



# Taking Stock of the Taliban's Perspectives on Peace

Asia Report N°311 | 11 August 2020

Headquarters

**International Crisis Group**

Avenue Louise 235 • 1050 Brussels, Belgium

Tel: +32 2 502 90 38 • Fax: +32 2 502 50 38

[brussels@crisisgroup.org](mailto:brussels@crisisgroup.org)

*Preventing War. Shaping Peace.*

## Table of Contents

Executive Summary.....	i
I. Introduction .....	1
II. Fundamental Taliban Perspectives on Peace.....	4
A. Foreign Influence and Its Implications .....	4
B. History, Honour and Legitimacy .....	6
C. Toward an Islamic System.....	7
III. The U.S.-Taliban Agreement as a Stage Setter for Peace Talks .....	9
IV. Signs of a Rhetorical Shift? .....	13
A. The Haqqani Op-Ed.....	16
B. Mullah Fazl’s Audiotape .....	17
C. No Spring Offensive Announcement .....	19
D. (War and) Peace in Other Prominent Messages.....	20
V. Clarified Positions and Unanswered Questions.....	23
A. Will the Taliban Really Cut Ties with Foreign Militants? .....	24
B. Under What Conditions Will the Taliban Agree to a Lasting Ceasefire? .....	26
C. What Kind of Constitution and Political System Would Be Acceptable?.....	27
D. What Provisions Will Exist for Women’s and Minorities’ Rights?.....	31
E. What Should Happen to Taliban Fighters and Afghanistan’s Security Forces? .....	33
VI. Conclusion .....	35
APPENDICES	
A. Map of Afghanistan .....	37
B. About the International Crisis Group .....	38
C. Crisis Group Reports and Briefings on Asia since 2017.....	39
D. Crisis Group Board of Trustees .....	41

# Principal Findings

**What's new?** On 29 February 2020, the United States and the Taliban signed an agreement meant to prompt peace talks between the militant group and the Afghan government. Many issues have delayed those talks, including widespread concerns about the Taliban's willingness to compromise in a political settlement ending the war.

**Why does it matter?** The U.S.-Taliban deal opened a fragile window of opportunity to settle the world's deadliest conflict. But for talks among Afghans to progress, the Taliban will need to move beyond vague governing principles and put forth concrete negotiating positions on reconciliation, power sharing and governance.

**What should be done?** The Taliban should swiftly determine clear negotiating positions and be prepared to debate – and eventually reach compromises – on these as intra-Afghan talks unfold. The U.S. and other donors should leverage prospects of post-transition assistance as encouragement, while the Afghan government and civil society should engage the group and its ideas.

## *Executive Summary*

As peace talks in Afghanistan unfold, the Taliban's positions on a number of critical topics to be discussed with the Afghan government remain ambiguous or undefined. The group has undertaken some preparatory deliberations but has a long way to go before it reaches consensus on ideas for Afghanistan's future. It is vital for the talks' eventual success that the insurgency determine a coherent political vision, accept an open debate in Afghan society of its positions and demonstrate a willingness to compromise at the negotiating table. The group's vision should include clear positions on what it wants to change as compared with the post-2004 Afghan constitution and political system, and by what mechanism; how to protect the rights of women and minorities; and how to restructure Afghan security forces, including what role, if any, Taliban fighters should have therein. The U.S., other donors and Afghan civil society actors should engage with the Taliban, to the extent possible, to nudge the movement in this direction.

The urgent need to firm up negotiating positions and prepare constituencies to accept compromises exists on both sides. Kabul has been relatively transparent regarding its vision and can be expected to seek to preserve the status quo as much as possible. The Taliban's political views are more opaque, however, and predicting where they may and may not be amenable to compromise requires a greater degree of interpretation from a more limited set of data. Accordingly, this report focuses on elucidating Taliban perspectives, evaluating to what extent the last year's developments reflect ideological shifts, and identifying what questions the group needs to answer in order to genuinely engage in negotiating peace.

The Taliban have historically avoided the internal debate and risk to cohesion that would come with forging consensus on difficult questions of governance and ideology. The group's core ideals are broad and define its objectives: ridding the country of foreign military forces and re-establishing what it considers legitimate, Islamic rule. The Taliban believe themselves close to reaching those goals, having survived as an insurgency and expanded far beyond their geographical and tribal roots since the U.S. and allies toppled their regime in 2001. After more than a year of bilateral negotiations, on 29 February 2020 the group signed an agreement with the U.S. that secured a phased foreign troop withdrawal in exchange for anti-terrorism commitments and a pledge to negotiate with the Afghan government, something it long refused to do.

In the months following the 29 February agreement, the Taliban and the Afghan government have stonewalled each other, resisting swift compromises on a prisoner exchange and a reduction of violence to levels more conducive to peace talks. The atmosphere for intra-Afghan negotiations is tense and, with the U.S. seemingly determined to downgrade its involvement in Afghanistan, an already fragile process is fraught with high stakes. Many in the Afghan government and civil society worry that talks may presage the unravelling of legal, social and economic achievements made since 2001. Widespread uncertainty as to the Taliban's aims deepens these fears.

The Taliban's ambiguity on their ambitions for a post-peace settlement exacerbate such fears. The group has done little to demonstrate its preparedness for mean-

ingful compromise, perhaps precisely to maintain cohesion and reinforce its bargaining position. Its political wing promises global audiences that a future Afghan state in which the Taliban play a leading role will be a responsible member of the international system. Yet, internally, the group has left many questions unanswered or permitted maximalist positions to flourish. Since 2018, representatives have assured diplomats that they seek an “inclusive” government in Afghanistan, but some members still claim to be fighting for a restoration of the Emirate the group established and ran exclusively in the 1990s. The group’s external statements on women’s and minorities’ rights are vague; its internal stances vary greatly, guided less by a universal policy than by local customs and individual commanders’ beliefs. It is even unclear what it hopes for its own fighters’ futures – that is, whether they should be incorporated into new Afghan security forces or gainfully employed elsewhere.

Many conflict actors enter negotiations with maximalist positions and adjust their stances as talks progress, sometimes over the course of years, but the Taliban are a hardened military organisation with a history of intransigence. To bolster prospects for constructive negotiations, the group should continue to shift its strategic communications away from war-related messaging and open itself to wider engagement with Afghan civil society, humanitarian agencies and other stakeholders. For talks eventually to succeed, the Taliban will need to accept – and convince the majority of their armed members of – the need for compromise to truly settle decades of brutal conflict.

Afghan civil society actors and foreign donors should encourage broader engagement. The Afghan government should mirror any shifts that occur in the Taliban’s behaviour and rhetoric, acknowledging and reciprocating any spirit of compromise. Foreign governments supporting the peace process should encourage the Taliban to undergird their participation in negotiations with substantive internal debate and expanded external dialogue. While the Taliban urgently need to begin establishing consensus on internally contentious questions, the agenda and pace of negotiations should be structured in a way that allows them time to do so on key issues.

**Doha/Kabul/Washington/Brussels, 11 August 2020**

# Taking Stock of the Taliban's Perspectives on Peace

## I. Introduction

---

On 29 February 2020, the United States culminated more than a year of direct negotiations with the Taliban by signing a historic agreement with the group in Doha, Qatar, meant to pave the way for a political settlement of the war in Afghanistan.<sup>1</sup> The agreement centred on a U.S. commitment to withdraw foreign troops in exchange for Taliban pledges to prevent terrorist groups from using Afghanistan as a staging ground and to enter negotiations with the Afghan government and other powerbrokers. It committed the government in Kabul, which was not a party to the negotiations, to release up to 5,000 imprisoned Taliban members before peace talks commenced and the Taliban to release 1,000 prisoners in return.

The parties set the start date for intra-Afghan talks at 10 March, but problems arose immediately: the day after the agreement was signed, Afghanistan's President Ashraf Ghani said his government could not honour terms it had not been present to negotiate.<sup>2</sup> The following morning, the Taliban declared that it would resume attacks on Afghan security forces – not strictly a violation of the written agreement, but a decision that led to widespread re-escalation of hostilities and bellicose rhetoric. Other issues impeded intra-Afghan talks, including political gridlock in Kabul stemming from disputed presidential election results. But steadily intensified U.S. pressure on Afghan political leaders cleared most of the hurdles in Kabul by the end of April.<sup>3</sup>

By May, two key impediments to negotiations remained: the Afghan government's slow release of prisoners and high levels of violence, including Taliban operations against Afghan soldiers but also several sensational terror attacks that the government blamed on the Taliban and the group disavowed.<sup>4</sup> A number of Afghan government officials made clear that violence had soured the mood for peace talks, while the Taliban insisted that their agreement with the U.S. was the only pathway to de-escalation: there was no chance of negotiating a ceasefire until all 5,000 Taliban prisoners were released.<sup>5</sup> The glaring five-to-one imbalance made the prisoner exchange a bitter pill

---

<sup>1</sup> See previous Crisis Group analysis of these bilateral talks, including Laurel Miller, "Will the U.S.-Taliban deal end the war?", *The New York Times*, 18 February 2020; Crisis Group Asia Briefing N°159, *Getting the Afghanistan Peace Process Back on Track*, 2 October 2019; Borhan Osman, "Trump must restart the Taliban talks", *The New York Times*, 18 September 2019; and Borhan Osman, "Afghanistan Diplomacy Gathers Steam Even as Attacks Increase", Crisis Group Commentary, 9 July 2019.

<sup>2</sup> "President Ghani rejects peace deal's prisoner swap with Taliban", Al Jazeera, 2 March 2020.

<sup>3</sup> On this gridlock, U.S. pressure and the resulting compromise, see Andrew Watkins, "Afghan Leaders End Political Impasse", Crisis Group Commentary, 20 May 2020.

