hope both to protect their network from arbitrary actions.

External assistance, as envisaged by Afghan actors involved in LPIs, performs a symbolic role which goes beyond the practical and rather reasonable concerns. Within Afghan political culture, one of the core roles of a leader is to marshal external assistance. Therefore, those heading up an LPI and appealing to young men or communities to follow them, can burnish their credentials by demonstrating that they have secured external assistance. Thus, for example, in the case of dealings with government, demonstrating the ability to get a hearing from the authorities may be as important as actually delivering practical protection. In terms of signalling, the fact of having a relationship with an external actor which has addressed practical issues such as getting safe passage for network members in government territory, signals that the external backer may be able to provide other forms of protection, the requirements for which may not initially be understood.

⁸ (HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH, 2020) as an example of analysis of suppression of civilian dissent

The notion of external backing is deeply ingrained. Doubts about the availability or reliability of external backing help to explain the relative paucity of fully developed local peace initiatives. There has long been a mismatch between what state actors are prepared to do to support local peace and what local peace actors expect in terms of support. Overcoming this mismatch would be one of the requirements for any significant expansion of LPIs.

Inclusiveness and local peace

One of the most widespread grievances about the Taliban and their Islamic Emirate political vehicle was that power was highly concentrated. Resources and responsible appointments in each province were monopolised by cliques who managed to retain the confidence of the Pakistan-based leadership. In Paktia, Taliban described how members of the Zadran tribe, loyal to deputy leader Khalifa Seraj and associates of zonal Military Commission chief, Qayyum Zakir, exercised undue influence. In the north, Taliban described an ethnic hierarchy of power in the movement, with Kandahari Pashtuns at its apex, followed by northern Pashtuns and then local non-Pashtuns (mainly Tajiks or Uzbeks), who had been accepted by the centre as loyal. Therefore, the impulse in mobilisation for local peace was towards a greater social inclusiveness than practised in the Islamic Emirate. In Paktia, this was strongly based in the prevailing concept of tribal shares. Zurmat the caucus used a local concept of “wand” or sub-district, as a guide for distributing invitations for civilian jirgas. In Jani Khel, the caucus tried to ensure that all clans of the dominant Mangal tribe participated in their events. In both of these districts, as well as the northern Pashtun district of Bala Morghab, social inclusiveness was pursued through the use of local conventions that ensured no clan or tribe should be excluded from the public sphere. In the north, in their movement-based approach, organisers prioritised mobilising within the aggrieved ethnic groups, in particular Uzbeks and Tajiks, but tried to build alliances to include all ethnicities present in the region. Their route to inclusiveness was through constructing an ethnic alliance.

In both north and south, caucus and movement-based approaches, women had no obvious role in the local peace-making. The caucuses and networks behind the movement were exclusively male in terms of membership. And open participation in activities, such as public meetings or de-escalation of fighting was likewise exclusively male. This was a reflection of the organisers’ understanding of conventions around access to the public space. They believed that the norms prevailing in their areas dictated that it was socially unacceptable for a woman to participate in a public meeting or play a representative function. Organisers believed that challenging such norms would lead to their organisations losing support and becoming marginalised. However, organisers also acknowledged that women were profoundly impacted by their actions. In the case of Bala Morghab, women had to cope with conflict-induced displacement while in Jani Khel, women directly benefitted from the reopening of the local girls’ lycee. In strategizing for the future, organisers identified niches within the public space where prohibitions on women were looser and there was some scope for “pushing the envelope”. For example, women have an accepted role in rural religious education, which is a potentially important tool in local peace-making. Likewise, even in conservative rural areas, where women are barred from physical meetings, some women do have access to social media. The implication is that, if local peacemakers

incorporate inclusion of women as a priority, socially appropriate, innovative approaches are available to allow some progress on this front⁹.

