



# Building on Afghanistan's Fleeting Ceasefire

Asia Report N°298 | 19 July 2018

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*Preventing War. Shaping Peace.*

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# Principal Findings

**What's new?** The Afghan government, international forces, and Taliban insurgents all observed a temporary ceasefire during the Eid al-Fitr holiday. The truce was unprecedented in Afghanistan's long war, brought a remarkable decline in violence and prompted scenes of joy across the country, often involving government and Taliban forces celebrating together.

**Why does it matter?** The truce demonstrated that leaders on both sides exert significant control over their forces, which is important given that neither side had trusted their opponent's cohesion. The festivities showed the enormous appetite among Afghans, including some combatants, for peace. Both these factors bode well for a future peace process.

**What should be done?** Washington should empower an envoy to speak to the Taliban and clarify that U.S. troops could leave Afghanistan were the movement and the Afghan government to sign a peace deal broadly acceptable in Afghan society. Taliban leaders should drop their refusal to talk to the Afghan government and engage Kabul.

## *Executive Summary*

For three days over the Eid al-Fitr holiday, Afghanistan witnessed an historic ceasefire by the main parties to its decades-long and ever bloodier conflict. A steep drop in violence brought a brief sense of normalcy to Afghans exhausted by war and prompted countrywide festivities. The truce proved there is a strong domestic constituency for peace. It also revealed coherence in the chain of command among both the Afghan security forces and the Taliban, as unit leaders, though often taken aback by the order to stop fighting, overwhelmingly complied. All sides should seize the opening to move toward peace. President Ashraf Ghani already has offered unconditional talks with the Taliban. The U.S. government, which reports suggest is now ready to speak directly to insurgent leaders, should empower an envoy to do so and should make clear, including publicly, that the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Afghanistan would be on the table were a peace deal broadly acceptable in Afghan society signed between insurgents and the Afghan government. The Taliban should enter peace talks with President Ghani's government.

The Eid truce led to a dramatic reduction in bloodshed. There were two notable exceptions, both of them strikes claimed by the small Islamic State (ISIS) branch in Afghanistan. These attacks did little to dampen celebrations, however. Government and Taliban fighters hugged each other, took selfies, sang and danced together, and exchanged flowers and gifts. As they reconciled, albeit temporarily, they often were mobbed by cheering crowds of flag-waving civilians. Tens of thousands of Afghans crossed battle lines to visit friends and kin. The merriment was restrained in the north and other places where fear of the Taliban is greatest. But most of the country, particularly areas that suffer the worst violence, saw scenes of joy and optimism unknown for years.

The Taliban resumed fighting after Eid, despite an offer by President Ghani to extend the ceasefire. But though short-lived, the truce was instructive for future peace efforts. The outburst of celebration showed the depth of most Afghans' yearning for an end to the war. Government and Taliban foot soldiers and commanders could be heard expressing their appreciation for the respite from battle. Their intermingling went some way toward debunking the notion that the war is defined by an insurmountable ideological divide. The Taliban's internal deliberations on the truce revealed a lobby for peace and compromise within the movement itself.

Most crucially, the ceasefire showed that leaders on both sides can enforce an order. While neither prepared their forces for the truce, both – the Afghan government and the U.S. and other international forces, on the one hand, and the Taliban, on the other – showed impressive discipline. Both refrained from exploiting a moment of vulnerability with surprise attacks. A three-day truce during Eid is, of course, a far cry from a political settlement involving major compromises with enemies. Still, the coherence of both sides during the detente, especially in an insurgency often portrayed as fractured, augurs well for future peace talks.

Progress toward such talks has long been deadlocked. Successive Afghan governments have expressed their willingness to speak to insurgent leaders. Most recently, President Ghani offered to do so without preconditions – a bold step, given that some

of his top officials only recently dismissed the Taliban as a disparate bunch of terrorists. The Taliban, however, have always insisted on direct talks with the U.S., which they view as their primary foe. In the past, the U.S. has rejected the idea that it is a party to the conflict, believing that Afghans should resolve their differences themselves, and has refused to discuss the question of a U.S. troop withdrawal from Afghanistan. But that stance appears to have evolved. U.S. officials' statements, media reports and Crisis Group's own research suggest that Washington is ready to take the important and welcome step of speaking directly to the Taliban and putting the issue of a U.S. troop withdrawal on the table. All sides should build on the momentum created by the Eid ceasefire and these latest developments:

- The U.S. should open a formal channel to the Taliban leadership. Washington could empower an envoy to speak directly with counterparts in the Taliban's political office in Doha, as well as Kabul and regional capitals. The U.S. also should explicitly put the withdrawal of U.S. and other international forces on the table, including in public statements. It should, however, make clear that an agreement on the nature of and timeline for such a drawdown would be part of, or contingent upon, a settlement between the Taliban and the Afghan government that is broadly acceptable in Afghan society.
- The Taliban leadership should accept talks with the Afghan government. If the ceasefire illustrated the Taliban's coherence, it showed, too, that President Ghani controls the Afghan forces against which the Taliban is mostly engaged in day-to-day fighting and which suffer far more casualties than their U.S. counterparts. Taliban leaders would also have to recognise that any agreement for international forces' withdrawal hinges on a wider peace deal, likely including national and local power-sharing arrangements, security sector reform and a process for re-writing the Afghan constitution.
- All sides could take confidence-building steps including, potentially, further ceasefires, prisoner exchanges or greater transparency in coordination between Kabul and insurgents in delivering basic services in Taliban-controlled areas. All parties should maintain the more measured tone they adopted in their rhetoric during the ceasefire.

The Eid truce has shown war-weary Afghans, including combatants, what peace might bring. It comes alongside other signs of movement, first President Ghani's offer of unconditional talks with the Taliban and then signs that Washington is willing to speak directly to Taliban leaders and broach the troop withdrawal issue. Direct U.S.-Taliban talks are no panacea. The Taliban may still reject engagement with Kabul, at least initially, and even if it accepts intra-Afghan talks, such talks would mark only the start of a long and difficult road toward a settlement amenable to all major Afghan factions and broader Afghan society. But the U.S. speaking directly to the Taliban is the best bet for getting to those negotiations and kickstarting a long-overdue peace process.

**Kabul/Brussels, 19 July 2018**

# Building on Afghanistan's Fleeting Ceasefire

## I. Introduction

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The war in Afghanistan, pitting Afghan government forces and a U.S.-led international coalition against an increasingly potent Taliban insurgency, has escalated steadily over recent years.<sup>1</sup> The first half of 2018 has seen new heights of violence, with the Taliban controlling, influencing or contesting some 44 per cent of districts across the country and launching an unprecedented number of attacks.<sup>2</sup> Yet for three days in June, over the Eid al-Fitr holiday, both sides ordered their respective forces to stand down. The ceasefire, unprecedented since the Taliban's ouster from Kabul in 2001, saw a remarkable decline in levels of bloodshed and prompted celebrations across the country. It proved only a fleeting respite, as fighting resumed shortly afterward. Nonetheless, it could give fresh momentum to efforts to find a peaceful settlement to Afghanistan's brutal war.

This report examines how the truce came about, what motivated both sides to participate and why the Taliban refused to prolong it, despite a unilateral extension from President Ashraf Ghani. It draws lessons from the ceasefire for efforts to nudge the two sides toward peace talks and lays out steps that they, and particularly U.S. President Donald Trump's administration, can take to build on the momentum. It is informed by Crisis Group's observations during travels around three provinces west and south of Kabul during the Eid holiday and interviews with Afghan government officials, including senior members of Ghani's government, civilians in urban and rural areas, and a wide range of sources within the insurgency.