<sup>4</sup> On notable attacks against civilians, see Mujib Mushal and Fahim Abed, "From maternity ward to cemetery, a morning of murder in Afghanistan", *The New York Times*, 12 May 2020.

<sup>5</sup> For officials' remarks reflecting attitudes' shift against talks, see tweet by Amrullah Saleh, @AmrullahSaleh2, first vice president of Afghanistan, 12:06am, 6 June 2020, and Hamdullah Mohib, @hmohib, national security advisor of Afghanistan, 4:45pm, 12 May 2020. On the Taliban's

for the Afghan government to swallow; one Afghan official noted that it “really should be termed a release, not an exchange”.<sup>6</sup>

Momentum swung in negotiations' favour at the end of May, when the Taliban announced that they would observe a three-day ceasefire during the Islamic holiday Eid al-Fitr – only the second ceasefire the group has ever offered. The Afghan government quickly confirmed that its forces would likewise cease hostilities. At the end of those three days, both parties signalled that they would sustain reduced levels of violence thereafter and continue a phased release of prisoners until intra-Afghan talks began.<sup>7</sup> This uneasy half-truce witnessed yet another escalation of violence and further delays in prisoner release, however, with both sides claiming their activity was retaliatory.<sup>8</sup> Another three-day ceasefire was declared at the end of July, on the occasion of Eid al-Adha (Eid ul-Qurban), reaffirming the Taliban's commitment to adhering to its deal with the Americans but also highlighting how long and contentious the delays of intra-Afghan talks had become.<sup>9</sup>

The violence and mistrust that followed the U.S.-Taliban agreement amplified perceptions, voiced by some in Afghan civil society, media and government, that the Taliban might be prepared to engage in talks but not to compromise to forge a political settlement of the conflict.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, the sequencing of peace efforts – beginning with bilateral commitments between the U.S. and Taliban, then moving to intra-Afghan talks that might end the war – allowed the insurgent movement to participate in the process without making significant concessions and with their leverage enhanced by those the U.S. made. As one European diplomat put it, “the Taliban got a lot up front; for them, the hardest part doesn't come until later”.<sup>11</sup>

These concerns deepened amid Taliban propaganda celebrating the deal with the U.S. as a great victory, along with calls to maintain the spirit – and military capabilities

---

insistence, see “Agreement implementation in everyone's interest”, Voice of Jihad (Taliban website), 29 May 2020.

<sup>6</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, Afghan diplomatic official, April 2020.

<sup>7</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, Western diplomatic official, June 2020.

<sup>8</sup> The Taliban denied rumours that they would extend the ceasefire and equivocated on maintaining the “reduced violence” that followed the Eid. See “منابع طالبان و دولت افغانستان: آتش‌بس اعلام نشده تا یک هفته دیگر” (Taliban and Afghan government: unannounced ceasefire will continue another week), BBC Persian, 27 May 2020. The U.S. reportedly was pressuring the group to accept a quid pro quo: reducing levels of violence in exchange for the Afghan government's release of a remaining number of imprisoned fighters, thereby removing the last two obstacles to talks. Crisis Group telephone interview, Western security official, Kabul, June 2020.

<sup>9</sup> See Susannah George and Pamela Constable, “Taliban declares ceasefire in Afghanistan for Eid, as pressure builds for peace talks”, *Washington Post*, 29 July 2020.

<sup>10</sup> In addition to Afghan officials' suspicions cited above, see Shaharзад Akbar, “I don't want the US to bargain away my son's future in Afghanistan”, CNN, 22 August 2019; and Wazhma Frog, “If the Taliban regain power, I could lose everything”, CNN, 26 February 2020. International observers struck a similar chord. See Saphora Smith, Mushtaq Yusufzai, Dan De Luce and Ahmed Mengli, “U.S. sees Taliban deal as exit from Afghanistan. Militants see it as victory over the superpower”, NBC News, 3 March 2020; and Anchal Vohra, “The United States wants peace. The Taliban wants an emirate”, *Foreign Policy*, 2 March 2020. Crisis Group explored many of these concerns in a Briefing Note, “Are the Taliban Serious about Peace Negotiations?”, 30 March 2020.

<sup>11</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, European diplomat, Brussels, May 2020.

– of jihad, even amid pursuit of a peaceful settlement.<sup>12</sup> True, some recent Taliban public messaging appeared designed to reassure international actors of the group's peaceful intentions. Most notable was a *New York Times* op-ed run under the name of Sirajuddin Haqqani, deputy emir of the Taliban and leader of the network blamed for some of Afghanistan's deadliest acts of terror.<sup>13</sup> But even this placating statement – an historic foray into Western establishment media by the anti-Western Taliban – offered only vague abstractions on future systems of governance, rights for women and minorities, and the Taliban's desired share of power. All of these issues will need to be clarified, debated and openly negotiated in order to achieve lasting peace.

As intra-Afghan negotiations draw closer, the need for both sides to firm up negotiating positions has gone from urgent to immediate. But while Kabul's negotiating team's stance is relatively easy to anticipate (it will likely seek to preserve the status quo as much as it can), the Taliban's political views are more opaque: it is difficult to predict where they may and may not be amenable to compromise. Accordingly, this report focuses on elucidating Taliban perspectives, evaluating to what extent the last year's developments reflect ideological shifts, and identifying what questions the group needs to answer in order to genuinely engage in a negotiated peace. The report draws upon Crisis Group interviews with a wide range of Taliban interlocutors in 2018, 2019 and 2020, as well as conversations with Western and Afghan officials. Interviews were conducted in Kabul, rural Afghanistan, Pakistan, Doha, European capitals and Washington, as well as remotely in the period since COVID-19 restricted travel. The report also builds on Crisis Group analysis of Afghanistan's peace process after Doha.<sup>14</sup>

---

<sup>12</sup> "Message of Esteemed Amir ul Mumineen, Sheikh-ul-Hadith Mawlawi Hibatullah Akhundzada, Regarding the Termination of Occupation Agreement with the United States", Voice of Jihad, 29 February 2020; see also "Victorious Force 1", video, Voice of Jihad, 1 June 2020.

<sup>13</sup> Sirajuddin Haqqani, "What we, the Taliban, want", *The New York Times*, 20 February 2020.

<sup>14</sup> See Crisis Group Briefing Notes, "What Will Happen if the U.S. Military Pulls out of Afghanistan without a Peace Deal?", 26 March 2020, "Are the Taliban Serious about Peace Negotiations?", op. cit., and "What Will Peace Talks Bode for Afghan Women?", 6 April 2020. Also see Crisis Group Asia Briefing N°160, *Twelve Ideas to Make Intra-Afghan Negotiations Work*, 2 March 2020; and Watkins, "Afghan Leaders End Political Impasse," op. cit.

## II. Fundamental Taliban Perspectives on Peace

---

To understand the Taliban's approach to key issues that will come up in peace negotiations, it is important to examine their views' ideological and intellectual underpinnings. Three areas of particular relevance are: (1) the group's perceptions of U.S. influence over the Afghan government and how these affect its willingness to deal with the latter, (2) the group's perspective on its prior time in government and how that links to its present claims to power, and (3) its desire to bring a distinct but undefined Islamic dimension to Afghan governance.<sup>15</sup>

These three themes are critical for negotiations because they directly relate to the group's criteria for declaring victory: expelling foreign forces, restoring legitimate rule and instituting Islamic governance. The group has made clear its desire to promote peace talks to its own membership as securing victory by means other than continued combat. These criteria have remained remarkably consistent since the movement regrouped as an insurgency in the years after the 2001 U.S. intervention. They are subject, however, to a wide variety of interpretations by the group's members. The Taliban intentionally avoids trying to forge consensus on difficult issues unless absolutely necessary, instead prioritising organisational unity – a practice that has directly shaped the group's lack of firm positions for a post-peace Afghanistan.<sup>16</sup> Interviews with Taliban leaders and lower-level militants suggest that they still struggle to come up with coherent, specific principles and policies based on the shared general perspectives outlined below.

### A. Foreign Influence and Its Implications

The Taliban consider the post-2001 Afghan state to be fundamentally illegitimate, a U.S. puppet that depends on Washington's military and financial largesse.<sup>17</sup> They dismiss as shams the elections through which successive Afghan administrations and parliamentarians have come into office. They also claim that anti-Taliban politicians are so dependent on international support that they look past their constituents'

---

<sup>15</sup>This section is based on dozens of Crisis Group interviews with senior and mid-level Taliban figures, as well as conversations with influential figures such as elders and clerics in rural areas of four provinces where popular support is essential to the Taliban. Crisis Group conducted fieldwork in rural areas of Kabul, Ghazni, Logar, Paktika and Wardak provinces in 2018 and 2019, and face-to-face conversations with Taliban figures in Qatar, Pakistan and a third country in 2018 and 2019. Additional conversations were conducted remotely, along with follow-up interviews in some of these locations, in 2020.

<sup>16</sup>This practice has been a common theme of the leadership's approach to managing the movement dating back to its "Emirate" regime. See David Mansfield, *A State Built on Sand: How Opium Undermined Afghanistan* (Oxford, 2016), ch. 6. The group's tendency to avoid factious policy formulation was only reinforced after its succession crisis of 2015, covered in detail in Borhan Osman, "Toward Fragmentation? Mapping the Post-Omar Taleban", *Afghanistan Analysts Network*, 24 November 2015; and broadly assessed in Andrew Watkins, "Taliban Fragmentation: Fact, Fiction and Future", U.S. Institute of Peace, 23 March 2020.

