

Title Report:

A Rise to Peace Special Report on Youths' Views on the Afghan Peace Process

Abstract

This report sought to explore the youth of Afghanistan's views and perspective on the Afghan peace process. 187 respondents between the ages of 18-39 responded to the questionnaire and provided data for this report. Overall, the report highlighted youth concerns regarding women's role following peace agreements with the Taliban, but are of the opinion they have an effective role in these talks. Consequently, the youth expressed mixed feelings regarding negotiations with the Taliban, which following the increase of violence, leaves little optimism for peace. Policy recommendations will follow the report, which will suggest investment in education for the youth. Moreover, recommendations will be offered to neighboring countries, including Pakistan and Iran. This report suggests that more research is necessary to ensure inclusivity in the peace process, in anticipation of the withdrawal of foreign troops.

Authors:

Jonas Andersson and Isabella Björkman

Contributors: Mujib Faizy, Abdul Jamil Ziaey, Shabir Eman, Ahmad Mohibi, Atefa Tayeb, Homa Aryan, Fahima Kaihan, Homa Aryan

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1. Introduction

After 20 years of conflict, peace talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban have begun. Two decades of war and more than a half a century of political instability has created a fragile Afghanistan. Most of the youth in the country, which represents a large part of the population, have not witnessed peace in their lives. They dream of a peaceful Afghan society, however, they feel excluded from the current peace process. Therefore, this report will focus on Afghanistan's youth and what they think about different aspects of the peace process. The report is primarily a desk based study, including answers from a questionnaire that was created and distributed by Rise to Peace to university students in Kabul between 2018-2019.

After describing the data used for this report, a short overview of the current state of the conflict will be presented. Thereafter, the report will continue with briefly describing the Youth, Peace and Security Agenda, including youths' views of the Afghan peace process. Following this, it will discuss the issue of inclusivity with a focus on the role of women and continue with the U.S. - Taliban peace agreement, the reintegration of former fighters, the role of foreign troops, Islamic countries and the High Peace Council.

Finally, the report will conclude with a set of recommendations. The recommendations include investment in education for youth and especially women, to create a meaningful inclusion for youth in the peace process and to create a stable and trustful peace institution. Moreover, the recommendations highlight the importance of the participation of neighbouring countries in the peace process, the importance of taking several aspects into account relating to the withdrawal of foreign troops, and that more research is needed with regards to the reintegration of former fighters in order to ensure inclusivity also in this process.

2. Description of the Charts

This report is primarily a desk-based study which is complemented by a questionnaire created and distributed by Rise to Peace to university students in Kabul 2018-2019. The questionnaire consists of eight questions with the purpose of capturing young Afghans' views on;

- The role of Islamic countries and foreign troops in the peace process;
- The role of women in the peace process, and after the signing of a peace agreement;
- The negotiations with the Taliban and the impact of the Taliban prisoners' release on the peace process; and
- The performance of the High Peace Council.

The questionnaire was answered by 187 respondents, the majority between the ages of 18 and 39. Approximately, 24 percent of the respondents are young women while 76 percent are young men, which limits the possibility to generalize within the group ‘young women’ in Afghanistan. In addition, the report is limited to respondents attending university, therefore it cannot generalize amongst the group ‘youth’ in Afghanistan. Hence, more research is needed to capture the different groups of youth, such as those who are not attending university and those who live in provinces other than Kabul. To provide an overview of the results, the answers are presented in charts that can be found under the different sections. In addition, a few quotes are presented throughout the report to further highlight the views of youth.

3. Current State of the Conflict

The report will begin with a brief summary of the conflict background leading up to the intra-Afghan peace talks in Doha, Qatar.

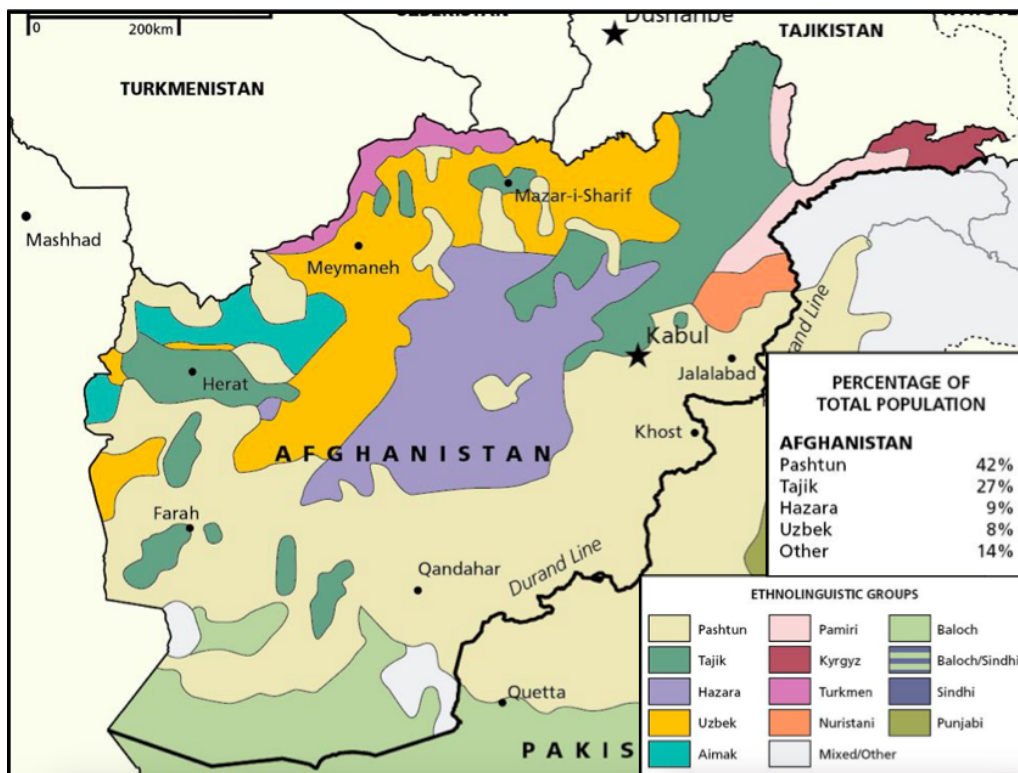


Image 1: Modified picture showing the different ethnic groups in Afghanistan (National Geographic, 2020).