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<sup>1</sup> For earlier Crisis Group analysis of the Afghan insurgency, see Asia Reports N°256, *Afghanistan's Insurgency after the Transition*, 12 May 2014; N°236, *Afghanistan: The Long, Hard Road to the 2014 Transition*, 8 October 2012; and N°207, *The Insurgency in Afghanistan's Heartland*, 27 June 2011.

<sup>2</sup> Borhan Osman, "The Cost of Escalating Violence in Afghanistan", Crisis Group Commentary, 7 February 2018. U.S. military estimates published by the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) show that insurgents' control of, influence over, or ability to contest districts has spread from 28 per cent of districts in November 2015 to 44 per cent in October 2017. Other analysts claim more significant gains for the insurgency. "Addendum to SIGAR's January 2018 Quarterly Report to the United States Congress", SIGAR, 30 January 2018.

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## II. How Did the Ceasefire Happen?

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Alongside an intensification in hostilities since the beginning of 2018, there has been a marked increase in peace overtures from both sides of the conflict.<sup>3</sup> In late February, President Ashraf Ghani unexpectedly offered peace talks with the Taliban. At a conference with major foreign partners, he approved a joint declaration stating that they “collectively agree that direct talks between the Afghan Government and the Taliban – without any preconditions and without the threats of violence – constitute the most viable way to end the ongoing agony of the Afghan people”.<sup>4</sup> Ghani’s February declaration was an important opening to talks. It also signalled a pivot of sorts: leading figures in his administration had argued over the preceding months that the insurgent leaders were too hardline and the Taliban too fragmented to make any such gambit worthwhile.<sup>5</sup>

As for the Taliban, it published three statements in February 2018 calling for peace talks, including a direct letter “to the American people”.<sup>6</sup> The movement’s response to President Ghani’s offer of peace talks that same month also suggested a subtle change in tack. In the past, the Taliban had swiftly rejected any Afghan government calls for talks. It has long asserted its desire to speak exclusively to the U.S., which it regards as its chief antagonist, not the government.<sup>7</sup> This time, however, the insurgent leaders remained silent. While privately Taliban officials dismissed the proposal as “nothing new”, the movement stopped short of publicly spurning Ghani’s offer.<sup>8</sup> When the president reiterated it in late March, at a conference in the Uzbek capital Tashkent, many observers interpreted the Taliban’s continued silence as a sign that the movement was deliberating internally about whether to make a positive reply.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> For example, the Taliban published three statements calling for peace talks in February. Al Emarah, February 2018.

<sup>4</sup> “Declaration: The Kabul process for peace & security cooperation in Afghanistan”, Kabul, 28 February 2018. The phrase “without the threats of violence” was inserted in the final stages of drafting the declaration. Its meaning was never clarified, although a similar phrase was repeated in a statement from the International Contact Group for Afghanistan, a group of major donors, which “urged the Afghan Taliban to engage in direct peace talks with the Government of Afghanistan without any delay, preconditions and without the threat of violence”. “Chair’s summary”, International Contact Group, Baku, 28 June 2018.

<sup>5</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Afghan officials, Kabul, February 2018. Previous invitations to the Taliban contained caveats, for example, requiring that the Taliban accept the 2004 constitution. Steve Coll, *Directorate S: The CIA and America’s Secret Wars in Afghanistan and Pakistan* (New York, 2018), pp. 471, 545.

<sup>6</sup> “Letter of the Islamic Emirate to the American people”, Al Emarah, 14 February 2018; “Statement by political office of Islamic Emirate concerning latest comments by US Department of State”, Al Emarah, 26 February 2018; response by Taliban spokesman Zabihul-lah Mujahid to Afghanistan expert Barnett Rubin, “An open letter to the Taliban”, *The New Yorker*, 27 February 2018.

<sup>7</sup> See Borhan Osman, “The U.S. needs to talk to the Taliban in Afghanistan”, *The New York Times*, 19 March 2018. The last major effort toward a peace process foundered in 2016 when the Taliban rejected talks brokered by the Quadrilateral Coordination Group, a format that included Afghanistan, China, Pakistan and the U.S.

<sup>8</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Taliban senior members, March 2018.

<sup>9</sup> Rod Nordland and Mujib Mashal, “Taliban’s rare silence on talks charges up a new peace conference”, *The New York Times*, 27 March 2018. That said, the Taliban posted articles on its official web-

In May, Ghani reportedly discussed with General John Nicholson, commander of U.S. and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) forces in the country, an even more dramatic gesture: a unilateral ceasefire, on the occasion of the upcoming Eid al-Fitr holiday.<sup>10</sup> Some Afghan government officials apparently voiced reservations, saying there was insufficient time to assess security implications.<sup>11</sup> Yet on 7 June Ghani, to the surprise of some Afghan army commanders, announced an eight-day halt in offensive operations against the Taliban during the festive season.<sup>12</sup> The U.S. military pledged to honour the ceasefire, while continuing operations against the small affiliate of the Islamic State (ISIS) in eastern Afghanistan.<sup>13</sup> Western and regional diplomats commended Ghani's initiative, which reportedly reflected months of dialogue between Kabul and its foreign allies about how to end the war.<sup>14</sup> This put additional pressure on the Taliban leadership, caught off guard by Ghani's gesture, to respond.<sup>15</sup>

The notion of announcing their own ceasefire was not wholly unfamiliar to the Taliban. Some mid-level Taliban political advisers had floated it over the past winter as a unilateral move the movement could initiate to demonstrate their interest in peace. At the time, insurgent leaders decided a ceasefire would be too risky, notably because it could be misinterpreted as an outcome of U.S. military pressure or cited by U.S. officials as yet another instance of Afghanistan "turning a corner".<sup>16</sup>

Ghani's initiative confronted the Taliban with a more vexing dilemma. Governments, including those of Iran, China, and Russia as well as Western powers, applauded the president's truce offer and some encouraged the Taliban to reciprocate; Afghans themselves also overwhelmingly welcomed the government's ceasefire.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, Ghani's gesture was perfectly timed: it coincided with one of the country's most important religious holidays, Eid al-Fitr, a period after Ramadan fasting when Muslims are required to resolve disputes and during which the Taliban had scaled back attacks in the past. A small group of pragmatic Taliban officials lobbied the insurgent leadership to respond positively. Their argument that the movement needed to change its image as purely a "war machine" reportedly carried weight in internal deliberations.<sup>18</sup> They also made the case that a successful ceasefire could usefully demonstrate the movement's coherence and its leaders' ability to enforce a truce.<sup>19</sup>

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site suggesting that the movement would not respond to the offer and repeating its resolve not to talk to the Afghan government. "Who are the true enemies of peace?", Al Emarah, 13 March 2018.

<sup>10</sup> Crisis Group interviews, senior Afghan and Western officials, June and July 2018.

<sup>11</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Afghan officials and Western diplomats, June 2018.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> The local ISIS affiliate is known as Islamic State-Khorasan Province. The extent of its operational links to the main ISIS organisation are disputed, but for simplicity this paper refers to the affiliate as "ISIS".

<sup>14</sup> Crisis Group interviews, senior Afghan and Western officials, February 2018.

<sup>15</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Taliban officials and Western diplomats, 2018.

<sup>16</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Taliban officials, June 2018.

<sup>17</sup> "Russia urges Taliban movement to join truce declared by Afghan president", TASS, 8 June 2018; "Iran backs Afghanistan ceasefire", IRNA, 8 June 2018; and "China backs Afghan ceasefire", PTI, 8 June 2018. Crisis Group interviews and observations, June 2018.