<sup>17</sup>The Taliban often use the terms "stooge" or "puppet" to describe the Afghan government. See, for instance, Yaroslav Trofimov and Maria Abi-Habib, "Taliban pinpoint limits of U.S. peace effort", *Wall Street Journal*, 13 January 2012; and Mujib Mashal, "Taliban talks hit a wall over deeper disagreements, officials say", *The New York Times*, 8 September 2019.

needs, instead seeking to curry favour with donors. A Taliban representative told Crisis Group, “The [Afghan government’s] leaders care about keeping their foreign funders happy”.<sup>18</sup> A Taliban fighter echoed this view:

If the government wanted to end the war, it could do it in one day. Tell the Americans to go, listen to what the people want and reconcile with the Taliban. Establish a clean government. But they won’t. The war is profitable for them so they can keep their jobs and the foreign money flowing.<sup>19</sup>

For the Taliban, grounding their rhetoric in the notion that they are resisting a foreign-backed, illegitimate government serves multiple purposes. It plays to rural constituencies’ tendency to see Kabul politicians as distant from Afghan religion and culture, as well as disparaging of rural populations and the pious. Such resentment is widespread in villages of the south and east, even among locals who say they feel no particular allegiance to the Taliban. In the words of one, “At least [the Taliban] are the sons of the land”.<sup>20</sup>

Of particular relevance to prospective negotiations, the Taliban’s narrative about U.S. control justifies their rejection of the 2004 Afghan constitution. They characterise the document as having been “written in the shadow of American bombers”.<sup>21</sup> For years, they have made clear that they are not interested in negotiating a political settlement that folds them into the existing constitutional order. (Whether they might show some flexibility in that position in future negotiations is discussed below.)

Perhaps in order to appear ideologically consistent with their long-held demand of non-interference from foreigners, the Taliban also have shown a willingness in recent years to offer assurances that the movement has no desire to meddle in the affairs of any other country or threaten any state.<sup>22</sup> For this reason, the group has been will-

---

<sup>18</sup> Crisis Group interview, Taliban official, May 2018.

<sup>19</sup> Crisis Group interview, Taliban fighter, April 2018.

<sup>20</sup> Crisis Group interview, villager from Ghazni province, Ghazni, June 2018. In part because they seek to nurture the idea that they defend local interests from a foreign-controlled puppet government, Taliban leaders tend to bridle at the oft-made suggestion that they themselves are proxies of Islamabad. Much of the Taliban’s leadership lives in Pakistan and the insurgents’ fundraising depends in part on smuggling across the Pakistani border. Yet a nearly decade-old NATO study concluded that most insurgents fight reasonably close to their homes, suggesting that the vast majority of Taliban live in Afghanistan – a conclusion validated by more recent field research. “Afghanistan Peace and Reintegration Program”, unclassified NATO briefing slides, Force Reintegration Cell, 8 June 2011.

<sup>21</sup> Crisis Group interview, Taliban official, February 2019.

<sup>22</sup> For one example, see, “If America seeks a real solution, there is a way”, Voice of Jihad, 9 August 2017. The commentary reads in part: “The Islamic Emirate has never resorted to creating internal problems for any country in the world including the invading countries. This is because interference in the internal affairs of other countries is not the policy of the Islamic Emirate. We have proven this in practical ways over the past decade and a half”. For a more recent example, see the scramble to explain Taliban comments about India. Chief negotiator Mullah Sher Abbas Stanekzai reportedly characterised India’s role in Afghanistan as “negative”, referring to its support for forty years of “stooge” governments, while some spokespersons’ social media accounts criticised India over Kashmir. These comments were later rejected as unofficial, in a statement citing the Taliban’s policy to ignore nations’ internal affairs. “Fake news’: Taliban disowns statement on Kashmir, friendship with India”, *The Week India*, 19 May 2020.

ing to commit in the U.S.-Taliban negotiations to preventing Afghan territory from becoming a staging ground for international attacks.

The group's rejection of foreign powers affects its stance at the negotiation table in several ways: one has been its long-time resistance to bargaining with the "puppet" government in Kabul, a position that has softened over the past year of talks with the U.S. But the group remains ambivalent on this point, and it remains to be seen what posture the Taliban will adopt toward the Afghan government as talks progress (see next section). The group's position on this matter underpins its rejection of a neutral third-party facilitator for the opening rounds of intra-Afghan talks – as it thinks the proper way to settle the Afghanistan conflict is "with only Afghans in the room".<sup>23</sup> Finally, the group's call for a total and final foreign troop withdrawal is integral to this view. U.S. and allied policymakers should not mistakenly assume flexibility on this point – which also illuminates the high value the Taliban have placed on the Doha agreement.

### B. *History, Honour and Legitimacy*

The Taliban look to the 1996-2001 period, when they ruled Afghanistan as an "Islamic Emirate", as a source of both legitimacy and honour. Although most outsiders consider that era's legacy to be dubious at best – only Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates recognised the Taliban regime, which was widely condemned for its regressive policies – the group's members see things differently.

In particular, the Taliban claim that they earned legitimacy by bringing law and order to Afghanistan after a chaotic civil war, and that their rule, in the words of one member, "inspired many in the Muslim world with its adherence to pure Sharia law and its prideful independence from outside influence".<sup>24</sup> That such an outcome came at the cost of draconian laws brutally enforced does not, from their perspective, diminish the achievement. Moreover, they see their claim to legitimacy as enhanced by comparing their rule to what they regard as the tumult that followed the 2001 U.S. invasion. This is in part why they continue to refer to themselves as the "Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan".<sup>25</sup>

Taliban members also explain that they drew a measure of honour from the power and prestige they enjoyed during the time of the Emirate. They experienced a corresponding sense of loss when their organisation collapsed due to U.S. military intervention, a sentiment that was reinforced when the new government and its foreign allies launched counter-insurgency operations.<sup>26</sup> Now they seek to have that sense of honour restored. Over the past year, as members of the Taliban's political office in Doha met to discuss peace efforts with a growing number of foreign officials (many

---

<sup>23</sup> Crisis Group interviews, diplomatic officials, July 2020. On the importance of a neutral third-party facilitator, see Crisis Group Briefing, *Twelve Ideas to Make Intra-Afghan Negotiations Work*, op. cit.

<sup>24</sup> Crisis Group interview, Taliban member, 2018.

<sup>25</sup> Bill Roggio, "At Moscow conference, Taliban refers to itself as the 'Islamic Emirate' 61 times", *Long War Journal*, 9 November 2018. In fact, Taliban members have routinely referred to themselves as the "Islamic Emirate" since 2001.

<sup>26</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Taliban members, 2018 and 2019. See also Anand Gopal, "The Battle for Afghanistan: Militancy and Conflict in Kandahar", New America Foundation, 2010.

of whose governments declined to recognise the Emirate regime in the late 1990s), the group has cast these meetings as legitimisation of the Emirate – and partial recompense of previous slights.<sup>27</sup>

How exactly the Taliban's perspective on their own history, legitimacy and honour might translate into concrete objectives at the negotiations table is not clear. Several movement representatives stress that, although they use the name "Emirate" to justify the war and defend the group's reputation, they are not asserting that a future state must fall under the absolute rule of an emir (though, worryingly, at least some fighters believe that is precisely what they are fighting for).<sup>28</sup> Consistent with this focus on retroactive justification, some Taliban officials suggest that a statement from their opponents recognising the historical legitimacy of the pre-2001 Emirate could be a productive part of a peace settlement. Such a step might go some way toward satisfying the Taliban in their quest for dignity, although it almost certainly would be difficult to accept for those Afghans who suffered directly from the group's rule, as well as for Western powers.

### C. *Toward an Islamic System*

Although the Taliban did not launch their post-2001 insurgency with declared aims regarding governance – at first, their goals centred on expelling foreign forces – over time they began articulating a demand for an "Islamic system". As a movement rooted in the traditions of Hanafi Islamic jurisprudence, the Taliban have many political ideas that are religiously grounded.<sup>29</sup> Recommendations from affiliated religious scholars have shaped Taliban views since the 1990s, and this appears likely to continue during peace talks. But the group has not offered much detail on what its vision of an Islamic system of governance would entail.

In recent years, the Taliban have shown some flexibility in their understanding of an "Islamic system". It should also be noted that they use the term "Islamic system" in more than one sense. At times, Taliban figures use this phrase when speaking broadly about cultural values and social norms. At other times, they use it more explicitly to suggest a governing structure that enforces Islamic law and gives political authority to the figures who interpret it.

---

<sup>27</sup> See, for example, "Numerous foreign secretaries held separate meetings with Deputy of Islamic Emirate Mullah Baradar Akhund", *Voice of Jihad*, 1 March 2020; this rhetoric found echoes in multiple Crisis Group interviews, Taliban officials, Doha and other locations, 2019.

<sup>28</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Taliban officials, 2018 and 2019. On fighters' perceptions, see Borhan Osman's nationwide survey of Taliban fighters: "A Negotiated End to the Afghan Conflict: The Taliban's Perspective", U.S. Institute of Peace, 18 June 2018.

<sup>29</sup> Islamic legal philosophy, or *fiqh*, follows distinct schools, or *madhhabs*, of tradition and interpretation. Sunni Islam consists of four primary extant *madhhabs*; the largest of these is the Hanafi school, with different strands stretching across the Muslim world from the Balkans to Bangladesh. Historically, Hanafi *fiqh* was more flexible than the other schools, which were rooted more strictly in tradition. But over time that flexibility granted space to harsh revivalist movements, such as the Deobandi school within Hanafism that influenced the Taliban. See Celia Drugger, "Indian town's seed grew into the Taliban's code", *The New York Times*, 23 February 2002.

Although the group clearly would like to change Afghanistan's current political system – to combat what it perceives as political, financial and moral corruption – its vision for change appears to reflect certain concessions to practicality.