As shown in Image 1, Afghanistan is made up of many different ethnic groups which throughout the years, have led to many internal struggles within the country (Peace Insight, 2020). Different groups have battled the regime and each other in attempts to control the country (UCDP, 2020a). Due to its geographical position, Afghanistan has for a long time been used as a battleground by external powers for strategic wars (Peace Insight, 2020). This

includes the competition for influence in the region by Russia and the United Kingdom (UCDP, 2020b). In the late 1970s, Afghanistan's Communist Party had difficulties controlling rural areas. Resistance by conservative tribes in the country led to the invasion of the Soviet Union in 1979, as well as the internationalisation of the crisis in Afghanistan (CR, 2018, p.3). In the mid 1990s, claiming to "return the country to Islam" (CR, 2018, p.3), the Taliban appeared as a new actor as a result of discontent with the rule of local warlords. The Taliban controlled the government between 1996-2001 and "established a strict Islamic state based on the Pashtun approach to sharia law" (UCDP, 2020b).

In 1999, the United Nations (UN) imposed sanctions on both the Taliban and al-Qaeda, who have a long history in Afghanistan, dating back to the Soviet invasion. Both groups were subsequently classified as terrorist organizations. In response to the 9/11 attacks carried out by al-Qaeda in 2001 - which shaped the future of Afghanistan for a long time to come - the U.S. President George W. Bush announced the "War on Terror." Less than a month later, the U.S. started bombing Taliban forces in Afghanistan. In November 2001, the Taliban had been toppled. One month later, the UN invited the Northern Alliance, a resistance group against the Taliban, and others to Bonn, Germany, for a conference on the re-creation of the state Afghanistan, including the creation of a new constitution. The discussions during the conference led to the signing of the Bonn Agreement (CFR, 2020).

After the Taliban fell on December 9, 2001, a new constitution was adopted in 2004 with the intention to unite the country's different ethnical groups. Later that year, Hamid Karzai became the first democratically elected president, and he was later re-elected in 2009. Ten years after the Bonn Agreement, a new conference in Bonn took place with the attempt to discuss the political roadmap in Afghanistan. However, this attempt failed. In 2017, the self-proclaimed Islamic State Khorasan Province increased in Western Afghanistan, and the Taliban seemed to be stronger than ever since the toppling in 2001. In 2018, the talks between the U.S. and the Taliban started, and two years later, they signed the Agreement for Bringing Peace into Afghanistan, hereafter referred to as the U.S. - Taliban peace agreement (Agreement for bringing peace to Afghanistan, 2020; CFR, 2020, MEI, 2020).

Since 2001 and the intervention of a U.S.-led multinational force, there has been heavy fighting between the Taliban and the internationally backed regime. Subsequently, the world has seen a continuation of the Taliban movement (UCDP, 2020a). In 2019, the conflict continued to escalate and the Taliban "controlled more territory than during any other year since the invasion led by the government of the United States of America in 2001" (UCDP, 2020a). As shown in Image 2, in 2020, the Taliban controlled several parts of the country. This included the borders to neighbouring countries of Iran and Pakistan.

AFGHANISTAN Who controls what

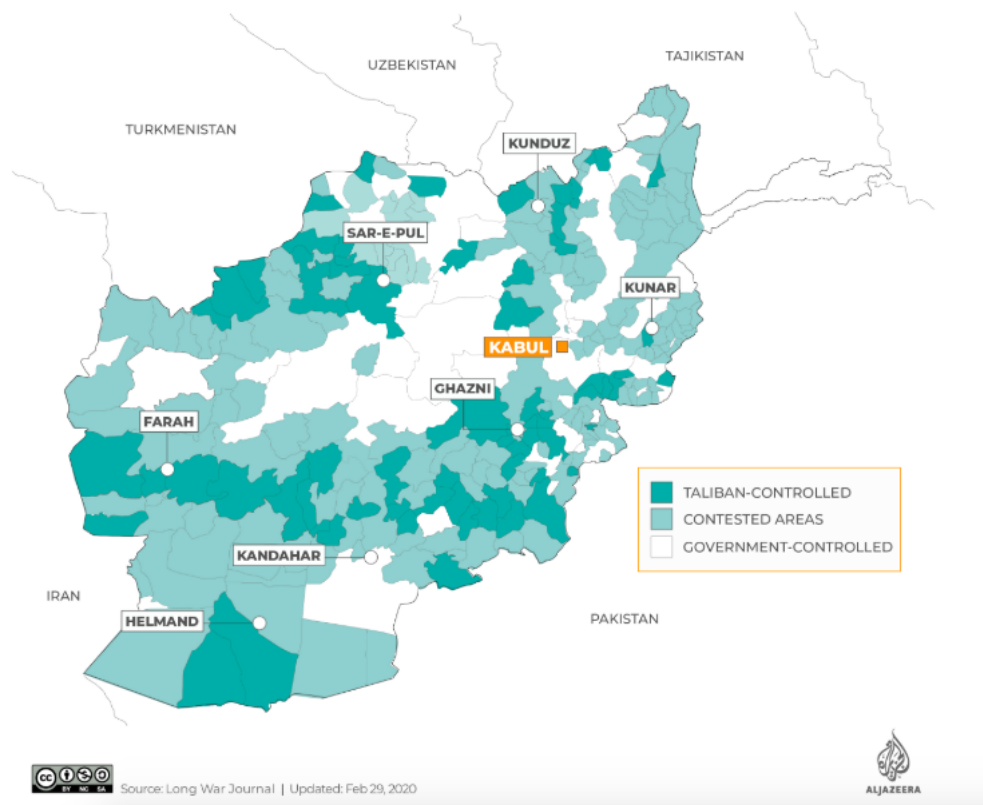


Image 2: Who controls what in Afghanistan (al-Jazeera, 2020a).

Several peace conferences have been held in order to find a political settlement to the conflict in Afghanistan (UCDP, 2020a). The U.S. - Taliban peace agreement specified that peace talks among the parties would begin in March 2020 (ICG, 2020a). However, due to a disagreement over a prisoners' exchange, it took until September 12, 2020, for representatives from the Afghan government together with Taliban members to gather in Doha, Qatar, for intra-Afghan peace talks (Furcoi & Qazi, 2020).

3.1 Intra-Afghan Peace Talks in Doha, Qatar

The intra-Afghan talks represent a unique opportunity to reach a peace agreement and to change the current reality of conflict, which is what many Afghans have experienced their whole lives (Cordaid, 2020; ICG, 2020b). Before starting to discuss issues such as external influence and issues of power, the parties needed to come to an agreement regarding the rules and procedures of the talks, which they did in December 2020. This ultimately opened up the door for discussions about substantive issues, including the reduction of violence (Worden, 2020a).