<sup>18</sup> Crisis Group interviews and observations, 2018.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

Others took credit. In particular, Pakistani officials subsequently asserted that they had nudged the Taliban toward a ceasefire. U.S. diplomats hinted that they had encouraged Pakistan to play such a role.<sup>20</sup> According to some reports, Pakistan agreed to pressure the Taliban in exchange for the U.S. killing of Mullah Fazlullah, the Pakistani Taliban leader, in an airstrike.<sup>21</sup> Senior Afghan officials initially accepted Pakistan's claims but later concluded that the Taliban's declaration was driven by dynamics within the insurgency.<sup>22</sup> Interlocutors familiar with the Afghan Taliban's deliberations likewise assert that the decision to pause hostilities had no link to Pakistani pressure.<sup>23</sup> Indeed, suggestions that Pakistan's influence was decisive arguably made the Taliban leadership more intransigent, as they sought to counter the impression they were under Islamabad's thumb.<sup>24</sup>

Also contrary to early speculation, Taliban sources maintain the decision was not preceded by extensive consultations with insurgent commanders or military heavyweights.<sup>25</sup> Deliberations reportedly were limited to leadership circles, including a number of Taliban figures who often provide substantive input on political decisions. The Taliban leadership then moved quickly, with the help of senior members responsible for media relations, to issue a statement on 9 June declaring their own ceasefire. The Taliban's truce suspended operations against Afghan forces for three days. The pause did not extend to foreign forces, but attacks on international troops were minimal; the Taliban claimed a small symbolic operation on 15 June as they shelled the largest U.S. base in Afghanistan, Bagram Airfield north of Kabul.<sup>26</sup>

Many senior movement members, as well as commanders across the country, reportedly were surprised when they awoke to the announcement.<sup>27</sup> A handful of commanders grumbled about the ceasefire or the way it was announced.<sup>28</sup> But their misgivings, which often related to either the commanders' belief that the insurgency was on the front foot, with little need to compromise, or to their distrust of enemy intentions, were quickly subsumed by the broader consensus. Crisis Group had access to audio recordings of a number of military heavyweights, including commanders in the Haqqani network – a faction responsible for some of the Taliban's bloodiest attacks – that suggest they only learned of the declaration after its announcement.<sup>29</sup> But even those who were startled mostly expressed support.<sup>30</sup> That the Taliban lead-

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<sup>20</sup> Anwar Iqbal, "US, Pakistan working to jump-start Afghan peace process", *Dawn*, 9 June 2018.

<sup>21</sup> Fazlullah's death was a significant victory for Islamabad. Although the Pakistani military and intelligence services tacitly back the Afghan Taliban, they have been fighting the Pakistani Taliban for over a decade.

<sup>22</sup> Crisis Group interviews, senior government official, July 2018; Western diplomat, June 2018.

<sup>23</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Taliban officials, June 2018.

<sup>24</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Taliban members aware of the decision-making process, June 2018.

<sup>25</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Afghan government, Western and Taliban officials, Kabul, June 2018.

<sup>26</sup> Tweet by Zabihullah Mujahid (@ZabihullaM4), 15 June 2018.

<sup>27</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Afghan government, Western and Taliban officials, Kabul, June 2018.

<sup>28</sup> Crisis Group interview, two Taliban commanders, June 2018.

<sup>29</sup> Audio recordings heard by Crisis Group, June 2018.

<sup>30</sup> Insurgent commanders with private qualms cited the common Taliban slogan that "there is always wisdom behind the leader's decisions" and obeyed the order to cease fighting. Crisis Group interviews, Taliban officials, June 2018.

ership framed the ceasefire as a gesture to allow celebrations of the religious holiday seems to have minimised risks of explicit opposition.

### III. Jubilation as the Guns Fall (Mostly) Silent

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The three-day Eid al-Fitr holiday always occasions a slowdown in the war, as fighters return home from the battlefields to spend time with their families. But this year's drop was dramatic: according to some monitors, security incidents were down by as much as two thirds compared with previous Eid holidays.<sup>31</sup> The decline was steepest during the three days of the Taliban's ceasefire, from the evening of 14 June to sunset on 17 June.<sup>32</sup> In an ordinary weekend, Afghans across the country suffer through more than 100 incidents, from bombings to assassinations and clashes. During the Eid weekend, such incidents reportedly numbered in the single digits.<sup>33</sup>

Moreover, the perpetrators were different. On an average day, the war between the Taliban and pro-government forces accounts for more than 95 per cent of violent incidents in Afghanistan. During the ceasefire, however, the Taliban did not contribute much to the tally. Criminal gangs and pro-government militias skirmished over personal disputes. Civilians were injured in gunfire let off in end-of-Ramadan exuberance. The local ISIS affiliate appears to have committed the most serious violations. On 16 and 17 June, suicide bombers attacked gatherings that were celebrating the ceasefire, killing at least 48 people. The strikes killed Taliban and Afghan security forces, underlining that ISIS sees both as their enemy.<sup>34</sup>

But these attacks did not dispel the jubilation in streets across much of the country. In many areas the festivities involved Taliban fighters and Afghan soldiers sipping tea, telling jokes and even joining each other in traditional dances, while singing Afghan patriotic songs. Raucous crowds hailed the scenes of reconciliation, fleeting as it may have been. Families that had been torn apart by a long war reunited. Women and children attended the revelries, in contrast with previous Eid holidays during which families avoided crowds because they feared bombings. Under the circumstances, with people trying to impress on the warring parties how badly Afghans want peace, participation in Eid festivities was a form of civic activism. People with no background in such activism turned out.

Such scenes were not limited to cities and towns. Even contested areas along the front lines, typically impassable due to running battles between Afghan forces and insurgents, turned into venues for both sides to mark the Eid holiday.<sup>35</sup> Celebrations were quieter in the north and other parts of the country dominated by non-Pashtuns

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<sup>31</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Western security analysts, June 2018.

<sup>32</sup> A security analyst called the pause in the bloodshed "truly miraculous". Crisis Group interview, Western analyst, 21 June 2018.

<sup>33</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Western security analysts, June 2018.

<sup>34</sup> "IS claims 85 casualties in 2nd suicide bombing in 24 hours on Afghan Taliban and Afghan security forces in Nangarhar", SITE Intelligence Group, 17 June 2018.

<sup>35</sup> These observations are informed by Crisis Group's travel around three provinces west and south of Kabul during the Eid holiday. They are consistent with media reports of celebration and reconciliation. The Afghanistan Analysts Network noted similar events in at least eighteen of 34 provinces: Helmand, Kandahar, Zabul, Uruzgan, Farah, Ghazni, Paktia, Paktika, Logar, Wardak, Kabul, Laghman, Nangarhar, Kunduz, Takhar, Baghlan, Faryab and Badghis. Kate Clark, "The Eid ceasefire: Allowing Afghans to imagine their country at peace", Afghanistan Analysts Network, 19 June 2018.

wariest of the Taliban. Some better-educated urbanites were sceptical.<sup>36</sup> But most of Afghanistan, and particularly the most war-ravaged regions, was gripped by euphoria.