Some measures of practicality can be found in the group's attempts to posture as a shadow government. As the Taliban have grappled over the last decade with the imperative to govern and provide services to civilians who have come under their influence, they have gradually adjusted some of their harshest stances on education, modern technology and media consumption – albeit to a degree that remains more restrictive than most Afghan government policies and often falls short of international human rights standards.<sup>30</sup> In many districts across the country, the group has allowed government-salaried officials or internationally funded humanitarian workers to continue performing essential services.<sup>31</sup> The acceptance of such assistance would seem to violate the movement's principle of rejecting a "stooge" government of foreign powers, but in permitting these services to continue it essentially appropriates funding and technical expertise that it lacks itself. The Taliban take great pains to obscure this incapacity, going so far as to issue their own invoices for services, such as electricity, provided by government bodies.<sup>32</sup>

Community pressure – or simply individual commanders' preferences – have prompted other variable adjustments to Taliban policy across Afghanistan, for instance on enabling girls' education.<sup>33</sup> The organisation's structure allows an enormous degree of latitude to leaders at the district and village level, especially when it comes to governance and community relations. Local context has only grown more important as the Taliban have expanded their shadow government efforts. When it comes to an "Islamic system", the movement's only real constant is its network of courts with judges applying austere interpretations of Islamic law.<sup>34</sup>

---

<sup>30</sup> On the group's service provision, see Rahmatullah Amiri and Ashley Jackson, "Insurgent Bureaucracy: How the Taliban Makes Policy", U.S. Institute of Peace, 9 December 2019; and a series of field studies from the Afghanistan Analysts Network that is summarised in Scott Smith, "Service Delivery in Taliban-Influenced Areas of Afghanistan", U.S. Institute of Peace, 30 April 2020. On continued Taliban practices of social restrictions and quashing civilian dissent, see "You Have No Right to Complain": Education, Social Restrictions and Justice in Taliban-Held Afghanistan", Human Rights Watch, 30 June 2020.

<sup>31</sup> Amiri and Jackson, "Insurgent Bureaucracy", op. cit.

<sup>32</sup> On electricity, see Mujib Mashal and Najim Rahim, "Taliban, collecting bills for Afghan utilities, tap new revenue sources", *The New York Times*, 28 January 2017; confirmed as an ongoing phenomenon in Crisis Group interviews, Kabul, March 2020.

<sup>33</sup> "You Have No Right to Complain", Human Rights Watch, op. cit.

<sup>34</sup> See Amiri and Jackson, "Insurgent Bureaucracy", op. cit., as well as Ashley Jackson and Florian Weigand, "Rebel Rule of Law: Taliban Courts in the West and North-west of Afghanistan", Overseas Development Institute, May 2020.

### III. The U.S.-Taliban Agreement as a Stage Setter for Peace Talks

---

The Taliban's consistent refusal to recognise or negotiate with the Afghan government, reflecting a bedrock theme in Taliban thinking noted above, fundamentally shaped the trajectory of the decade-long efforts to resolve Afghanistan's war. This refusal ultimately prompted the U.S. in early 2019 to begin negotiating overtly and bilaterally with the Taliban – a process concession to the group that energised talks and eventually led to the 2020 Doha agreement. This concession displeased the Kabul government, which had long insisted on a seat at the table from the outset of any talks. Nevertheless, the U.S.-Taliban negotiations not only produced a Taliban commitment to intra-Afghan talks but also prompted a barely acknowledged compromise on acceptance of the Afghan government as interlocutor.

From his electoral campaign's earliest days, U.S. President Donald Trump had been vocal in his disapproval of continued military engagement in Afghanistan. During his first months in office, national security officials persuaded him to grant military commanders slightly more troops, looser rules of engagement and more time before considering any drawdown. But by mid-2018, the U.S. president had reportedly grown impatient, while a three-day ceasefire between Taliban and Afghan government forces during the Eid al-Fitr holiday (the first ever between the two warring parties) seemed to open a window of opportunity.<sup>35</sup> In a June statement on the ceasefire the State Department appeared to signal an impending policy shift, saying it would "support, facilitate and participate" in Afghan government-led talks with the Taliban.<sup>36</sup>

In September 2018, the U.S. appointed Zalmay Khalilzad, a former ambassador to Kabul and an architect of the country's 2004 constitution, as special representative for Afghanistan reconciliation. Khalilzad quickly began demonstrating Washington's appetite for rapid progress toward a political solution to the conflict – even if that meant accommodating the Taliban's refusal to talk to Kabul. U.S. diplomats discarded their longstanding insistence that Washington would negotiate with the group only if the Afghan government was also at the table. In October, the U.S. envoy asked Pakistan to release the Taliban's former second-in-command, Abdul Ghani Baradar, a confidence-building measure that would prove critical when Baradar was later appointed to lead the movement's political office in Doha.<sup>37</sup> Talks quickly moved toward what the two parties considered core issues: the U.S. demand for counter-terrorism assurances and the Taliban demand for the withdrawal of foreign troops.

In late 2018, Khalilzad asked the Taliban a series of broad questions to elicit their views on counter-terrorism, the pathway to intra-Afghan dialogue, the shape of a future state and their desired relations with the U.S. and the world.<sup>38</sup> In 2019, the U.S. envoy gradually narrowed the agenda, leaving issues such as state structure and

---

<sup>35</sup> Crisis Group telephone interviews, former U.S. officials, December 2019 and March 2020.

<sup>36</sup> Michael R. Pompeo, "On President Ghani's Offer to Extend the Ceasefire and Open Negotiations", U.S. State Department, 16 June 2018.

<sup>37</sup> Dexter Filkins, "Pakistanis tell of motive in Taliban leader's arrest", *The New York Times*, 22 August 2010. After Baradar's appointment and transfer to Doha, he and Khalilzad led the subsequent rounds of talks.

<sup>38</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Western and Taliban officials, Kabul, November 2018.

the constitution to be discussed among Afghan parties at a later stage. The U.S. also shifted its characterisation of the desired format for those later peace negotiations from “Taliban-government” to “intra-Afghan”. The broader term was a rhetorical concession to the Taliban’s continued refusal to meet with the Afghan government in a bilateral or trilateral (ie, including U.S. negotiators) format, but it also acknowledged the Afghan government’s persistent challenges in assembling an “inclusive” multi-faction negotiating team.<sup>39</sup> As a result, U.S.-Taliban negotiators focused on a timetable for U.S. military withdrawal, Taliban assurances on counter-terrorism, and how those two agenda items might be linked to peace talks and a reduction of violence or a full ceasefire.

Talks progressed throughout the year, even as agreement on certain points proved challenging. For example, in March 2019, the U.S. proposed a timeline for troop reductions stretching over several years, while the Taliban asked for a withdrawal period of several months. The parties also struggled to find common ground on transnational jihadist groups: at times during talks the Taliban welcomed quiet cooperation in their fight with the Islamic State-Khorasan Province (IS-KP), but they also believed that the U.S. had an overbroad definition of “terrorism” and were reluctant to share information about smaller militant bands that they did not view as threatening.<sup>40</sup> The U.S. began talks pushing for the Taliban to explicitly disavow al-Qaeda, but the group staunchly resisted doing so. In the end, the Taliban’s persistence won the formal point: the final agreement did not renounce al-Qaeda, instead detailing a number of actions by which the Taliban would prevent actors from using “the soil of Afghanistan” to threaten the security of the U.S. and its allies.

As talks progressed in Doha, tensions grew between Washington and Kabul. Afghan officials were unsettled by both their exclusion from talks and U.S. officials’ seeming impatience. The day after a U.S.-Taliban meeting in October 2018, Ghani cautioned Khalilzad that a peace process would require six years. Khalilzad reportedly replied that he had six months. While talks lasted far longer, U.S. officials worked with a sense of urgency that they felt Kabul did not reciprocate.<sup>41</sup> Afghan officials were outraged that the U.S. had apparently agreed to a sequence whereby it would commit to begin withdrawing forces before intra-Afghan talks began, as they worried a drawdown would weaken their hand. Kabul also thought that, rather than seeking counter-terrorism help from the Taliban, the U.S. should rely on cooperation with the government.<sup>42</sup> On 14 March 2019, during a visit to Washington, National Security Advisor Hamdullah Mohib publicly and harshly accused Khalilzad of delegitimising the Afghan government. The U.S. responded by cutting off contact with Mohib, Kabul’s top security official, for over a year.<sup>43</sup>

---

<sup>39</sup> Crisis Group interviews, U.S. and Afghan government officials, April and August 2019.

<sup>40</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Taliban officials, Doha, March and June 2019.

<sup>41</sup> Crisis Group interviews, active and former U.S. officials, Kabul and via telephone, February 2020.

<sup>42</sup> Crisis Group interview, senior Afghan government official, December 2018. The Afghan government has consistently emphasised its track record of support for U.S. counter-terrorism efforts. President Ghani himself stressed the point on 11 June 2020 in a virtual event, “Afghanistan’s Vision for Peace”, co-sponsored by the Atlantic Council and U.S. Institute of Peace.

<sup>43</sup> Jonathan Landay, “U.S.-Afghan tensions erupt over Kabul’s exclusion from peace talks”, Reuters, 14 March 2019.