Throughout the years, the peace process in Afghanistan has received criticism for not being inclusive (International Alert, 2020). In particular, Afghan women have a history of being excluded from peace talks and political processes despite their significant involvement in bringing peace and development to Afghanistan (IPI, 2020). In this aspect, the youth are another group with a history of getting involved in politics and making a difference (CR, 2018, p.3). However, they are yet to see meaningful participation in the peace process, including political discussions (CR, 2018, p.9).

4. The Youth, Peace and Security Agenda

Following the Women, Peace and Security Agenda, which opened up the space to recognize “non-traditional” peace and security issues at the UN Security Council (UNSC), the Youth, Peace and Security Agenda was established with the purpose of the inclusion and participation of youth. This was achieved by the adoption of the UN Security Council (UNSC) Resolution 2250 (UNSCR 2250, 2015), which recognized for the first time that “young people play an important and positive role in the maintenance and promotion of international peace and security” (Berents, 2020). After UNSCR 2250, the UNSC has adopted UNSCR 2419 (UNSCR 2419, 2018) as well as UNSCR 2535 (UNSCR 2535, 2020).

Throughout the work so far, it is possible to conclude that “including youth in peace processes will result in more inclusive and representative governance structures that will foster more peaceful societies” (Berents, 2020). Moreover, Resolution 2250 is urging member states to set up “mechanisms that would enable young people to participate meaningfully in peace processes and dispute resolution” (Ahmadi & Stanikzai, 2018, p.2). The latter becomes especially important in countries with a young population, such as Afghanistan, due to those countries having an increased risk of conflict (Ahmadi & Stanikzai, 2018, p.2).

4.1 Youth in Afghanistan

Due to the conflict in Afghanistan, approximately two million people have been killed, over a million disabled or orphaned and as another consequence, nearly two generations have grown up surrounded by conflict (Ahmadi & Stanikzai, 2018, p.1).

“Peace is very important for the youth and employment will lead to development of the country.”

Male, BA, 24 years old.

Currently, over 60 percent of Afghanistan’s population is under the age of 25, and roughly 46 percent is under the age of 15 (UNFPA, 2020). Because of conflict, “young people in Afghanistan face significant challenges related to health, education, employment and gender

inequality” (UNFPA, 2020). There have been decades of lost educational opportunities and pervasive unemployment which “combined with insecurity and ongoing violence, have placed a tremendous burden on the youth population, particularly young men who are often forced to assume the role of breadwinner at a very young age” (Ahmadi & Stanikzai, 2018, p.1). As a consequence of high unemployment rates, “a significant number of Afghan youth have become involved in organized crime or other illegal—and often violent—activities to fulfill their perceived obligations and duties to family” (Ahmadi & Stanikzai, 2018, p.2). Equally, there are specific challenges facing young women because of their gender, including direct violence and low level harassment. In turn, this is affecting their opportunities not only to participate meaningfully in politics, but in their participation in society (CR, 2018, p.8).

4.2 Youth Participation in the Peace Process

Research shows that youth in Afghanistan feel “removed from the ongoing peace project and that they have had little involvement in the political discussions around the peace process” (CR, 2018, p.9). Young women especially, feel restricted to take part in peace processes at a local and national level (CR, 2018, p.9). Furthermore, research shows a lot of disagreements amongst youth in Afghanistan with regards to which group harbours blame for the current instabilities in the country. However, there are critical sentiments towards the government and corruption. This is mainly in response to government hiring becoming intertwined with corruption of local leaders. As a consequence, there is distrust for the leaders and the explanations they provide concerning the ongoing political situation in the country (CR, 2018, pp.5-6). As shown in Chart 1, even though the majority of the participants responded that they had witnessed efforts to ensure peace in Afghanistan, almost 30 percent responded that they have not. This might be explained by the lack of trust in their leaders.

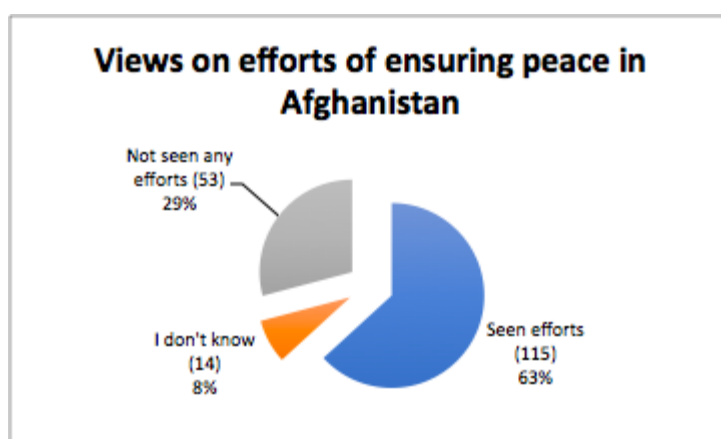


Chart 1: Views on efforts of ensuring peace in Afghanistan.

There is a perception amongst youth in Afghanistan that older leaders undermine younger leaders and that there is no tolerance for them. Instead, according to some youth “their priority is personal interest, their families and how to extend their power” (CR, 2018, p.8).

This highlights the difficulties that youth experience when trying to enter the political space. In addition to distrust in the government and the issue of power, there are critical views amongst youth toward international actors in Afghanistan, where Pakistan and the U.S. have been seen as perpetrators of the conflict. With regards to external actors, there is also a general idea that international presence in the country has been less for the welfare of Afghans, but more for personal gains of those actors (CR, 2018, pp.6-7).

Looking at inclusivity and youth in Afghanistan, young women face specific challenges because of their gender, making them more excluded from different processes compared to their male counterparts. Therefore, the issue of gender equality, women's rights, and women's role, are of great importance in the current peace talks. This is especially important since research shows that a broad buy-in from society is important for a more successful implementation phase after a peace agreement has been reached (UN, 2012). This is in addition to helping build legitimacy for the peace agreement (Krause, Krause & Bränfors, 2018) and the process as a whole (Broome, 2002).

5. Inclusivity in the Peace Process: the Role of Women

Historically, women in Afghanistan have played a role in the decision-making processes and conflict resolution, including the traditional jirga system¹, where they have contributed to resolving issues in their role as wife, mother or daughter (Azadmanesh & Ghafoori, 2020, p.5). Through their work in the jirga and local councils, women play an active role “in conflict resolution and local peace processes that are key for holding communal peace” (Azadmanesh & Ghafoori, 2020, p.47). Moreover, they contribute to bringing peace and development to their country (IPI, 2020; Larson & Ramsbotham, 2018, p.63) for example, by negotiating with local Taliban groups to solve local issues (Kakar, 2019).