A common theme in the ceasefire celebrations was suspicion, shared on both sides, that outsiders fuel the war. Many soldiers and Taliban fighters, when asked why they fought if they evidently intermingled so easily, blamed either foreigners (by which government troops meant interlopers backing the Taliban, primarily Pakistanis) or “Americans” (insurgent shorthand for not only the U.S. but also other Western forces).<sup>37</sup>

Not all politicians welcomed the celebrations, although only a few prominent figures said so out loud. Former Afghan intelligence chief Amrullah Saleh became a leading critic, warning of a “Taliban Tet offensive” and “mass infiltration”.<sup>38</sup> On the insurgent side, some Taliban commanders and ideologues condemned the fraternisation as a betrayal of thousands of martyrs, accusing foot soldiers of being too friendly during the ceasefire.<sup>39</sup>

These voices, while a minority, reflected divergent perspectives within the Taliban regarding their “internal enemy”, the term they use to designate Afghan government forces. For many Taliban, Afghan soldiers are enemies primarily because they shield foreign troops from attack; in the absence of a foreign presence, in other words, reconciliation would be possible. Insurgent hardliners, in contrast, view the Afghan army's affiliation with the government as sufficient reason for animosity, and thus consider mingling with them to be treachery.<sup>40</sup> Overall, however, a majority on both sides expressed support for the ceasefire. Even Atta Mohammad Noor, a former Northern Alliance commander with a long history of battling the Taliban, now an opposition politician and Tajik powerbroker, backed the truce and called for its extension.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> “The Eid ceasefire: What did (some of the) people think?”, Afghanistan Analysts Network, 29 June 2018.

<sup>37</sup> For example, Crisis Group asked a Taliban fighter and an Afghan army soldier standing together at a Humvee about their motives for fighting, given their apparent friendliness at that moment. The insurgent answered: “We do not want to fight the [Afghan] soldiers; our goal is to fight the infidel [foreign] forces, but then these soldiers shield our enemy from us. Our fight is not against the Afghans, but against the foreigners”. The soldier responded: “It is all a foreign conspiracy that makes us [Afghans] fight each other. America and Pakistan are both enemies of the Afghans. We also do not want foreigners in Afghanistan, but neither do we want Pakistan's interventions. And we both agree that if all Afghans come together to say ‘no’ to the foreigners, there will be peace in Afghanistan”. Crisis Group interviews, Ghazni province, June 2018.

<sup>38</sup> Tweets by @AmrullahSaleh2, 7-22 June 2018. Saleh was referring to the 1968 Tet offensive in Vietnam, a series of North Vietnamese and Viet Cong surprise attacks on South Vietnamese positions during the Vietnamese New Year holiday. His warnings proved unfounded, as the Taliban did not take advantage of their peaceful access to Afghan cities during the ceasefire to mount such assaults.

<sup>39</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Taliban officials, June 2018.

<sup>40</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Taliban members, June 2018.

<sup>41</sup> Facebook postings @generalatamohammadnoor, June 2018.

#### IV. The Taliban's Refusal to Extend the Ceasefire

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As the end of the ceasefire approached, pressure mounted on the Taliban leadership to extend it. On 16 June, President Ghani prolonged the government's truce, subsequently specifying that the extension would last for ten days. Ghani offered medical assistance to wounded Taliban and family visits to insurgent prisoners. Other Afghan leaders called on the Taliban to reciprocate, while many ordinary Afghans held out hope for a prolonged period of calm, wishing that popular backing for the Eid ceasefire would persuade insurgent leaders.<sup>42</sup> As peace demonstrators from southern Helmand province marched hundreds of kilometres from their home province to Kabul, hundreds of supporters gathered along their route to amplify their calls for a halt to the violence.<sup>43</sup> International actors, including the UN, echoed calls to maintain the ceasefire.<sup>44</sup> In parts of Afghanistan, even senior Taliban field commanders reportedly pushed their leaders for an extension.<sup>45</sup>

These appeals fell on deaf ears. Although the demands triggered discussions within the Taliban's top ranks, on the whole the leadership opposed an extension. Taliban sources advance several reasons. First, they felt that prolonging the ceasefire would not have brought the movement closer to its core goals: withdrawal of foreign forces and establishment of a new government that meets its standards of Islamic rule.<sup>46</sup> This sentiment was reflected on the battlefield. A commander said: "We have not fought for nothing all these years. We are not going to give up our jihad merely because some people are demanding it".<sup>47</sup> He dismissed calls to extend the ceasefire as tantamount to asking for unilateral Taliban concessions without reciprocal steps from either the government or the U.S.

Second, Taliban leaders did not want to appear to be succumbing to pressure. Indeed, they insisted their three-day Eid ceasefire was a unilateral decision, justified not by Ghani's own proclamation but by the religious holiday. Portraying a continuation of the ceasefire as an equally unilateral move would have been harder. Some feared that the U.S. and Afghan governments would interpret a Taliban decision to maintain the ceasefire as the result of expanded U.S. military operations. Movement leaders

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<sup>42</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Kabul, Wardak and Ghazni provinces, June 2018.

<sup>43</sup> Mujib Mashal, "A grass-roots Afghan peace movement grows, step by step", *The New York Times*, 15 June 2018.

<sup>44</sup> For example, the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan issued statements in support of the ceasefire on 7, 9, 14 and 16 June.

<sup>45</sup> Crisis Group interviews, tribal elders, Paktika and Paktia provinces, June 2018.

<sup>46</sup> The Taliban have described an "Islamic government" as their goal for more than a decade, usually without articulating how it would differ from the current Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. Their demand for a new political order amounts to a rejection of the 2001 Bonn Agreement, which set up a transitional government after the Northern Alliance routed the Taliban from Kabul, rather than a specific prescription. Borhan Osman and Anand Gopal, "Taliban views on a future state", New York University Center on International Cooperation, July 2016.

<sup>47</sup> Crisis Group interview, Taliban commander, Wardak province, June 2018. The commander also argued: "Such calls [for an extension] should primarily be directed at the Americans and ask them to leave Afghanistan, so we can stop fighting altogether. Their occupation is the reason we are fighting .... The blood of thousands of martyrs was shed in order to liberate this country and to achieve a pure Islamic government. We cannot betray their cause [by halting fighting before those goals are achieved]".

were determined to avoid that perception. That Pakistani officials had claimed credit for the Taliban's ceasefire provided further disincentive, insofar as insurgent leaders consistently strive to rebut any suggestion that Islamabad controls them.<sup>48</sup>

Third was the issue of Taliban unity. An extended ceasefire – as opposed to the three-day truce – would have required Taliban leaders to consult more extensively among the membership, especially with field commanders and hardline ideologues. They worried that making such a decision without proper consultation could prompt a backlash. Deliberations also would have taken time and, even if disagreements eventually were ironed out, they risked puncturing the image of coherence projected during the ceasefire itself. True, some Taliban commanders had called for an extension and the enthusiasm with which many fighters had embraced the truce suggested they might have favoured one, too. In that sense, deciding against prolonging the ceasefire also might have carried the risk of dissent. But, whether logically or not, Taliban leaders appear to have viewed a return to fighting as less likely to incite controversy within insurgent ranks.<sup>49</sup>

Fourth, Taliban leaders based outside the country might not have fully appreciated the power of pro-peace popular sentiment, as they did not witness first-hand what was happening on the ground.

A final reason for the leadership's decision likely was more prosaic: extending the ceasefire would arguably have allowed candidates for forthcoming parliamentary and district council elections, scheduled for October, to visit their constituencies in Taliban-held areas. That opportunity would have run contrary to the movement's objectives of disrupting this year's vote and precipitating a political crisis.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Taliban officials, June 2018.

<sup>49</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Taliban leaders, June 2018.

<sup>50</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Taliban officials, June 2018.