Amid these tensions, the U.S. pushed the Taliban to soften their resistance to direct negotiations with the Afghan government. The Taliban had consistently refused such meetings so as to repudiate Kabul's claim to legitimacy.<sup>44</sup> They began to bend in April 2019, when Taliban representatives accepted plans for an informal dialogue in Doha that would include Presidential Palace figures, so long as all participants nominally appeared in their personal capacities (this technicality allowed the Taliban to say they were not talking with the "foreigner's puppet"). That round of talks collapsed, but the Taliban seemed to have crossed a threshold, helping generate positive momentum. A second attempt at stepped-up intra-Afghan dialogue had more success as more than 60 delegates, including Taliban and Afghan government officials, gathered on 7 and 8 July in Doha. The organisers again said all participants were present in their personal capacities, but the event raised hopes for formal negotiations. In late July 2019, a Taliban spokesman promised that intra-Afghan talks would include all factions, including the "Kabul administration".<sup>45</sup>

By the time the U.S. and Taliban finalised and signed their agreement in February 2020, its text lacked a single reference to the Afghan government, instead merely referring to upcoming "intra-Afghan dialogue and negotiations". Yet in spite of the omission, the Taliban's commitment to talks that would include Afghan government representatives in effect retracted a core criterion for victory: rejecting formal negotiations with the Afghan government until the last foreign soldier had left Afghan soil.<sup>46</sup> The group also agreed to a late-stage demand from the U.S., driven in part by the Afghan government's concerns: the Taliban offered a seven-day "reduction in violence", which fell short of a full ceasefire and was spottily observed in some provinces, but measurably tamped down attacks on Afghan security forces and reduced civilian casualties.<sup>47</sup>

---

<sup>44</sup> Taliban figures previously met Afghan officials in Murree, Pakistan, in July 2015, but the Taliban never publicly acknowledged the meeting and privately complained they had been tricked into attending. Borhan Osman, "The Murree Process: Divisive Peace Talks Further Complicated by Mullah Omar's Death", *Afghanistan Analysts Network*, 5 August 2015.

<sup>45</sup> Tweet by Suhail Shaheen, @suhailshaheen1, spokesman for Taliban political office, 28 July 2019. In the early months of 2019, the Taliban's use of the term "Kabul administration" indicated a softening of their terms for the Afghan government, given the common references to the "stooge" or "puppet regime" of years prior.

<sup>46</sup> For several years prior to Khalilzad's efforts, secret talks between individual members of the Afghan government and the Taliban took place intermittently yet routinely. The government's side most prominently included then-director of the Afghan intelligence service Mohammed Masoom Stanekzai (whom Ghani appointed in 2020 to lead the inclusive Afghan negotiating team). As a result, it is not accurate to say the Afghan government and Taliban have never spoken or engaged in high-level dialogue. Rather, the significance of the U.S.-Taliban agreement and its commitment to intra-Afghan negotiations is the formality of the putative talks, and the Taliban's implicit acknowledgment of the Afghan government's authority to negotiate in them, which the group had strongly rejected up to 29 February 2020. Crisis Group telephone interviews, former U.S. and UK officials, April 2020.

<sup>47</sup> Zack Budryk, "Pompeo: US wants 'demonstrable evidence' Taliban will reduce violence", *The Hill*, 3 February 2020. Pompeo's remarks aligned closely with phrases used by Afghan officials when questioning the Taliban's commitment to peace. Also see Thomas Ruttig, "First Breakthrough Toward Peace? A Look at the Seven-day 'Reduction of Violence'", *Afghanistan Analysts Network*, 17 February 2020.

Since then, the group's public messaging has downplayed the degree to which intra-Afghan talks would signify their acknowledgment of the Afghan government, instead emphasising U.S. obligations and criticising Kabul's actions – rather than rejecting Kabul's role in negotiations as a matter of principle.<sup>48</sup> By 10 March 2020, the date that the U.S.-Taliban agreement set for the start of intra-Afghan talks, Afghan leaders had still failed to reach agreement on an “inclusive” negotiating team that equitably represented key national stakeholders (a dilemma driven by many domestic political factors, but particularly exacerbated by the contested results of the September 2019 presidential election).<sup>49</sup> After U.S. pressure prompted Kabul to hurriedly produce a consensus negotiating team on 26 March, the Taliban publicly dismissed the list as not inclusive enough.<sup>50</sup> The same week, though, Taliban figures travelled openly to Kabul to serve on a technical working group on prisoner exchange. The group did not comment on the government negotiating team's composition after prominent opposition politicians endorsed the list.

The Taliban's gradual acceptance of the Afghan government as its primary negotiating counterpart in intra-Afghan talks was not a foregone conclusion; recognising Kabul (even implicitly) cuts against the grain of the group's foundational views.<sup>51</sup> The group made no other concession on the process or substance of intra-Afghan talks to accompany its acknowledgement of the government's necessary participation – but neither did the U.S. attempt to extract them. The Taliban's acquiescence to sitting at the table with government representatives was essential to the peace process moving forward in any form.

---

<sup>48</sup> See the Taliban's repeated references to the “Termination of Occupation Agreement”, as well as the insistence that the U.S. bears responsibility for the Afghan government's behaviour leading up to intra-Afghan talks, for example in “Message of Felicitation of the Esteemed Amir-ul-Mumineen Sheikh-ul-Hadith Mawlawi Hibatullah Akhundzada (may Allah protect him) on the Occasion of Eid-ul-Fitr”, Voice of Jihad, 20 May 2020.

<sup>49</sup> For more on these tensions and their impact on the peace process, see Watkins, “Afghan Leaders End Political Impasse”, op. cit.

<sup>50</sup> A Taliban spokesperson noted that the announcement of the team's formation by the “Kabul administration” was against their principles, but then said opposition political figures had not endorsed the team, which was true at the time. In the following days, Dr Abdullah Abdullah and nearly every other major Afghan political figure issued strong public endorsements. See “Remarks by Spokesman of Islamic Emirate Concerning Negotiation Team Announced in Kabul”, Voice of Jihad, 28 March 2020.

<sup>51</sup> When the U.S. began direct talks with the Taliban in late 2018, a movement spokesperson rejected even the notion of any agreement with the U.S. until the last foreign troops had left Afghan soil. See Mujib Mashal, “U.S. officials meet with Taliban again as Trump pushes Afghan peace process”, *The New York Times*, 13 October 2018.

#### IV. Signs of a Rhetorical Shift?

---

The Taliban's agreement with the U.S. triggered a wave of public communications from the group about the peace process and related issues. Some content, released in English, seemed intended for foreign audiences, while the majority was geared toward supporters. Sources in the movement say internal discussions on peace and post-peace policies also picked up pace after February, at various levels of leadership and including figures and circles whom Afghan and Western officials often characterise as "hardline".<sup>52</sup> Yet the tone and substance of external messaging has not been uniform. Some Taliban rhetoric seemed clearly intended to promote the U.S.-driven peace track, and perhaps also to alleviate Western concerns about the prominent role the group would play in a future Afghan state. Other content emphasised the group's resolve to remain on a war footing.<sup>53</sup>

The contradiction between the two themes elicited several explanations from observers. Some sceptics suggested that any Taliban rhetorical overtures to peace are simply diversionary, and that the group has no real interest in negotiations and merely plans to wait out a U.S. withdrawal.<sup>54</sup> Others have drawn attention to a perceived divide on negotiating peace between the group's political office based in Qatar and its military commanders in the field, suggesting that even if the more politically oriented Taliban leaders genuinely intend to negotiate, the movement is too fractured to trust those leaders.<sup>55</sup>

Reality may be less clear-cut. As one Western diplomat experienced in engaging with the group put it, the Taliban appear to be "sitting on the fence", equally poised to pursue political or military tracks as they evaluate adversaries' actions and their opportunities to achieve their objectives through negotiations.<sup>56</sup> The same diplomat noted that the group has lost little thus far by adopting this reactive posture, either in the peace process or in the military conflict itself. The Taliban consists of tens of thousands of Afghans bearing diverse views and interests, and the leadership has balanced the pursuit of potential gains from peace with the need to maintain organisational stability. Quite simply, the Taliban appear to be keeping their options open and postponing potentially divisive internal debates over expectations from the peace process. The question that most usefully illuminates the group's multi-themed messaging is not "What is the Taliban's intent regarding the peace process?", but rather, "What are the Taliban's concerns about moving forward with negotiations, and what approaches are they taking to mitigate them?"

---

<sup>52</sup> Crisis Group telephone interviews, Western official and Taliban interlocutors, June 2020.

<sup>53</sup> Several prominent examples are detailed further below in this section. The group's video production since 29 February is particularly illuminating, with series titles like "Victorious Army", "Real Men", "Enemy Savagery" and "Martyrdom Loving Nobility". All available at Voice of Jihad.

<sup>54</sup> See, for example, Hussein Haqqani, "Don't trust the Taliban's promises", *Foreign Policy*, 7 February 2019; or similar sentiments echoed in Deb Riechmann, "Critics of US-Taliban deal say militants can't be trusted", Associated Press, 4 July 2020.

<sup>55</sup> See Yelena Biberman and Jason Schwartz, "A divided Taliban could unleash a new proxy war in Afghanistan", Atlantic Council, 26 June 2020; or Zachary Karabatak, "The Taliban's political leaders signed a peace deal – but its military commanders could put that at risk", *Washington Post*, 16 March 2020.

<sup>56</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, Western diplomatic official, May 2020.