Compared to when the Taliban were in power in the 1990s, today, women in Afghanistan have been empowered and they have emerged as more visible leaders at different levels of society, including occupying 25 percent of the seats in the parliament (IPI, 2020). Despite this, many women experience a lack of basic social and legal rights, exclusion from peace talks and the political processes (IPI, 2020). Compared to their male counterparts, women are restricted from participating in meaningful roles in society and within political structures (Azadmanesh & Ghafoori, 2020, p.47).

5.1 Negotiations with the Taliban

¹ Jirga is an informal body composed of older, influential and educated people in a community which undertakes conflict and dispute resolution through arbitration (Azadmanesh & Ghafoori, 2020).

While there is a general acceptance that “a negotiated peace will entail the participation of [the] Taliban in institutions of governance” (APPRO, 2019, p.55), many women’s rights activists are worried that their rights are to be compromised as negotiations continue (Azadmanesh & Ghafoori, 2020, p.8). They are concerned that the Taliban have not changed their views on women’s rights, women’s participation in social or political affairs and that they object to women’s inclusion in the peace process (Azadmanesh & Ghafoori, 2020, p.47). This is also reflected in the answers from the distributed questionnaires, as seen in Chart 2 below, with a majority of respondents thinking that women’s role will decrease in Afghanistan after a peace agreement. However, research also suggests that Taliban leaders are prepared to acknowledge women’s rights to work and education (ICG, 2020c, p.32).

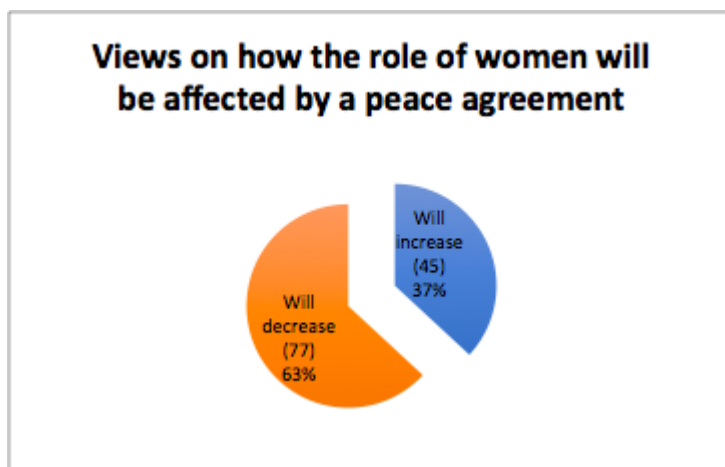


Chart 2: Views on how the role of women will be affected by a peace agreement.

For peace to be sustainable, it is vital to have an inclusive process with regards to who is involved in the more informal negotiations, the issues discussed as well as who is sitting at the negotiation table (UN, 2012). For the women in Afghanistan, the stakes are high in terms of what might be the result of the peace process (IPI, 2020), and currently, there are four women in the Afghan government negotiating team (ICG, 2020b) who can bring new perspectives to the peace talks. This includes a greater focus on political and legal reforms, social and economic recovery as well as transitional justice (IPI, 2020). In addition, they work not only to ensure but also to expand women’s rights to education, to work, and to move freely (Wilson Center, 2020). With regards to women’s role in the peace process, as seen in chart 3 below, the majority of the respondents were of the opinion that women have an effective role, which can be seen to reflect women’s role in resolving issues in society. However, the results can also be seen to reflect some of the complexities with regards to women’s rights in Afghanistan.

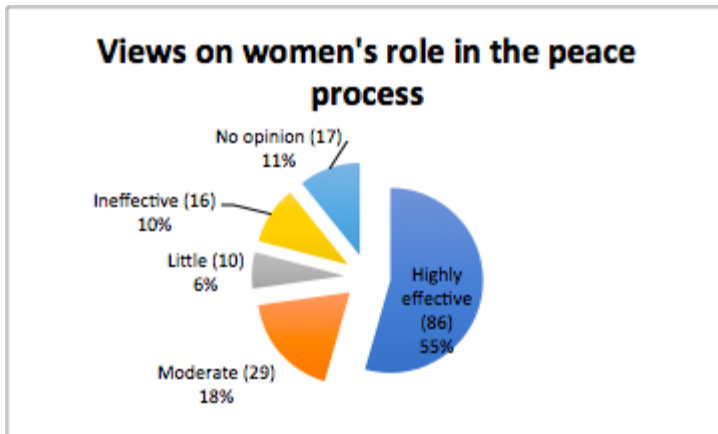


Chart 3: Views on women’s role in the peace process.

The next section will focus on the U.S. - Taliban peace agreement which has been viewed as an important opening for the negotiations in Doha, but at the same time, it has also been criticized, amongst other things, for not mentioning women’s rights.

6. The U.S. - Taliban Peace Agreement

In addition to establishing a 14-month withdrawal timeline of U.S. troops, the U.S. - Taliban peace agreement signed in February 2020, agrees on some aspects with regards to counter terrorism and security. Moreover, it commits the Taliban to begin intra-Afghan negotiations with Afghan political and civil society leaders and government representatives. Furthermore, it establishes a comprehensive cease-fire to be an item on the agenda for those negotiations. In addition, it covers the release of Taliban prisoners held by the government and government prisoners held by the Taliban.

Even though the agreement is viewed as an important opening with regards to the current negotiations (Worden, 2020b), it has been criticized for not referencing women’s rights, lacking a language of Afghanistan remaining a democracy as well as deciding to release prisoners before peace talks begin (George, 2020a). For some Afghan officials and civilians, the agreement has been viewed as a betrayal (George, 2020b), and there is additional critique saying that it demanded too little from the Taliban in return for the exit of U.S. forces (George, 2020c). Moreover, it is viewed as problematic that following the signing of the agreement, Afghanistan witnessed an increase in violence (George, 2020a), which undermines the legitimacy of the peace talks in Doha (SIGAR, 2020, p.69). In turn, this can explain the mixed views as shown in Chart 4, when youth were asked whether or not negotiations with the Taliban will bring peace to the country.

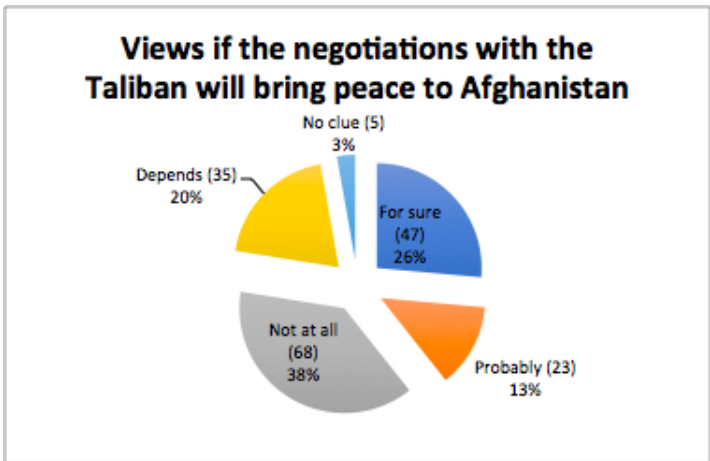


Chart 4: Views if the negotiations with the Taliban will bring peace to Afghanistan.