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## V. The Ceasefire's Implications

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The three-day truce was instructive for potential future peace efforts. Perhaps the most fundamental takeaway is that both leaderships exercise control over their respective rank and file, thereby (largely) putting to rest questions about the two sides' cohesion.<sup>51</sup>

That Taliban leaders were able to enforce a major political decision throughout the movement is particularly noteworthy. Of course, a three-day truce during Eid is nothing like a permanent peace deal. Whether Taliban leaders could exert similar authority in the event of a settlement that involved compromise with other parts of Afghan society is unknown; indeed, its choice not to extend the ceasefire appears to have been at least partly motivated by concern that doing so would reveal friction within the movement. Still, even Afghan officials who have long rejected the notion of a single Taliban movement now recognise that its leaders enjoy a firm grip on the insurgency.<sup>52</sup> Some northern opposition groups have reached the same conclusion.<sup>53</sup> President Ghani himself tacitly acknowledged as much in a recent article published in *The New York Times*.<sup>54</sup>

As seen, battlefield commanders were unprepared for the order from their leadership but complied quickly. This course of events underscored both the leaders' authority and the influence of official Taliban channels, whether statements from spokesmen posted on the movement's main website or information relayed on WhatsApp and other messaging applications. Even members who questioned the logic behind the ceasefire respected their leaders' decision.<sup>55</sup> Negligible breakdowns of command-and-control within the insurgency did occur – as they did among pro-government forces. But the commanders' and foot soldiers' overall compliance suggest that the Taliban leadership would be a credible partner in a future peace process.

If the ceasefire revealed much about the war's protagonists, the cheering throngs in towns and villages across the country also illustrated the strength of the domestic constituency for peace. The yearning for an end to war was apparent not only among Afghans living in rural areas riven by fighting and in towns and cities targeted by Taliban strikes. It also was evident within both the armed forces' and the insurgency's ranks, with fighters on front lines greeting the truce as enthusiastically as civilians.

Popular support for the ceasefire created an environment of mutual trust and restraint that enabled both sides' combatants to celebrate together – often while

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<sup>51</sup> See Crisis Group Asia Report N°268, *The Future of the Afghan Local Police*, 4 June 2015, for a discussion of the coherence of pro-government forces. On the Taliban, see Antonio Giustozzi, "Afghanistan: Taliban's organization and structure", Landinfo, 23 August 2017. Giustozzi concludes: "Never centralised, the organisation of the Taliban became increasingly fragmented from 2007 onwards". In contrast, other recent scholarship suggests that Taliban governance is more coherent than ever. See Ashley Jackson, "Life under the Taliban shadow government", Overseas Development Institute, June 2018.

<sup>52</sup> Crisis Group interview, Western diplomat citing senior government officials, Kabul, June 2018.

<sup>53</sup> "The most important point about the ceasefire is that the Taliban are not divided into small groups", said a senior adviser to Junbish-e Milli, a major political party. "They have a strong chain of command across the country". Crisis Group interview, Junbish-e Milli official, 5 July 2018.

<sup>54</sup> Ashraf Ghani, "I will negotiate with the Taliban anywhere", *The New York Times*, 27 June 2018.

<sup>55</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Taliban officials, June 2018.

bearing arms. The scenes included amiable encounters between figures notorious for their penchant for violence or their deep mutual animosity.<sup>56</sup> If anything, the two sides displayed a degree of tolerance and understanding that exceeded their leaders' instructions by allowing each other to enter their respective areas of control with their guns. The outpouring of joy may have helped dissuade Taliban units from abusing the ceasefire by launching attacks in towns or cities. Likewise, it may have deterred Afghan officers from ordering the ambush or arrest of those who did temporarily surrender their weapons before entering towns or crossing battle lines. And it may have persuaded anti-Taliban leaders who see them as irreconcilable terrorists not to criticise the truce.

Another lesson is that some Pakistan-based Taliban leaders appear to have difficulty reading fast-moving dynamics on the ground. As a result, they run the risk of adhering to hardline positions out of tune not only with public sentiment but also with their own rank and file. That said, it still appears unlikely that the movement will splinter. Some government officials have suggested resuscitating previous – unsuccessful – efforts to reintegrate individual insurgents or field commanders as opposed to pursuing talks with the Taliban leadership.<sup>57</sup> Certainly, Taliban fighters appeared easy-going as they chatted with their adversaries. Many are tired of fighting. Local ceasefires or informal deals between insurgent commanders and local officials may even be feasible; if those can alleviate human suffering they should be supported.

But banking that a groundswell of such deals could push insurgent leaders toward negotiations or even circumvent the need for engaging them at all would likely be a mistake. Crisis Group's research suggests that without a green light from their leaders, most likely in the context of a wider settlement, most insurgent foot soldiers and commanders, even those that might have hoped for a ceasefire extension, will not abandon fighting.<sup>58</sup> Indeed, Taliban attacks resumed on 17 June at precisely the hour declared by the leadership as the end of the ceasefire, illustrating its ability to issue an effective call to arms across much of the country.<sup>59</sup>

The ceasefire also underscored that the war is not driven primarily by ideology. Leaders on both sides, and indeed people across society, hold highly divergent visions of how Afghanistan ought to be ruled. But the celebrations suggested that combatants potentially could respect each other as fellow Afghans and Muslims who favour a sovereign, indivisible country.

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<sup>56</sup> For example, the pro-government commander Azizullah Karwan reportedly sat down for tea with his bitter rival, Taliban commander Mullah Musafar, in Paktika province. Crisis Group interviews, June 2018. The limits of the bonhomie were highlighted after the ceasefire ended and gunmen killed Karwan. "Special Police commander assassinated in Kabul", *Tolo News*, 28 June 2018.

<sup>57</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Afghan officials, June 2018. The Afghanistan Peace and Reintegration Programme (APRP) was the latest major effort at piecemeal reconciliation with the Taliban. The final evaluation concluded: "The main design problem of the APRP project has to do with a contested assumption that it was possible to have a reintegration program without a peace agreement". Seamus Cleary et al., "Afghanistan Peace and Reintegration Programme: Final evaluation report", July 2016.

<sup>58</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Taliban fighters and commanders, 2017-2018.

<sup>59</sup> Taliban attacks were slow to resume their pre-ceasefire intensity in some provinces; by one estimate, June 2018 was almost 70 per cent less violent than June 2017. Crisis Group interviews, Western analysts, July 2018.

A final lesson might be drawn from the parties' unscripted reactions to how the ceasefire played out. Nobody on either side seemed to know what would happen next. Within the Taliban in particular, many insurgents appear to have rejoiced in the pause and fraternised with their erstwhile enemy in ways that even they did not expect. Should a credible peace process commence, reactions likewise might surprise. Indeed, even aspects of the Taliban's ideology, often considered static, could be influenced by such a process.

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## VI. Kickstarting Peace Talks

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Powerful factors militate against peace in Afghanistan. The Taliban control or contest more territory and conduct more attacks than at any time since 2001, putting unprecedented strain on the government. Forthcoming elections, scheduled for October and likely to be contentious, give the movement even less reason to compromise. Both sides deeply mistrust each other. Powerbrokers across the board are vested in the war economy.<sup>60</sup> International and regional politics are thornier than at any time since 2001, as U.S. relations with Russia, Iran and Pakistan deteriorate and hostility mounts among Gulf powers.

The ceasefire has set a precedent, however. It has bolstered confidence in both sides' ability to halt hostilities and offered war-weary Afghans, including combatants, a glimpse of what the conflict's end might bring. Activists, some senior government officials and even pro-Taliban circles call for a repeat during the next major holiday, Eid al-Adha, which starts around 21 August.<sup>61</sup> Whether or not another truce transpires, the June ceasefire should propel all sides to reinvigorate efforts to end the war.