First, the Taliban are a militant movement, with armed struggle rooted in their founding ideology and nearly 30 years of organisational culture.<sup>57</sup> Rallying the movement around the notion that victory can best be achieved through negotiations, rather than military might is – and will continue to be – a massive undertaking. Convincing the group's military wing that negotiations with the U.S. were worth pursuing – and then to break with the longstanding rejection of public talks with Kabul – required a great deal of lobbying by the political office and other more pragmatic elements in the movement.<sup>58</sup> When talks with the U.S. gathered steam, many in the movement (including prominent figures on the military high council) rejected them as a sideshow, a sentiment that was circulating even days before the 29 February signing ceremony in Qatar.<sup>59</sup> President Trump's abrupt cancellation of talks in September 2019 – putting them on a several-month hiatus – breathed life into Taliban dismissals of the chances for a political settlement, as did President Ghani's immediate rejection of the eventual agreement's terms on prisoner exchange.<sup>60</sup>

These moments underscored the group's second serious concern: Taliban members vehemently mistrust the U.S. government, and many still doubt the sincerity of its pledge to withdraw its troops – no matter what terms the Taliban may meet. Additionally, many in the movement see Washington's hand behind Kabul's intransigence on terms of the 29 February agreement (such as delays in releasing Taliban prisoners).<sup>61</sup> Even at the highest levels of leadership, there appears to be wholesale rejection of the notion that the Afghan government is an independent actor. Many Taliban members regard events such as Kabul's prisoner release procedures, or even the chaos of the presidential election standoff between Ghani and Abdullah, as disturbances orchestrated by the U.S., and signs of Washington's intent to confuse or deceive the group. One U.S. official lamented that Washington must negotiate with an actor that “believes its own propaganda”, but the mistrust stems from a core aspect of the Taliban's worldview and should not be understood as mere posturing.<sup>62</sup>

The Taliban consistently point to what they perceive as evidence of the Afghan government's rejection of the U.S.-Taliban agreement. One grievance is a series of statements made by Afghan officials, including President Ghani, that attempt to connect the Taliban to IS-KP – at the same time that U.S. defence officials began to publicly acknowledge the Taliban's instrumental role in militarily degrading the jihadist

---

<sup>57</sup> It could be argued that commitment to militancy goes even farther back in the group's history, to its original “insurgency” against mujahedin factions in the mid-1990s. On the rank and file's deep-seated resistance to anything other than military victory over the Afghan government, see Osman, “A Negotiated End to the Afghan Conflict: The Taliban's Perspective”, *op. cit.*

<sup>58</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Taliban officials, Doha and other locations, April 2019 and February 2020.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>60</sup> See Crisis Group Briefing, *Getting the Afghanistan Peace Process Back on Track*, *op. cit.* A Taliban interlocutor relayed these reactions. Crisis Group interview, Kabul, February 2020. The same views surfaced in Michael Semple, “Internal Divisions, in Kabul and within the Taliban, Hinder Afghan Peace Talks”, *World Politics Review*, 30 March 2020.

<sup>61</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Taliban interlocutors, Kabul, May-June 2020.

<sup>62</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, U.S. official, May 2020. See Section II.

group.<sup>63</sup> When such differences arise in narratives emanating from Kabul and Washington, they are seen as intentional and therefore obstructionist; the Taliban believe that the “puppet” government would only publicly disagree with the U.S. if it were instructed to. Similarly, the Taliban regard the government’s repeated insistence that a ceasefire should precede negotiations with great suspicion, believing these calls to be a ploy primarily intended to fracture their movement.<sup>64</sup>

Finally, and relatedly, the Taliban are highly sensitive to anything they perceive as an attempt to weaken their cohesion. In 2015, the group faced a succession crisis when word leaked that their founder, Mullah Omar, had been dead for over two years. The news broke amid growing discontent among the leadership with the movement’s management and coincided with the electrifying successes of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (and its Afghanistan outcropping, IS-KP). At times that year, infighting erupted among Taliban fighters and splinter factions. Since then, the leadership has prioritised curbing threats to the group’s cohesion, which includes external criticism.<sup>65</sup> The group’s sharp responses to perceived attacks, even verbal ones, guide its communications down to the issuance of daily statements. A number of its outputs explicitly address sources of mistrust in the Afghan government’s stance on peace.<sup>66</sup> Experts on the Taliban say they are unlikely to begin admitting wrongdoing or acknowledging uncomfortable truths – at least not under the current leadership.<sup>67</sup>

Despite this rigidity, the group’s public rhetoric has evolved somewhat. Below, several key Taliban messages regarding peace are outlined and assessed. Together they demonstrate a significant – albeit partial and apparently ongoing – rhetorical

---

<sup>63</sup> During his inauguration speech on 9 March, President Ghani mentioned that the Taliban and Islamic State “shared the same roots”, which Afghan media analysts interpreted both as a tough stance against the group as well as a veiled reference to Pakistan’s role in the conflict. The next day, the chief of U.S. Central Command, General Kenneth McKenzie, testified to a U.S. Congressional committee that the Taliban had fought and defeated IS-KP with limited U.S. support: “It was a bloody mess, but they did it”. U.S. House of Representatives Armed Services Committee, “National Security Challenges and U.S. Military Activities in the Greater Middle East and Africa”, 10 March 2020.

<sup>64</sup> Taliban perceptions of the ceasefire as “illogical and opportunistic” were detailed in a statement at Voice of Jihad, 26 April 2020. One revealing measure of the depth of Taliban suspicion was reported in Mujib Mashal, “At center of Taliban deal, a U.S. envoy who made it personal”, *The New York Times*, 1 March 2020. In spite of the close working relationship that Baradar had established with Khalilzad over the previous year, often retreating to one-on-one sessions when negotiations hit stumbling blocks, the Taliban leader hesitated to be the first one to physically sign the 29 February agreement: “The Talib chief was taking no chances ... seemingly unwilling to put pen to paper until he was sure there was no trick”. Kabul’s attempts to weaken the Taliban have been reported since 2016. Jessica Donati and Habib Khan Totakhil, “Afghan government secretly fosters Taliban splinter groups”, *Wall Street Journal*, 22 May 2016.

<sup>65</sup> See Osman, “Toward Fragmentation?” and Watkins, “Taliban Fragmentation”, both *op. cit.*

<sup>66</sup> The below sub-sections detail a number of these pieces. Afghan experts on the Taliban emphasise the group’s particular responsiveness to threats to cohesion in the last five years, after struggling to rebuild consensus during the post-Mullah Omar succession crisis, but also note that defensiveness has been a defining trait of the movement since its inception. One pointed out that the Taliban commonly use the Pashto term *takhrīb*, which roughly translates as “sabotage”, “vandalism”, “subversion” or “destruction”, to describe criticism of the movement. Crisis Group telephone interview, researcher, Kabul, June 2020. Also see “You have No Right to Complain”, Human Rights Watch, *op. cit.*

<sup>67</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Taliban researchers and Western diplomats, Afghanistan and by telephone, May-June 2020.

shift. Five years ago, the idea of peace talks was so incendiary among the group's leaders that analysts of the Taliban cite early attempts to enter talks as a primary driver of the group's worst episodes of fragmentation.<sup>68</sup> The recent shift elevates the concept of negotiation as an acceptable strategy for achieving movement objectives, alongside the historical bedrock of armed struggle. This change in attitude does not exclude a continued application of violence, corresponding with the group's strategic hedging since February. But the evolution is still noteworthy in a movement that prides itself on consistency.

#### A. *The Haqqani Op-Ed*

On 20 February 2020, days before U.S. officials and Taliban representatives signed their agreement in Doha, *The New York Times* published an op-ed titled "What we, the Taliban, want" under the byline of Sirajuddin Haqqani, "deputy leader of the Taliban".<sup>69</sup> It was written in fluent, refined English, and its content was as surprising as its style.<sup>70</sup> Haqqani portrayed peace efforts as a product of the Taliban's moral realisation that the war's human cost had grown too great. He opined that "our biggest challenge is to ensure that various Afghan groups work hard and sincerely toward defining our common future", but expressed confidence that "if we can reach an agreement with a foreign enemy, we must be able to resolve intra-Afghan disagreements through talks".

For many, the idea that these conciliatory words were written by a man the U.S. and Afghan governments believe to be behind some of the deadliest attacks on civilians in Afghanistan since 2001 strained credulity. The op-ed's polish prompted widespread speculation among Afghans that someone else, perhaps a foreigner, had ghost-written it, while its grand claims and altruistic tone prompted harsh criticism of *The New York Times* for sharing Haqqani's views without context.<sup>71</sup> Some said the op-ed was pure propaganda meant to hoodwink gullible Americans, and a number of readers were alarmed by the essay's particularly vague language when it came to human – including women's – rights.<sup>72</sup>

---

<sup>68</sup> See Osman, "Toward Fragmentation?", op. cit., as well as Graeme Smith, "Taliban Factionalism Rises After Mullah Omar's Death", Crisis Group Commentary, 13 August 2015.

<sup>69</sup> Haqqani, "What we, the Taliban, want", op. cit.

<sup>70</sup> The piece includes the following text: "We thought it unwise to dismiss any potential opportunity for peace no matter how meager the prospects of its success. ... That we today stand at the threshold of a peace agreement with the United States is no small milestone. ... We stuck with the talks despite recurring disquiet and upset within our ranks over the intensified bombing campaign against our villages by the United States and the flip-flopping and ever-moving goal posts of the American side". Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> For example, see Peter Bergen, "What the *New York Times* didn't tell readers about its Taliban op-ed is shocking", CNN, 21 February 2020.

<sup>72</sup> A strongly sceptical perspective is found in Thomas Jocelyn, "What you won't learn from the *NYT* op-ed by the Taliban's deputy leader", *Long War Journal*, 20 February 2020; on rights, see *ibid.*, as well as Mary Akrami, Sahar Halaimzai and Rahela Sidiqi, "Afghanistan deal: Don't trade away women's rights to the Taliban. Put us at the table", *USA Today*, 1 March 2020. The op-ed's phrasing on human rights read as follows: "I am confident ... we together will find a way to build an Islamic system in which all Afghans have equal rights, where the rights of women that are granted by Islam

But the tenor of Haqqani's op-ed overshadowed the reality that most of its content was perfectly aligned with core Taliban themes. Several lines of the op-ed repeat a variation of the opening phrase "once the foreigners leave", followed by assurances of peace and prosperity. While its style was conciliatory, the piece subtly laid blame for Afghanistan's woes on foreign intervention. It also included a pledge to adhere to each letter of the agreement's text, which in retrospect foreshadowed the group's stringency on terms of prisoner release. The op-ed put forth eyebrow-raising positions the Taliban had not previously made public, such as their willingness to cooperate and potentially partner on Afghanistan's post-peace reconstruction with the U.S., their main adversary. Crisis Group has confirmed that the Taliban expressed these policy stances to U.S. officials during negotiations in 2019 and earlier, and have discussed them internally since 29 February.<sup>73</sup>

Amid the flurry of reactions to the piece, and although its substance did not mark a dramatic shift, few dwelled on the implications of the fact the Taliban had never released anything like it before. While the op-ed's release was pegged to the timing of the signing ceremony, it culminated a steady evolution in communications over the period of negotiation with U.S. officials. In January 2020, Mullah Baradar gave an equally unprecedented filmed interview to a U.S. news outlet, and throughout 2019 several Western press organisations were granted access to Taliban-influenced areas and the group's fighters (though under tightly controlled conditions).<sup>74</sup> Publishing the op-ed, and running it under the name of one of their most notorious leadership figures, was an implicit acknowledgment that the group had entered a new era. The Taliban's top echelons now saw benefit or utility in directly engaging with the international media – an option that had been dismissed in the past as unnecessary and somewhat debasing, with the message sure to be distorted.<sup>75</sup>

### *B. Mullah Fazl's Audiotape*

In late March 2020, Mullah Fazl, a former Guantánamo Bay detainee and senior figure in the Taliban's political commission, gave a speech to military commanders in Pakistan that was recorded and distributed widely to fighters in Afghanistan.<sup>76</sup> In this speech, Fazl said the agreement with the U.S. was a victory for the Taliban, but

---

– from the right to education to the right to work – are protected, and where merit is the basis for equal opportunity".