“The U.S. and Afghanistan should agree on a peace deal that will result in “real” peace in Afghanistan.”

Female, college, 20 years old.

As already mentioned, the agreement addresses a prisoners’ release, a cease fire, U.S. troop withdrawal, as well as Taliban counterterrorism guarantees and intra-Afghan negotiations. It is stating that these are interrelated and that they should be “implemented in accordance with its own agreed timeline and agreed terms, but no timelines and terms are mentioned” (Worden, 2020b). Looking specifically at the prisoners’ release, the release of combat and political prisoners was a confidence-building measure (SIGAR, 2020, p.106) that has been met with a lot of concern, especially relating to a lack of a defined strategy should Taliban prisoners return to fighting (Tolo News, 2020). In turn, this could help explain respondents’ views as shown in Chart 5 below.

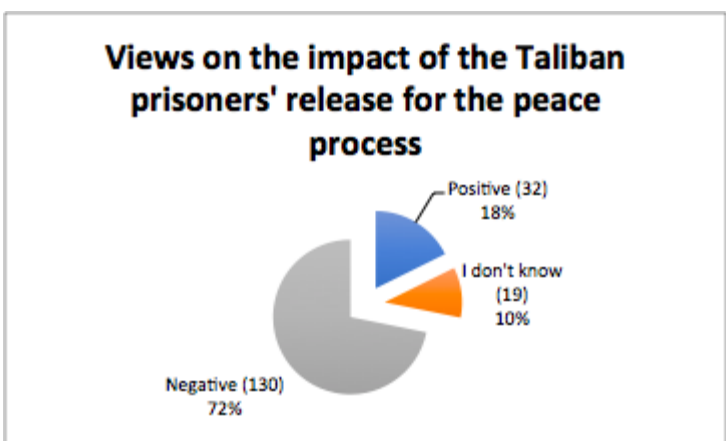


Chart 5: Views on the impact of the Taliban prisoners' release for the peace process.

6.1 Reintegration of Former Fighters

Reintegration of former fighters and their families into society, both socially and economically, is important for sustainable peace. Should this not be the case, there is a risk that these individuals are more vulnerable to recruitment by criminal groups or terrorist organizations (SIGAR, 2019, p.1). Previous Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) programs² have had limited effect, both due to the Afghan government's difficulties in administering the programs as well as the Taliban fighters' little interest in defecting (Dobbins, Campell, Miller & Zimmerman, 2020, p.11). Prior experience in Afghanistan also demonstrates the importance of ensuring that communities play a role "in planning and executing a reintegration program" (SIGAR, 2019, p.96), highlighting the importance of inclusivity in this process. Moreover, the programs should deliver benefits to former combatants and the communities that receive them. If not, this can create perceptions of favoritism and fuel community resentment, which ultimately risk derailing the reintegration process (SIGAR, 2019, p.96).

With regards to DDR programs, international assistance, including assistance from the U.S., will help hold the parties responsible to carry out what they agree on (Dobbins, Campell, Miller & Zimmerman, 2020, p.10). Given that Taliban fighters also operate out of Pakistan, external actors such as Pakistan play an important role in overseeing "the reintegration of Taliban fighters who choose to remain in the country thereafter" (Dobbins, Campell, Miller & Zimmerman, 2020 p.8). Understanding the importance of inclusion and the role of external actors is vital when planning and implementing DDR programs and also during significant events such as a prisoners' release.

7. Impact of Different Stakeholders

As mentioned in the previous section, there are two parties at the negotiation table in Doha, Qatar. However, there are other actors such as neighbouring countries and foreign troops who could have an impact both on the conflict and on the peace talks. Therefore, this section, which is divided into two parts, will look into the U.S. and NATO in addition to Iran and Pakistan.

7.1 Foreign Troops

In response to the 9/11 attacks, the U.S. invaded Afghanistan. Ever since, foreign troops have been present in the country. In 2008, the Obama Administration increased U.S. forces in Afghanistan to 68,000 troops and the following year an additional 30,000 troops were deployed. In 2011, however, the Obama Administration announced plans to withdraw troops

² The Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration program (DDR, 2003–2005); the Disbandment of Illegal Armed Groups program (DIAG, 2005–2011); Program Tahkim-e Sulh (PTS or Strengthening Peace Program, 2005–2011); the Afghanistan Peace and Reintegration Program (APRP, 2010–2016); and reintegration commitments within the 2016 Hezb-i Islami Gulbuddin deal with the Afghan government (HIG, 2016–present) (SIGAR, 2019, p.13).

from Afghanistan and at the end of 2019, the Trump Administration only had 8,600 troops left in the country (al-Jazeera, 2020b). In 2019, 18 years after the war started, the U.S. was still present in the country, and as already mentioned, one year later, the Taliban and the U.S. signed the U.S. - Taliban peace agreement. Until 2019, more than 2,400 Americans had lost their lives in Afghanistan, and it is the longest war in American history (al-Jazeera, 2020a; BBC, 2020).

“As long as the U.S. is here, you can only see peace in your dreams. There is no peace.”

Male, BA, 22 years old.

NATO, with its mission International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), is another foreign actor that has been present with troops in Afghanistan. ISAF, which was established by the UN at the Bonn conference in 2001, was a NATO-lead security mission in Afghanistan until 2014 (NATO, 2015; DW, 2019). The mission deployed over 130,000 soldiers from 51 NATO member countries and partner nations. Its mandate was to control and secure Kabul and to assist the transition government. However, in 2006, the mandate expanded to cover the entirety of Afghanistan. ISAF’s aim was to provide security sector reform, including training and monitoring to the Afghan government, the international community, the Afghan National Police, and the Afghan National Army. At the end of 2014, the Afghan National Security Forces had taken over the control of the security in Afghanistan and the ISAF mission changed to a smaller non-combat mission (NATO, 2015).

“The presence of foreign troops is a big problem for peace in Afghanistan. In case they leave the country, peace will automatically and permanently come to the country and people.”

Male, college, 25 years old.