President Ghani has offered a bold vision of how to advance intra-Afghan dialogue. He has pledged to talk to insurgent leaders without preconditions and at a location of their choosing.<sup>62</sup> The Afghan government also has opened a dialogue with the U.S., Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, aiming to involve Gulf powers in future peace talks.<sup>63</sup> While Ghani's public overtures have not explicitly put on the table the issues of most interest to the Taliban – the presence of foreign forces and the reconfiguration of the political order – Western and Afghan officials now quietly assert that talks could broach those questions.<sup>64</sup> Indeed, U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, in a 16 June statement expressing support for Ghani's offer of peace talks, noted that those talks "by necessity would include a discussion of the role of international actors and forces".<sup>65</sup>

These steps represent significant change and are enormously positive. What they do not do is surmount what long has been a chief obstacle: on the one hand, the Taliban's determination to talk to the U.S. and refusal to engage the Afghan govern-

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<sup>60</sup> A report by SIGAR found that the drug trade expanded in parallel with the growing conflict, resulting in alliances among government officials, drug traffickers and insurgents. "Counternarcotics: Lessons from the U.S. Experience in Afghanistan", SIGAR, June 2018.

<sup>61</sup> Crisis Group interviews, senior officials and peace activists, Kabul, June, July 2018.

<sup>62</sup> Ghani, "I will negotiate with the Taliban anywhere", op. cit.

<sup>63</sup> According to a senior Afghan official, "the government's peace efforts consist of three tracks: first, a Pakistan platform, including Afghanistan, Pakistan, the U.S. and the Taliban; second, bilateral talks with Taliban on national and local levels, though as yet with no credible insurgent interlocutor; and third, a regional, or Islamic world, platform, with the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia and the U.S., which could help with the relocation of Taliban interlocutors/families, and bridge the mutual trust deficit between the parties". Crisis Group interview, Kabul, 16 July 2018.

<sup>64</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Afghan and Western officials, June 2018.

<sup>65</sup> Mike Pompeo, "On President Ghani's offer to extend the ceasefire and open negotiations", U.S. Department of State, 16 June 2018. The recent meeting of the International Contact Group also noted that "talks by necessity would include a discussion of all contested issues, including the future role of international actors and forces". "Chair's summary", International Contact Group, Baku, 28 June 2018.

ment; and, on the other, Washington's implicit rejection that it is a party to the conflict. Taliban leaders have not publicly rebuffed the government's offers of talks this year, but they persist in calling for bilateral talks with Washington as an initial step.<sup>66</sup>

Whatever its final format, a meaningful peace process almost certainly will require a U.S. initiative to break this deadlock. Washington will likely need to open a formal line of communication to the insurgent leadership, even as it reassures the government and other Afghan powerbrokers that it will not undermine the authority or sovereignty of the Afghan government or precipitously withdraw its forces and funding.

There is precedent. Behind-the-scenes contacts between U.S. officials and Taliban representatives in the movement's Doha office started in 2010, during President Barack Obama's second term. They yielded some results, notably the May 2014 release of Bowe Bergdahl, a U.S. soldier held hostage by the Taliban, in exchange for the release of five insurgent leaders from Guantanamo – thereby showing that the Doha team spoke for, and could deliver concessions on behalf of the movement's leadership.<sup>67</sup> But those talks failed to develop into a wider peace process, due in large part to core disagreements over the nature and format of talks.<sup>68</sup> In 2016, a series of trilateral meetings took place among U.S. and Afghan officials and Taliban representatives in Doha, though these broke down before making much progress, largely for the same reasons.<sup>69</sup> Informal contacts at various levels reportedly continue, but not in a structured manner or with the objective of ending the war.<sup>70</sup>

In this light, Washington's apparent willingness to speak directly to Taliban representatives, captured in a *New York Times* article on 16 July 2018 and confirmed through Crisis Group's own research, is a critical and welcome step forward.<sup>71</sup> To stand the best chance of moving toward a broader peace process, the U.S. should appoint a truly empowered envoy to conduct formal if exploratory talks. This idea has been floated for some months by U.S. officials, who see the envoy shuttling between Kabul, the Taliban and regional governments.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Taliban leaders, 2017-2018.

<sup>67</sup> Bergdahl was held by the Haqqani faction, sometimes considered the most hardline group of Taliban, making the Doha office's ability to deliver the U.S. prisoner even more significant. See, for example, Coll, *Directorate S*, p. 528.

<sup>68</sup> Hamid Karzai, then Afghan president, insisted that U.S.-Taliban talks should proceed only if the Taliban committed to negotiations with the Afghan government. The Taliban rejected this precondition in 2012. Barnett Rubin, "An open letter to the Taliban", *The New Yorker*, 27 February 2018.

<sup>69</sup> Greg Jaffe and Missy Ryan, "A Dubai shopping trip and a missed chance to capture the head of the Taliban", *The Washington Post*, 24 March 2018. A U.S. drone strike that killed then Taliban leader Akhtar Mansour also set back the talks. Tahir Khan, "Mullah Mansoor was 'about to join peace talks' when killed", *Express Tribune*, 11 July 2016.

<sup>70</sup> Crisis Group interviews, U.S. officials, 2017 and 2018.

<sup>71</sup> See Mujib Mashal and Eric Schmitt, "White House orders direct Taliban talks to jump-start Afghan negotiations", *The New York Times*, 15 July 2018. According to the piece, which cites several senior U.S. officials, "the Trump administration has told its top diplomats to seek direct talks with the Taliban ... done in the hope of jump-starting negotiations to end the 17-year war". Afghan and Western officials in Kabul confirmed elements of the story to Crisis Group. But they suggested that the Afghan government, rather than officials in Washington, initiated the idea of direct U.S.-Taliban engagement. Crisis Group interviews, Afghan and Western officials, 16 July 2018.

<sup>72</sup> Crisis Group interviews, U.S. officials, June 2018.

The envoy, whom the White House should clearly signal speaks on its behalf, should initially talk to the Taliban about issues at the heart of the U.S. war with the insurgent group.<sup>73</sup> From the U.S. side the main problem would be transnational militants' use of Taliban-controlled areas as safe havens; from the Taliban's, the presence of U.S. and allied foreign forces. The U.S. would, in other words, put the issue of troop withdrawals on the table. Statements by senior U.S. officials, including Secretary Pompeo, suggest that doing so is not out of the question. Moreover, a withdrawal over time appears largely in tune with the inclinations of President Donald Trump himself.<sup>74</sup>

To address the legitimate concerns of the Afghan government and its domestic allies, the U.S. should convey to the Taliban and the Afghan public that any understanding on a troop drawdown could only take place as part of an agreement between the Taliban and the government, or once such a deal is in place. In any case, as long as the war persists, so, too, will safe havens and opportunities for transnational militants.

The main point of contact – or in the Taliban's own words, its "exclusive avenue" for negotiations – is its office in Doha.<sup>75</sup> Afghan and U.S. officials at times express frustration that the office wields insufficient clout with the senior Taliban leadership. But attempting to bypass the Taliban's own hierarchy would be a mistake, potentially fuelling their suspicions and make them more resistant to talks. For now, it follows, the U.S. should work through the Doha office, unless signals to proceed otherwise emerge from the Taliban leadership itself.

In turn, the Taliban should also empower its envoys in Doha to negotiate substantively. The movement would have to accept that in return for bilateral talks with the U.S. it would have to negotiate with the Afghan government. Refusing to do so would represent a failure by the insurgent leadership to heed important lessons of the ceasefire: that Kabul controls the Afghan forces battling in its name; and that U.S. and other international forces also complied with Ghani's ceasefire order.

The Taliban also would have to accept, even if implicitly, that any agreement on a timeline for a U.S. force withdrawal would need to be tied to or at least contingent upon a wider peace deal. Such a deal would likely have to include at least agreement on national and local power-sharing arrangements, security sector reform and a process for rewriting the Afghan constitution. In the event of a settlement, it would not be unthinkable for the Taliban to accept a residual U.S. troop presence, or at least U.S. support in containing militants opposed to the agreement, including potential Taliban splinter groups and ISIS.<sup>76</sup> In private, Taliban leaders suggest they may also

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<sup>73</sup> One former U.S. diplomat involved in past negotiations with the Taliban cites photos of President Obama with Mark Grossman, U.S. special representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan in 2011-2012, as sending a clear signal to Taliban leaders that Grossman had a direct line to and spoke on behalf of the president. Crisis Group interview, former U.S. official, July 2018.