<sup>73</sup> Crisis Group telephone interviews, Western official and Taliban interlocutors, June 2020.

<sup>74</sup> See Clarissa Ward, Najibullah Quraishi and Salma Abdelaziz, "36 Hours with the Taliban", CNN, February 2019; Susannah George, "Inside Taliban's Afghanistan, violence remains path to power", *Washington Post*, 19 December 2019; Priyanka Boghani, "EXCLUSIVE: 'The war will end when the U.S. withdraws,' says Taliban's chief negotiator", PBS, 17 January 2020.

<sup>75</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Taliban figures, 2018-2020.

<sup>76</sup> Fazl was one of the "Taliban five", men whom the Barack Obama administration released from the Guantánamo Bay jail in 2014 in exchange for the captive U.S. soldier Bowe Bergdahl. His period of detention garnered him great respect among front-line fighters and military commanders, elevating his stature as a former deputy defence minister of the Taliban's 1990s Emirate. Though resident in Doha since his release and serving as a senior member of the movement's political commission, in 2019 Taliban leaders assigned Fazl a seat on the Taliban's military commission, reportedly so as to cross-pollinate the political office's efforts internally and add gravitas to its negotiating mission among a still-sceptical leadership. Crisis Group interview, Taliban interlocutor, Kabul, March 2020.

noted that fighters were nonetheless required to keep fighting on the battlefield, in order to preserve the movement's strength and assure its ultimate triumph.<sup>77</sup> Fazl emphasised the movement's unity and members' obedience as being critical to its success, and swore that their sacrifices – and those of fallen comrades – would never be betrayed in negotiations. Fazl was harsher than internal messages traditionally have been, in terms of rebuffing foreign extremists and their relations with the Taliban. He said there was a need for battlefield restraint (which by the end of March already showed signs of fragility) to maintain the agreement with the U.S., and stressed that restraint would facilitate the release of imprisoned fighters – whose plight is a regular theme of Taliban communications.

The highlight of Fazl's speech was a closing reassurance that the movement would insist on three core demands during negotiations: the Taliban is to choose the leader of Afghanistan's future government, the future government must be an emirate and it is to be based entirely on Sharia. The recording was eventually leaked to Afghan media, where these comments were largely seen as confirming suspicions that the Taliban considered the Doha agreement a victory and had no intention of making compromises in intra-Afghan talks.<sup>78</sup> In the past year, a number of Taliban political figures had told Western media that the group sought an "inclusive" future Afghan government – yet here was a stark contradiction contained in an internally directed speech.<sup>79</sup>

When asked about the movement's true stance, a Taliban official in Doha pointed to the many "red lines" Afghan politicians and public figures opposed to the movement had drawn with respect to peace. According to him, any recent instances of Taliban insistence on the restoration of an "Emirate" were meant to counter the increasing tendency among pro-government figures to refer to their side as the "Islamic Republic", the country's official name in accordance with the 2004 constitution.<sup>80</sup> Fazl used the phrase "protect our gains" in his speech, the exact language used by Afghan politicians, civil society and Western donor governments to insist on limiting compromise with the Taliban when it comes to international human rights standards.<sup>81</sup>

---

<sup>77</sup> Mullah Fazl, unreleased audio recording, 25 March 2020.

<sup>78</sup> See, for example, Tamim Hadid, "Some Taliban leaders insist on return of Islamic Emirate", TOLO News, 1 April 2020.

<sup>79</sup> For instance, Amir Khan Muttaqi, chief of staff to Taliban Emir Haibatullah Akhundzada, voiced such sentiments as early as May 2019. Haseba Atakpal, "Taliban wants an 'inclusive post-peace govt'", TOLO News, 31 May 2019.

<sup>80</sup> Crisis Group interview, Taliban interlocutor, July 2020. The Taliban interviewee relayed that many in the movement perceive Afghan and international use of the term "Islamic Republic" as a coordinated campaign to establish a "red line" to preserve the post-2004 constitutional order, a stance they view as provocative and obstructionist given their opposition to it. Afghan use of the term the "Islamic Republic" to describe the Afghan government and the common interests of Afghan political camps came into vogue in late 2019 amid Afghan political leaders' persistent difficulties reaching consensus. When the Afghan government named a negotiating team that opposition political leaders endorsed in March 2020, the term "Islamic Republic" quickly replaced "pro-government factions" as a descriptor for the team and its composition. Several Afghans told Crisis Group that prior references to "pro-government factions" connoted disunity and weakness on the government's side.

<sup>81</sup> The call to "protect the gains since 2001" of the current state and social order has been a rhetorical staple of Afghans and international supporters for nearly a decade. See David Alexander, "Peace process must protect post-2001 gains – Afghan official", Reuters, 20 January 2012. The idea of pro-

Mullah Fazl was reportedly a key emissary for sharing the political office's agenda with the rest of the movement. He was responsible for persuading the leadership council to accept the final terms in the agreement with the U.S., including its late-stage insistence that the agreement's formal signing be preceded by a seven-day "reduction of violence", a move that triggered great suspicion.<sup>82</sup> Several Taliban figures have cited his gravitas among commanders as an asset, providing a useful bridge between the political office and the group's hardened fighters.<sup>83</sup> Fazl's speech in this sense illustrates two dynamics: it is, interpreted generously, another instance of the political leadership calling on the military wing to stay the course amid delays in the Doha agreement's implementation; but it also is an encapsulation of maximalist positions. The balancing act suggests how difficult the task of convincing the movement's members to embrace negotiations and a peaceful settlement will be.

### C. *No Spring Offensive Announcement*

As of June 2020, the Taliban had still not announced a "spring offensive", a signature annual messaging campaign and rallying cry for its fighters since 2005. In most years, they have made these announcements in April, and never any later than May. Immediately after 29 February, the group *did* step up attacks, although subsequently with stops and starts correlating with developments in the peace process. Different actors have provided sharply contrasting metrics of Taliban conflict activity, but there is no denying that in the period following 29 February, the group pursued its military campaign with steadily increasing levels of offensive activity across the country as compared to its reduction in violence in February.<sup>84</sup> In other words, although the Taliban chose not to announce a spring offensive, they nonetheless have been carrying one out (albeit with some limitations).

---

tecting the gains by declaring "red lines" might be epitomised by the 2019 civil society campaign #MyRedLine, founded by Afghan journalist Farahnaz Forotan. Forotan encouraged Afghan women and girls to share their perspectives on peace and their own personal red lines: which compromises at the negotiation table would they consider too high a price for peace? The campaign is one of several similar efforts, a number of which receive international support.

<sup>82</sup> Crisis Group interview, diplomatic official engaged with the Taliban political office, April 2020. The Taliban have publicly criticised the U.S. insistence on the seven-day period, made at a very late stage in their negotiations. In his *New York Times* piece, Haqqani disparaged the demand and others like it: "We stuck with the talks despite recurring disquiet and upset within our ranks over the intensified bombing campaign against our villages by the United States *and the flip-flopping and ever-moving goalposts of the American side*". (emphasis added)

<sup>83</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Taliban officials, March-July 2020.

<sup>84</sup> The picture on the ground is complex: while the Taliban's activity rose across the country since 29 February, conflict monitors have noted that casualties dropped measurably among Afghan security forces and Taliban fighters from March to July – suggesting widespread but less intense fighting compared to prior years. By the end of July, the Taliban had also largely abided by an unwritten understanding with the U.S. to refrain from major attacks or offensives on provincial capitals. It has largely stopped attacking district centres as well. All this has significantly blunted the impact of the Taliban's 2020 "spring offensive", in exchange for a reprieve from U.S. airstrikes. Crisis Group interviews, U.S., UN and humanitarian conflict monitors, Kabul and by telephone, March-July 2020. Confirmed by data in the public domain compiled by the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project.

The unusual lack of an offensive announcement in the immediate aftermath of the U.S.-Taliban agreement suggests a strong correlation between the two, even though there was no mention of “cancelling” the annual offensive in the deal. Officials on both sides have alluded to secret and perhaps unwritten details of the agreement, but none has mentioned the annual offensive in this regard. U.S. officials interviewed in April claimed to have no foreknowledge if the group would ultimately announce an offensive or not. They said they were planning for either eventuality.<sup>85</sup> The Taliban so far have not explained their reasons for withholding the usual public relations campaign, in spite of the rank and file’s reported curiosity at its absence.<sup>86</sup> The group only obliquely mentioned that 2019’s offensive, Operation Fath (meaning “Victory”), would naturally continue into 2020.