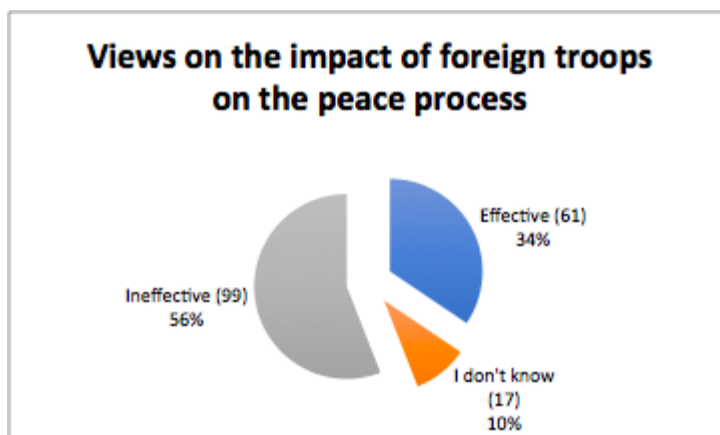


Chart 6: Views on the impact of foreign troops on the peace process.

The youth in Afghanistan have during their whole - or most of their lives - lived with the presence of foreign troops without seeing an end to the conflict. As shown in Chart 6 above,

56 percent of the respondents answered that foreign troops are ineffective. The respondents and the two quotes give the impression that it is important for youth, that foreign troops leave the country. According to the U.S. - Taliban peace agreement, the U.S. will withdraw its troops by May 2021³ (Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan, 2020). However, there has been an increase of violence since September last year, which will have an impact on the discussions of U.S. withdrawal (SIGAR, 2020). In turn, the latter can have a great impact on both the internal stability in Afghanistan as well as the stability of the region. Neighbouring countries have a great interest in a peaceful Afghanistan since that also affects the stability of the region, which is why the next part of this report will look into youths' views on the role of Islamic countries in the peace process.

7.2 Islamic Countries

Neighbouring Islamic countries can play a vital role in the peace process. This part of the report will focus specifically on Iran and Pakistan, due to their close ties to Afghanistan as well as their history with the Taliban.

7.2.1 Iran

Iran, a neighbouring country to the west, shares many ties, both religiously and culturally with Afghanistan. Despite this, they also share a long history of differences. Iran supported the American-led invasion in 2001 to overthrow the Taliban-led government in Kabul, however, during the last few years, there has been a shift in Iran's approach towards the Taliban. Reports state that Iran has assisted the Taliban with weapons, conducted military training, and that top Taliban leaders have been to Tehran for discussions with Iran on the situation in Afghanistan (European Eye on Radicalization, 2020; MEI, 2020). Moreover, Iran has often seen Afghanistan as a safe-haven for sunni extremists (Worden, 2018), and it is also reported that Iran paid bounties to the Taliban to conduct attacks on American and coalition troops (CNN, 2020). In addition, Iran and the Taliban have both been fighting the Islamic State Khorasan Province, who have been growing in Western Afghanistan, and they also consider the U.S. to be their enemy (Nader, Scotten, Rahmani, Stewart & Mahnad, 2014; MEI, 2020).

Moreover, Iran has a complicated relationship towards the Afghan government which is partly due to the fact that since 1979, the country has hosted Afghan refugees. Today, it is reported that one to three million Afghans live in Iran. However, many of them are denied basic services. Drug trafficking over the Iranian/Afghan border - particularly Opium - is another concern for the Iranian government (Worden, 2018). Another area of conflict between Afghanistan and Iran is the access to water for Iranians in the eastern region. They are dependent on water from the Afghan Helmand River, and agreements have been signed

³ U.S. President Biden announced on April 13, 2021, that U.S. troops will leave Afghanistan by September 11, 2021 (al-Jazeera, 2021).

over the years to grant access to water for Iran, including an agreement for “comprehensive cooperation”, signed by the Iranian Government and the Afghan Government in July 2020. In this agreement, Iran will cooperate with Afghanistan in the economic, cultural, educational, and security sectors and in return Afghanistan will “back down” from its position over the water (Ariana News, 2020).

Finally, Iran is recognized by the U.S. Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation, to be an actor with “enormous capacity to help or hinder the political stability of its neighbors and, thus, advance or retard US interests in the Middle East” (Atlantic Council, 2020). This demonstrates the important role that Iran can play in the current peace process, despite the region's conflict between the two countries as mentioned above.

7.2.2. Pakistan

Pakistan, which is a neighboring country to the east, also shares both religious and cultural ties with Afghanistan. Pakistan aims at building close cooperative relations with Afghanistan which in turn “is a high priority of Pakistan’s foreign policy and a vital component of our vision of a ‘peaceful neighbourhood’” (MOFA, 2020). This clearly demonstrates that Pakistan also has a vital interest in the ongoing peace process. However, Pakistan has been used as a safe-haven for the Taliban, which has worsened an already strained relationship between the two countries dating back to 1947, when Afghanistan voted against a Pakistani entrance into the UN (Nagra, Mustafa & Imran, 2019).

During the Soviet invasion in Afghanistan, the U.S. supported the Mujahideen, which later separated into two groups; the Taliban and the Northern Alliance (Britannica, 2020). After the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan, Pakistan supported the Taliban for several reasons and, in addition, the Taliban was viewed by Pakistan as an Islamist ally who would sympathize over the Kashmir region against India. At this time, Pakistan wanted a secure Afghanistan, especially on Afghanistan's eastern border, and to be able to influence Kabul and the region so that Pakistan could become a major player. In 1996, Pakistan assisted the Taliban to seize control over most of Afghanistan, however, it became complicated after the 9/11 attacks and Pakistan needed to choose sides and eventually decided to support the American-led invasion (Katz, 2016). Pakistan has also permitted transit of material and tolerated American missile attacks on the Taliban and al-Qaeda targets in Pakistan (Katz, 2016).

Moreover, Pakistan is hosting the most Afghan refugees in the world and it is reported that as many as 3.5 million Afghans live as refugees in Pakistan, of whom 1.4 million are registered (UNHCR, 2020). Pakistan does not have a Refugee Law and has not signed the United Nations 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, which means many Afghans who are born in Pakistan are not entitled to a Pakistan citizenship or basic rights (Bpb, 2019).

Another area for tensions between Afghanistan and Pakistan is the Durand Line, which was established by the British colonial rule and works as a border between the two countries. It is dividing the Pashtun population and is today a disputed area for the Taliban (The Diplomat, 2020; Lambah, 2012) in addition to being used for drug smuggling into Pakistani territory. The Taliban are controlling some of the area and the U.S., as well as Pakistan, have carried out attacks on the Taliban along the Durand Line (Katz, 2016). Despite the listed tensions above, looking at what Pakistan is communicating officially via the Pakistani Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the country's aim is to build close cooperation relations with Afghanistan, something which could be useful moving forward in the Afghan peace process.