<sup>74</sup> Trump has said that his "original instinct was to pull out". "Remarks by President Trump on the strategy in Afghanistan and South Asia", White House, 21 August 2017. Trump has reportedly displayed "signs of frustration" with the situation in Afghanistan in recent months, on the eve of a pending U.S. inter-agency review. Idrees Ali and Jonathan Landay, "After discouraging year, U.S. officials expect review of Afghan strategy", Reuters, 10 July 2018.

<sup>75</sup> Haibatullah Akhundzada, "Message of felicitation on the occasion of Eid al-Fitr", al-Emarah, 12 June 2018.

<sup>76</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Taliban members, January-June 2018.

need foreign support during the transition to help stabilise the country economically and politically.<sup>77</sup>

Preliminary U.S.-Taliban talks, with Washington putting a future U.S. military withdrawal on the table, are unlikely to be a cure-all. The Taliban may initially reject future talks with the Afghan government, holding out hope of dealing solely with the U.S. or the disparate Afghan factions in pro-government enclaves. There is also a risk that an initiative by the U.S. will prompt spoilers on both sides to launch spectacular attacks, street demonstrations or other actions that would stall negotiations.

Still, direct U.S.-Taliban talks offer the best hope of breaking the deadlock. Besides, such talks could yield dividends even if the Taliban initially reject intra-Afghan talks. The U.S. formalising a line of communication to insurgent leaders and putting the withdrawal of its forces on the table could strengthen the hand of those elements within the Taliban who are more inclined toward peace. It could undercut hardliners' claims that they are fighting an implacable foreign foe set on occupying Afghanistan forever. While some insurgents might see a U.S. declaration that it would withdraw forces as a sign the U.S. is tiring and thus as reason to fight on, the clarification by Washington that its forces' departure would hinge on a wider settlement would keep such perceptions in check.

Reassuring regional powers of Washington's intention to leave would be useful, too. While most fear a sudden U.S. departure, none want a permanent presence. Making clear that the exit of U.S. forces is in the cards would undercut one rationale for neighbours to back insurgents in the hope of deterring the U.S. from staying. Lastly, signalling that U.S. troop commitments are not open-ended could galvanise anti-Taliban factions to contemplate a future that includes sharing power with insurgents. Besides, for the U.S. the cost of empowering an envoy and making clear that an eventual troop withdrawal is on the table would be minimal. Afghan and U.S. operations against the insurgency would continue apace, albeit possibly calibrated based on how talks progress.

All sides could take confidence-building steps in this context. These might include, for example, further ceasefires or they could relate to prisoner releases or basic service delivery. In exchange for the Taliban's release of captive Afghan soldiers over Eid, for example, the government could consider freeing more insurgent prisoners; the Taliban should then reciprocate by letting go more detainees. Insurgent leaders also might be more transparent about cooperation with government and aid agencies delivering health and education programs and other support to rural districts in its control; and the government could officially endorse daily negotiations that already occur among the Taliban, Afghan officials and non-government aid workers along these lines (such a step would involve neither side relinquishing its territorial claims).<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> Donors could also ease restrictions on programs in Taliban-controlled areas. Delivering aid in rural Afghanistan often requires negotiations with the Taliban, but these talks remain secret because donors are hesitant to recognise the extent of the insurgents' control. See, for example, Jackson, "Life under the Taliban shadow government", p. 28: "While schools and clinics may provide fruitful ground in building confidence and even eventually opening the way to peace talks, however open the Taliban might be to dialogue on humanitarian and development issues, donors, the UN and NGOs

Negotiations between the Afghan government and the Taliban certainly should not be contingent on such steps. But the Eid ceasefire creates space for measures that could foster an atmosphere of cooperation between the two sides.

Both sides also should rethink some of their rhetoric. The Taliban should curb talk about toppling the government by force; the government should limit references to the insurgency as disparate bands of terrorists. The U.S. could publicly acknowledge positive moves taken by the Taliban, however small. Secretary Pompeo's statement on 16 June was a step in the right direction: "If Afghans can pray together, their leaders can talk together and resolve their differences".<sup>79</sup>

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remain hesitant to engage, worried they might 'legitimise' the Taliban or encounter legal or funding penalties".

<sup>79</sup> Mike Pompeo, "On President Ghani's offer to extend the ceasefire and open negotiations", U.S. Department of State, 16 June 2018. The June ceasefire may even have opened space for bolder gestures. It is not outside the realm of possibility that the Taliban would agree to stop attacking major cities in exchange for a halt to airstrikes, for example, although neither side has shown serious interest in this concept. Crisis Group interviews, Taliban and Afghan officials, June 2018.

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## VII. Conclusion

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Despite the enormous obstacles that remain to peace in Afghanistan, the parties to the conflict have edged closer to meaningful talks over the past decade and a half. In 2001, the U.S. excluded Taliban leaders from the Afghan political order when laying its foundations at the Bonn conference.<sup>80</sup> Successive generations of U.S. officials have softened that position, starting with the concession that former Taliban could avoid prosecution if they surrender, then offering talks with preconditions, including that the Taliban commit to disarm and accept the constitution.<sup>81</sup> President Obama shifted toward mentioning acceptable outcomes of talks instead of asserting preconditions for them, but despite setting a date for the withdrawal of most U.S. forces, showed no readiness to actually speak to the Taliban about drawing down.<sup>82</sup> Statements by U.S. and Afghan officials since June 2018 and media reports in mid-July suggest President Trump's administration might be ready to drop this reservation while also opening a formal channel to the insurgency.<sup>83</sup>

The Afghan government's position has evolved, too. Former president Karzai often obstructed direct U.S.-Taliban talks.<sup>84</sup> President Ghani initially framed the war as a bilateral issue between Afghanistan and Pakistan and, when his early attempts at rapprochement with Islamabad ran aground, members of his administration gave up on peacemaking. In 2017, those officials portrayed the war as a generational struggle against militants so radicalised that they would never make peace and so fragmented that their leadership cannot promise an end to violence.<sup>85</sup> This position was a recipe for endless bloodshed, and Ghani was right to set out along a different path in early 2018, with his offers of unconditional talks and his unilateral ceasefire.

That the Taliban accepted a ceasefire, if only for three days, also hints at changes within the insurgency's opaque leadership and the presence in the movement's ranks of a lobby for reconciliation. The behind-the-scenes thinking described in this paper would have been hard to imagine in previous years. Still more surprising was the wellspring of enthusiasm for peace among front-line Taliban commanders, previously assumed to be more rigid than their leaders. Some within the Taliban even speculate that a future peace deal could leave current Afghan institutions largely untouched, including the security sector, although with significant reforms and integration of armed Taliban into the security forces.<sup>86</sup>

If all sides have moved closer to a real conversation about peace, clearly a gulf remains. Direct U.S.-Taliban talks may not immediately yield an agreement from insurgents to speak to the Afghan government, which they have long portrayed as a

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<sup>80</sup> John Bew et al., "Talking to the Taliban: Hope over History?", International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence, 2013, p. 6.

<sup>81</sup> Former U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan Zalmay Khalilzad announced in 2004 that the U.S. would accept reconciliation only with "non-criminal" elements of the Taliban, who would not be arrested if they renounced violence. *Ibid.* p. 23.

<sup>82</sup> Coll, *op. cit.*, p. 471.