Programming local peace

The paucity of fully developed local peace initiatives is an anomaly given that many aspects of conditions in Afghanistan seem propitious and there is a long history of interest in the issue. Although neither the US nor the Afghan government prioritised local peace-making during the 2018-2021 peace initiative, multiple Afghan and international agencies made at least tentative efforts to support decentralised approaches to peace-making¹⁰. Gaps and contradictions in the state institutional infrastructure for peace have acted as an impediment to the support of local peace. Before its abolition, the High Peace Council was effectively marginalised within the state, lacking access to resources and side-lined by the executive branch. The State Ministry for Peace enjoyed better relations with the executive, but has adopted a cautious and minimally operational role, with little engagement with rural Afghanistan where local peace-making takes place. The High Council for National Reconciliation, established in 2020, has the mandate for peace-making within Afghanistan and has assigned senior figures to support LPIs. However, the council has yet to access resources and carve out a role in practical programming. Even if the HCNR does develop a role in support to LPIs, that support would require a multi-sectoral and multi-agency approach. In the broadest sense of local peace, as understood by those who have pioneered LPIs, security, economics, public health, justice, administration and communications are all implicated. The 2020 LPI pilots went ahead with a single government sponsor unsupported by any effective coordination and engagement with public bodies. In Afghan state practice, the provincial governors are well-placed to engage with local initiatives and deliver some level of coordination. For security coordination and assistance in dealings with insurgents, the governors generally turn to the National Directorate of Security. However, this dependence on the governors and NDS has clearly not resulted in a country-wide programme of support to local peace. Furthermore (Larson, 2018)ore, both civil society and Taliban involved in LPIs have called for support arrangements which balance the need for practical cooperation with competent state bodies on the one hand with the need for local peace actors to preserve and project their independence on the other hand.

No single national body in Afghanistan has clear competence for supporting local peace and clarification of roles and responsibilities between the several bodies which have peace promotion as part of their terms of reference is required. The High Council for National Reconciliation and State Ministry of Peace have acknowledged the importance of local peace.

IV. Recommendations

1. Conducive environment for support of LPIs

State actors should create a conducive environment for the support of LPIs and for the Afghan civilian actors involved in their execution at the local level. In particular this will require policies and mechanisms to ensure that peacemakers who engage with

⁹ (Azarbaijani-Moghaddam, 2018) (Special Inspector General Afghan Reconstruction, 2021) for recent examples of reality checks on the extent of space for gender equality promotion, including local peace

¹⁰ Bodies trying to support initiatives included the Afghan government's Directorate for Local Bodies, the High Peace Council, UNAMA, USIP and the office of the US Special Representative for Afghan Reconciliation.

insurgents, as part of bona fide local initiatives can avoid harassment by security agencies. In turn, parameters for legitimate engagement with communities in conflict affected areas and with insurgents should be clarified. Whereas this is a primarily a sovereign Afghan issue, any western donors hoping to support peace-making should also develop clear parameters for admissible activities and a mechanism to test them.

2. Resources

An appropriate level of resources should be made available for support of LPIs. Any funding mechanism should draw on previous experience, for example of reintegration programmes, where stewardship of resources was notoriously poor

3. Recognition of the role of Local Peace Initiatives

Individuals and communities involved in implementing area ceasefires or challenging conflict actors' activities in their areas often take considerable risk for the public good. National peace bodies and the media should recognise and celebrate local achievements as a way of legitimising and incentivising this work. Such recognition may also help to combat the stigma which may attach to dealings with insurgents or security agencies.

4. Explaining sub-national variation in conflict intensity

Conflict analysis should help to inform local peace programming. A useful area of inquiry is identification and explanation of sub-national variation in intensity and dynamics of conflict, and thus of variables which local peace actors can manipulate. This level of analysis has been neglected while the focus has been on top-down peacemaking.

5. Mix of state and independent support

Afghan state bodies can reasonably expect to play a lead role in channelling resources to and supporting LPIs. However, there should also be space for independent bodies to support local peace-making. This is important because some local peace actors, with a strong base in their communities and potential to mobilise for peace, calculate that their local legitimacy depends upon retaining a degree of autonomy. To fulfil their potential they must avoid the impression that they have been "captured" by the state.

6. Guidelines for LPI support

The Afghan Government should take the lead on developing norms and templates for the support of LPIs, which should be used to guide the funding and encouragement of local peace-making. The guidelines should encourage approaches which are most consistent with sustainable peace and avoid reinforcing Taliban authoritarian control of communities.

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