The respondents were asked about their views on the role of Islamic countries in the peace process. As seen in Chart 7 below, half of them see their role as negative, 41 percent see it as positive and the rest preferred not to say. The negativity towards the role of Islamic countries in the peace process could perhaps be explained by Iran supporting the Taliban, especially with the conducting of military training and the use of their territory as a safe-haven. In addition, and as mentioned previously in the report, the negativity could be explained by the general critical view that exists amongst youth towards external actors (CR, 2018, pp.6-7).

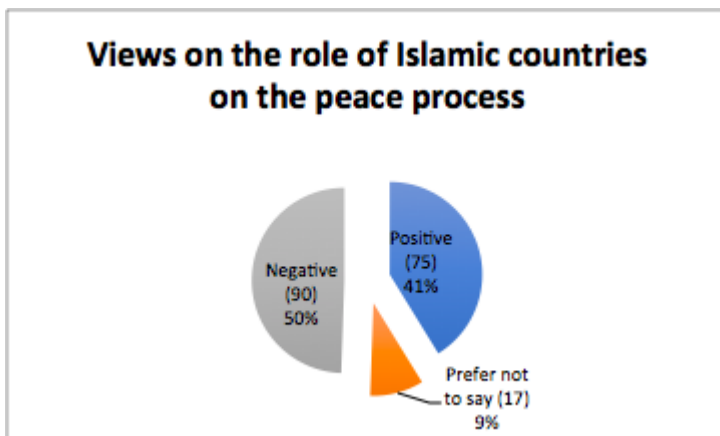


Chart 7: Views on the role of Islamic countries in the peace process.

As demonstrated, Islamic countries, Iran and Pakistan, share close ties with Afghanistan. A peaceful region is a concern for both countries, and therefore, they have a vital interest in the peace process. During the years of war, there have been several attempts to bring peace to Afghanistan. This also includes attempts for peace from within the country. The next section of this report will focus on the High Peace Council, an Afghan institution for peace.

8. The High Peace Council

This section will look into the background and youths' satisfaction with the performance of the Afghanistan High Peace Council (HPC), which was created as part of the peace process in 2010. Today, the High Peace Council has been replaced by the High Council for National

Reconciliation (HCNR), however, it was still in place at the time when the questionnaires were distributed. The HPC was established by the former President Hamid Kirzai, as a result of the Jirga conference. This was established with the aim to negotiate with the Taliban and other violent groups, in an attempt to bring peace to Afghanistan. The Jirga conference included 1600 participants from all 34 provinces, including representatives from women's rights groups, religious scholars and members of the cabinet. Despite this, researchers argue that the HPC was heavily influenced by the government, hence it created mistrust by the Taliban towards the leaders of the HPC. The HPC was also criticized by the civil society and some members of the Afghan society, mainly women and rights activists, for including warlords and jihadists in the peace process (Taieb, 2020).

“Men and women of integrity and good reputation should be appointed as head and members of the High Peace Council.”

Male, BA, 24 years old.

The HPC was not able to fulfill its duties and, as already mentioned, was later dissolved and replaced with the High Council for National Reconciliation before the negotiations started in Doha (Taieb, 2020; Salehi & Rasikh 2021). Earlier in February this year, the U.S. secretary of state spoke with the chairman of HCNR, Dr. Abdullah Abdullah, on the review of the U.S. strategy in Afghanistan and thanked him for his vital work in the peace process (U.S. Department of State, 2021). The respondents were asked how satisfied they were with the performance of the HPC. In Chart 8 below, 51 percent responded that they were not satisfied and 42 percent answered that the HPC has done nothing for peace at all. In total, 93 percent of the respondents were negative towards the work of the HPC. The negative response from the respondents can be explained by several aspects of the work of the HPC. For example, research shows that the HPC was:

“...established to act independently in bringing together the Afghan government and the Taliban. However, later it became obvious that it was heavily influenced by the government. HPC's dependency on the government caused the Taliban not to fully trust on the body as a reliable channel for peace talks. Also, lack of or low level of legitimacy and lack of expertise were other reasons that caused HPC to fail in fulfilling its duties” (Taieb, 2020, p.1).

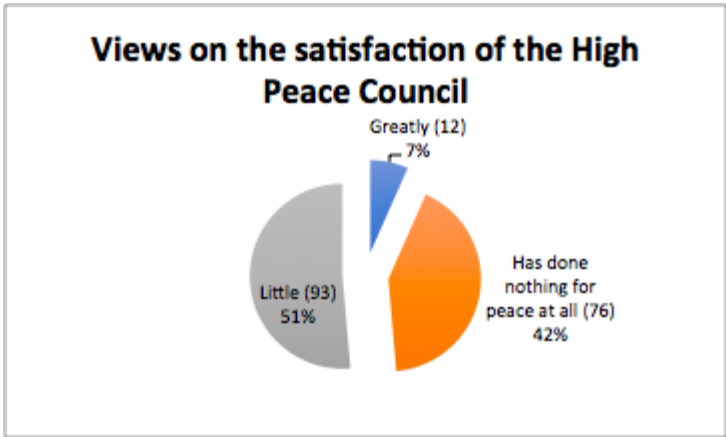


Chart 8: Views on the satisfaction of the High Peace Council.

It is of great importance that different groups of the population are included in a peace process, for it to be more sustainable and equal. Moreover, it is of great importance to build institutions that are inclusive, that instills trust in the population. However, the critique towards the HPC also demonstrates some of the additional complexities with the concept of inclusion. The next chapter of this report will present conclusions based on the research carried out. It will be finalised with a set of recommendations.

9. Conclusion and Recommendations

In 2015, the UNSC adopted Resolution 2250, which recognized for the first time that young people play an important and positive role in the maintenance and promotion of international peace and security. Since then, it has been possible to conclude that the inclusion of youth in the peace processes result in more inclusive and representative governance structures that in turn will foster more peaceful societies. At the same time, research shows that youth in Afghanistan, especially young women, feel excluded from the peace process and other political processes. Additionally, it has demonstrated that they have a broad distrust in their leaders. Moreover, countries with a young population, such as Afghanistan, have an increased risk of conflict, which further motivates the inclusion of as well as the activation of youth at different levels of society. Therefore, this report has focused on the views of Afghanistan's youth relating to different aspects of the ongoing peace process. It has covered the role of women in, and after, the signing of a peace agreement, the negotiations with the Taliban and the impact of the Taliban prisoners' release. Moreover, it has looked at the role of Islamic countries and other stakeholders, including the role of foreign troops and the performance of the High Peace Council (HPC).