<sup>83</sup> Pompeo, *op. cit.*; International Contact Group, *op. cit.*

<sup>84</sup> Felix Kuehn, "Taliban History of War and Peace in Afghanistan", *Accord*, vol. 27, June 2018.

<sup>85</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Afghan and Western officials, 2018.

<sup>86</sup> Crisis Group observations and interviews, June 2018.

stooge of foreign powers. Many insurgents still believe they could end the war in conversation with the U.S. alone; bucking that sentiment could take time.<sup>87</sup>

Moreover, even were intra-Afghan talks to start, forging agreement among Afghan armed factions and society at large on the sharing of power and resources as well as on a new political order will be extraordinarily difficult. Bringing along neighbours and other relevant powers at a time of acute divisions among them – and between some of them and the U.S. – will pose yet another set of obstacles. Indeed, it is unclear whether such a deal could be hammered out at another Bonn-style conference or, instead, would require more incremental steps.<sup>88</sup> Certainly both the pro- and anti-government sides would need to think hard about who speaks on their behalf in negotiations. Broad representation would be needed on both sides, incorporating hardline factions that might otherwise play spoilers.

The immediate challenge, however, is getting to a peace process. A U.S. initiative and offer of formal if exploratory talks with insurgents is the best bet for doing so. The extraordinary scenes of celebration prompted by the Eid ceasefire makes this moment auspicious for such a gesture.

**Kabul/Brussels, 19 July 2018**

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<sup>87</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Taliban officials, June 2018.

<sup>88</sup> Experts recently recommended such an incremental process. Anna Larson and Alexander Rambotham, "Progressive peace for Afghanistan", *Accord*, vol. 27, June 2018.

Appendix A: Map of Afghanistan



## Appendix B: About the International Crisis Group

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The International Crisis Group (Crisis Group) is an independent, non-profit, non-governmental organisation, with some 120 staff members on five continents, working through field-based analysis and high-level advocacy to prevent and resolve deadly conflict.

Crisis Group's approach is grounded in field research. Teams of political analysts are located within or close by countries or regions at risk of outbreak, escalation or recurrence of violent conflict. Based on information and assessments from the field, it produces analytical reports containing practical recommendations targeted at key international, regional and national decision-takers. Crisis Group also publishes *CrisisWatch*, a monthly early-warning bulletin, providing a succinct regular update on the state of play in up to 70 situations of conflict or potential conflict around the world.

Crisis Group's reports are distributed widely by email and made available simultaneously on its website, [www.crisisgroup.org](http://www.crisisgroup.org). Crisis Group works closely with governments and those who influence them, including the media, to highlight its crisis analyses and to generate support for its policy prescriptions.

The Crisis Group Board of Trustees – which includes prominent figures from the fields of politics, diplomacy, business and the media – is directly involved in helping to bring the reports and recommendations to the attention of senior policymakers around the world. Crisis Group is chaired by former UN Deputy Secretary-General and Administrator of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), Lord (Mark) Malloch-Brown.

Crisis Group's President & CEO, Robert Malley, took up the post on 1 January 2018. Malley was formerly Crisis Group's Middle East and North Africa Program Director and most recently was a Special Assistant to former U.S. President Barack Obama as well as Senior Adviser to the President for the Counter-ISIL Campaign, and White House Coordinator for the Middle East, North Africa and the Gulf region. Previously, he served as President Bill Clinton's Special Assistant for Israeli-Palestinian Affairs.

Crisis Group's international headquarters is in Brussels, and the organisation has offices in seven other locations: Bogotá, Dakar, Istanbul, Nairobi, London, New York, and Washington, DC. It has presences in the following locations: Abuja, Algiers, Bangkok, Beirut, Caracas, Gaza City, Guatemala City, Hong Kong, Jerusalem, Johannesburg, Juba, Mexico City, New Delhi, Rabat, Tbilisi, Toronto, Tripoli, Tunis, and Yangon.

Crisis Group receives financial support from a wide range of governments, foundations, and private sources. Currently Crisis Group holds relationships with the following governmental departments and agencies: Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Austrian Development Agency, Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, European Union Instrument contributing to Stability and Peace, European Commission, Directorate General for Neighbourhood Enlargement Negotiations, Finnish Ministry for Foreign Affairs, French Development Agency, French Ministry of Europe and Foreign Affairs, Irish Aid, Japan International Cooperation Agency, Principality of Liechtenstein, Luxembourg Ministry of Foreign Affairs, New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs.

Crisis Group also holds relationships with the following foundations: Carnegie Corporation of New York, Heinrich Böll Stiftung, Henry Luce Foundation, John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, Korea Foundation, Oak Foundation, Omidyar Network Fund, Open Society Foundations, Ploughshares Fund, Robert Bosch Stiftung, Rockefeller Brothers Fund, and Wellspring Philanthropic Fund.

**July 2018**

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## Appendix C: Reports and Briefings on Asia since 2015

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### Special Reports

*Exploiting Disorder: al-Qaeda and the Islamic State*, Special Report N°1, 14 March 2016 (also available in Arabic and French).

*Seizing the Moment: From Early Warning to Early Action*, Special Report N°2, 22 June 2016.

*Counter-terrorism Pitfalls: What the U.S. Fight against ISIS and al-Qaeda Should Avoid*, Special Report N°3, 22 March 2017.

### North East Asia

*Stirring up the South China Sea (III): A Fleeting Opportunity for Calm*, Asia Report N°267, 7 May 2015 (also available in Chinese).

*North Korea: Beyond the Six-Party Talks*, Asia Report N°269, 16 June 2015.

*Stirring up the South China Sea (IV): Oil in Troubled Waters*, Asia Report N°275, 26 January 2016 (also available in Chinese).

*East China Sea: Preventing Clashes from Becoming Crises*, Asia Report N°280, 30 June 2016.

*China's Foreign Policy Experiment in South Sudan*, Asia Report N°288, 10 July 2017 (also available in Chinese).

*The Korean Peninsula Crisis (I): In the Line of Fire and Fury*, Asia Report N°293, 23 January 2018 (also available in Chinese).

*The Korean Peninsula Crisis (II): From Fire and Fury to Freeze-for-Freeze*, Asia Report N°294, 23 January 2018 (also available in Chinese).

### South Asia

*Mapping Bangladesh's Political Crisis*, Asia Report N°264, 9 February 2015.

*Women, Violence and Conflict in Pakistan*, Asia Report N°265, 8 April 2015.

*The Future of the Afghan Local Police*, Asia Report N°268, 4 June 2015.

*Revisiting Counter-terrorism Strategies in Pakistan: Opportunities and Pitfalls*, Asia Report N°271, 22 July 2015.

*Sri Lanka Between Elections*, Asia Report N°272, 12 August 2015.

*Winning the War on Polio in Pakistan*, Asia Report N°273, 23 October 2015.

*Nepal's Divisive New Constitution: An Existential Crisis*, Asia Report N°276, 4 April 2016.

*Political Conflict, Extremism and Criminal Justice in Bangladesh*, Asia Report N°277, 11 April 2016.

*Sri Lanka: Jumpstarting the Reform Process*, Asia Report N°278, 18 May 2016.

*Pakistan's Jihadist Heartland: Southern Punjab*, Asia Report N°279, 30 May 2016.

*Pakistan: Stoking the Fire in Karachi*, Asia Report N°284, 15 February 2017.

*Afghanistan: The Future of the National Unity Government*, Asia Report N°285, 10 April 2017.

*Sri Lanka's Transition to Nowhere*, Asia Report N°286, 16 May 2017.

*Sri Lanka's Conflict-Affected Women: Dealing with the Legacy of War*, Asia Report N°289, 28 July 2017.

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