The questionnaires that were created and distributed by Rise to Peace in Kabul between 2018-2019 demonstrate that youth in Afghanistan have strong opinions about the peace process in their country. In brief, they are worried that women's role will decrease after a peace agreement with the Taliban, but they are also of the opinion that women have an effective role in the peace process. This can be seen as demonstrating the complexities around women's role, including how the role of women has changed over time to become more visible. Youth who responded to the questionnaire have mixed views if negotiating with the Taliban will bring peace to the country. Specifically regarding the Taliban prisoners' release, a majority of the respondents were negative towards the impact of the release for the peace process. This could be a result of the agreement signed in February 2020 between the U.S. and the Taliban, which has been seen as an important step towards peace. However, it is also an agreement that has been fairly criticized. In addition, the following increase in violence that the country has experienced leaves little hope for peace and creates distrust for the peace process.

In relation to the peace process, over 50 percent of the respondents view foreign troops as ineffective. Half of them see the role of Islamic countries in the peace process as negative, while 41 percent see it as positive. As shown, when it comes to external actors, it is rather divided. Regarding one of Afghanistan's institutions for peace, almost all the respondents were negative towards the work by the HPC. This could be due to a lack of or low level of legitimacy, including a lack of trust of expertise within the institution.

This report will now present its recommendations which aim at contributing to a more meaningful inclusion of youth in Afghanistan. By representing such a big part of the population, youth both have the right and the obligation to be part of shaping the future of their country. Therefore, this report recommends:

- **To invest in education for boys and girls, young men and women**

As already mentioned, conflict has negatively affected youth and their education, and many experience difficulties in finding jobs. This situation can force youth, especially young men, to become involved in illegal and violent activities in order to support their families. Education is key to a more peaceful society and to a more gender equal society. Therefore, it is important for Afghanistan to invest in high-quality education which could be a way to unlock multi-generation potential. In addition, jobs can lead to a higher economic inclusion which is important especially for young women (Wilson Center, 2020).

- **To create meaningful inclusion in the current peace process and other political processes**

To strive for more inclusive processes should not only be because of good will or to tick a box. As stated previously, including youth in peace processes result in more inclusive and representative governance structures that will foster more peaceful societies. Moreover, UNSC Resolution 2250 urges member states to set up mechanisms to enable young people to participate meaningfully in peace processes. Here, a specific focus should be on including young women as they currently experience more difficulties compared to their male counterparts.

One way of ensuring broader representation is through mechanisms such as the Afghan Mechanism for Inclusive Peace (AMIP) (AMIP, 2021a). The AMIP came about on the request from the Afghan civil society, who wanted a structured and sustainable mechanism for inclusion. It aims to provide a pathway from local, cultural and religious leaders, women, youth, and victims across the country (AMIP, 2021b). AMIP could therefore fulfill an important function, of bringing together and raising the voices of Afghanistan's youth in their quest and preparation for peace.

- **To conduct more research on the issue of reintegration**

The reintegration of former fighters and their families in society, both socially and economically, is vital for sustainable peace in Afghanistan. There have been several DDR programs launched in the country. Prior experience has demonstrated the importance of ensuring that communities play a role in both the planning and executing of a reintegration program. For this reason, it is important to increase the understanding of inclusion in the planning and implementing of DDR programs. Moreover, due to the nature of the conflict in

Afghanistan, with regards to actors such as the U.S. and neighbouring countries such as Pakistan, it is important to increase the understanding also of their role when planning and implementing DDR programs.

- **To take several aspects into consideration with regards to the withdrawal of U.S. troops**

On April 13, 2021, U.S. President Biden announced that the withdrawal of U.S. troops will occur on September 11, 2021 (al-Jazeera, 2021). According to founder and CEO of Rise to Peace, Ahmad Shah Mohibi, there are alternatives for the U.S. withdrawal of troops. The *first* is for the U.S. to leave. However, this could lead to civil war, chaos and more instability for the people in Afghanistan. The *second* is to go back to supporting Operation Enduring Freedom⁴ and the Afghan forces to fight the Taliban to decrease the violence within the country. The *third* alternative, and the one recommended by Mr. Mohibi, is to stay with a small number of forces and support the peace talks because “diplomacy works when there is pressure on the ground” (CGTN, 2021).

With regards to the safety of the population, foreign troops still have a role to play. Therefore, when planning the withdrawal, it is important to take into consideration the safety of the Afghan police, armed forces and the society, including youth as well as the risk of giving more leverage to the Taliban.

- **That neighbouring countries Iran and Pakistan support the Afghan peace process**

A peaceful Afghanistan is important for the country itself and for the entire region, including the neighbouring countries of Iran and Pakistan. It is therefore important that Iran and Pakistan contribute to supporting the Afghan peace process.

Iran and Pakistan have been involved in the conflict both as supporters of the American-led invasion and of the Taliban. The tensions between the countries and their historical disputes can be one reason for the respondents’ negative views on the role of Islamic countries in the peace process. However, as the intra-Afghan peace talks continue, it is important that Iran and Pakistan continue their efforts for close relationship and positive development.

Neighbouring countries should support the peace process and work with the Afghan government also after a peace agreement is signed. This could in turn, help build youths’ trust for Iran and Pakistan. In turn, this could serve as an important keystone for good relationships between the countries in the future.

⁴ Operation Enduring Freedom was the official name by the U.S. government on the “War on Terror”, with focus on Afghanistan during 2001-2014.

- **To create a stabil trustful peace institution for all Afghans**

93% of the respondents were negative towards the former peace institution, the High Peace Council. Therefore, relevant actors should focus on creating solid and stable peace institutions, with participation from different groups in the society, including youth, women, and different ethnical groups. For a peace institution to fulfill its purpose and for the work to be taken into account by society, trust is an important component. This is because “trust gives institutions lasting legitimacy and helps individuals and groups remain engaged in the long and arduous process of building lasting peace” (Interpeace, 2021).

The new peace institution, the High Council for National Reconciliation, should learn from the High Peace Council’s mistakes, and be the stable, trustworthy institution that Afghanistan’s population needs. In doing so, it will serve as an important component towards peace in the country.

To conclude; These recommendations are suggestions of how to increase the inclusion of youth in Afghanistan, both in the political discussions and peace process. The diverse group ‘youth’ needs to be taken seriously by different actors within the country, including older leaders. Their inclusion should be meaningful, and not only a tick in the box. These are demanding recommendations for all actors involved. However, looking towards the prospect of a more peaceful Afghanistan for generations to come, it is worth the commitment.

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