It is difficult to draw conclusions about the Taliban’s intent – but if nothing else, the group seems to have been aware of the negative optics and potential difficulty in implementing its agreement with the U.S., if it made a traditional annual announcement. Clearly, the Taliban highly value the foreign troop withdrawal they provisionally won in the Doha agreement (as is also illustrated in the short-term ceasefires the group was willing to implement since February 2020, in spite of prior resistance). While the Taliban’s omission could be perceived as an instance of placating foreign audiences without significantly changing their conflict behaviour, these announcements of annual offensives are significant boosters of morale within a movement that relies on high morale to sustain its fighting force.<sup>87</sup> To break with precedent for the first time in its history is a significant omission for an insurgency obsessed with its own cohesion.

#### D. *(War and) Peace in Other Prominent Messages*

One communiqué the Taliban did produce in 2020, perhaps their most significant traditional annual output, was the emir’s Eid al-Fitr message on 20 May. In it, Emir Haibatullah, much like Mullah Fazl in his speech, exhorted the movement’s fighting members first and foremost to unity and obedience:

---

<sup>85</sup> Crisis Group telephone interviews, U.S. military and diplomatic officials, Kabul, April 2020.

<sup>86</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, Taliban interlocutor, June 2020.

<sup>87</sup> Spring offensive announcements are also related to critical annual logistical and financial dispersals, from top levels of Taliban leadership down to commanders in the field. The term “spring offensive”, suggestive of a winter lull in fighting, has long been misleading – the Afghan conflict activity has consistently logged high levels of winter activity for more than a decade. But there are personnel and materiel pipelines connecting the insurgency across the country that close due to inclement winter weather and reopen in the spring. The annual offensive announcement is the motivational campaign that corresponds with dispersing goods, transferring crack troops and reactivating part-time fighters. Announcements carry sufficient motivational heft within the Taliban that different wings of the movement mount debate and internal campaigns for the privilege of naming each year’s offensive (deceased emirs Omar and Mansour have been namesakes in the past, while deceased Haqqani Network founder Jalaluddin has never been, to the reported chagrin of Haqqani supporters). Unpublished report, UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, 2019.

I call upon all our compatriots, specifically all the officials and battlefield Mujahideen of the Islamic Emirate, to pay close attention to your objectives, consolidate your ranks and might, maintain your unity and obedience and further regulate your administrative structure.<sup>88</sup>

His next point addressed non-combatant supporters, rallying them to a somewhat unprecedented task:

all the noble scholars, spiritual leaders, teachers, tribal elders, writers, poets, academics and influential personalities of our homeland must expand their cooperation toward the establishment of an Islamic system, peace, rehabilitation, unity and a sovereign Afghanistan.<sup>89</sup>

The emir's Eid message often strikes a more religiously oriented tone and addresses less militaristic subject matter than other major Taliban statements, but the concepts of "peace" and "reconciliation" are fundamentally new in the discourse of the emir's direct statements. The message also included words of validation for the movement's military wing, but to enshrine notions of negotiation and peaceful settlement as lofty aspirations alongside the Taliban's founding purpose is novel.<sup>90</sup>

In the months after 29 February, the Taliban also published several lavishly produced videos. These videos highlighted the movement's military might and heaped praise on its fighters for their efforts – but, echoing the emir's Eid message, they also included statements from top Taliban leaders that held up the prospect of negotiations and peaceful settlement alongside the glory of battlefield victory.<sup>91</sup> The movement also continued to grant international media interviews with a growing range of its senior figures, who offered more coherent positions on matters to be addressed in intra-Afghan negotiations.

Most notably, senior Taliban figure in Doha (and former Guantánamo detainee) Khairullah Khairkhwa gave an interview to Al Jazeera on 12 July 2020 – in which he laid out perhaps the most specific commentary to date on the movement's stances toward a post-peace Afghanistan. Khairkhwa – not a regular in Taliban public relations – appeared to be an intentionally unconventional choice. Like Fazl, his reputation among military commanders is reportedly stellar (due in part to his time in U.S. detention, but also to his pre-2001 record in the movement), and he gave the interview in fluent Arabic, a signifier of religious learning and testament to his personal piety. He emphatically stated that the Taliban understand an attempted military takeover of the country to be futile, and that Afghan society has changed greatly since

---

<sup>88</sup> "Message of Felicitation of the Esteemed Amir-ul-Mumineen Sheikh-ul-Hadith Mawlawi Hibatul-lah Akhundzada (may Allah protect him) on the Occasion of Eid-ul-Fitr", Voice of Jihad, 20 May 2020.

<sup>89</sup> Taliban interlocutors report that affiliated religious scholars were, in fact, beginning to lead a shift in internal discourse in support of political negotiations during the run-up to intra-Afghan talks. They further note that this internal campaign acquired momentum as the start date for talks seemed to approach. Crisis Group interviews, Taliban figures, Afghanistan, May-July 2020.

<sup>90</sup> The emir cautioned, "No one should expect us to pour cold water on the heated battlefronts of jihad or forget our forty-year sacrifices before reaching our objectives". "Message of Felicitation", op. cit.

<sup>91</sup> One of these videos, titled "Victorious Army (1)", featured speeches by deputy emirs Sirajuddin Haqqani and Mullah Baradar, who explicitly championed peace efforts in an otherwise militaristic production. Voice of Jihad, June 2020.

2001. Taliban figures in Doha had expressed these same sentiments behind closed doors to U.S. officials and Crisis Group throughout 2019, but they had never aired them publicly or so unequivocally.<sup>92</sup>

The one consistent theme in all Taliban communications after February, both warlike and peace-promoting, was the clear insistence that the only path to peaceful resolution of the conflict was through strict implementation of their agreement with the U.S. In part, the group is evincing its pleasure at having secured the concessions it did from the superpower: it repeatedly praised the deal as one of its great accomplishments, and released several statements blaming Kabul and Washington for delays in achieving benchmarks.<sup>93</sup> Nonetheless, the group's attachment to the deal can be also seen as a positive sign of intent to continue testing the value of a peace negotiations track. In spite of high levels of Taliban violence directed at Afghan security and government personnel since February, even their combat behaviour largely bore out this claim. The Taliban conspicuously avoided actions proscribed by the agreement – attacks on provincial centres, suicide attacks and high-profile attacks in urban areas – on all but a handful of occasions, despite otherwise stepping up their offensive activity.<sup>94</sup> In other words, the deal with the U.S. was a commitment worth keeping – all the way into intra-Afghan talks.

---

<sup>92</sup> Crisis Group interviews, U.S. officials and Taliban representatives, Doha, 2019. See Section V for more on these positions.

<sup>93</sup> For praise of the deal, see “Message of Felicitation ... on the occasion of Eid ul-Fitr” or “Message ... regarding Termination of Occupation Agreement with the United States”, both *op. cit.* On Kabul's illegitimacy and Washington's responsibility to take talks forward, see Voice of Jihad's relatively pacifying “Agreement implementation in everyone's interest”, 29 May 2020, or the more belligerent “Obstructing intra-Afghan talks, for what?!” , 8 July 2020.

<sup>94</sup> Assessment based on Crisis Group interviews, U.S. officials and UN/humanitarian conflict monitors, March-July 2020.

## V. Clarified Positions and Unanswered Questions

---

Even after signing their agreement with the U.S. and preparing to enter talks with the Afghan government, the Taliban largely declined to publicly clarify their stance on a number of issues integral to reaching a political settlement. In some ways, an opaque negotiating style has been a Taliban trademark since Washington's earliest attempts to sit down a decade ago.<sup>95</sup> Indeed, the Taliban's political office seems to regard uncertainty about how much the group may compromise as a key negotiating strength. One of the office's members in Doha admitted that the group has intentionally withheld disclosure of points on which they would be willing to compromise, maintaining maximalist positions until talks progress in order to trade away compromises for gains on the highest priorities.<sup>96</sup>

But that is not the entire picture: the Taliban have avoided announcing clear positions about their desires for Afghanistan's future state and society because they have never established firm internal consensus on these issues. Avoiding doing so seems attributable in part to concerns about preserving internal cohesion. In the words of one interlocutor close to a number of Taliban figures, "since 2015 the group's cohesion has been brutally hard-won; why would they risk it until absolutely necessary?"<sup>97</sup> Given the movement's lack of transparency, the leadership's full reasons for maintaining policy ambiguity are impossible to determine.

Close observers of the Taliban also note that last-minute decision-making has been a movement trait from the earliest days – and the Taliban's current leadership council still largely consists of the same generation that steered the Emirate. One Afghanistan-based researcher said these figures do not discuss controversial matters until the moment they deem absolutely necessary and are unlikely to change tack regarding peace talks.<sup>98</sup> Another said the (largely untold) history of Taliban figures' rise and fall within the movement is a cautionary tale against taking firm policy stances; those who have done so have often wound up losing influence.<sup>99</sup>

---

<sup>95</sup> See Marc Grossman, "Talking to the Taliban, 2010-2011: A Reflection", *PRISM*, vol. 4, no. 4 (2013).

<sup>96</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, Taliban official, Doha, June 2020.

<sup>97</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, Taliban interlocutor, July 2020.

<sup>98</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, researcher, Afghanistan, July 2020. The researcher told Crisis Group that a number of personal contacts in the movement operate with the attitude embodied in an Afghan proverb, which roughly translates as "don't take off your shoes until you see the river".

<sup>99</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, researcher, Kabul, June 2020. Among the figures discussed, Tayyib Agha stood out. Agha was once a personal aide to Mullah Omar; he led early talks with the U.S. and became the Taliban's political chief in Doha, but then faded away in 2015 after Omar's death became public. The researcher assessed that Agha had taken stances "too clear to back out of" on precisely such issues as what the group might compromise on in future peace talks (he viewed a restoration of the Emirate as unrealistic). See also "Taliban political chief in Qatar Tayyab Agha resigns", BBC, 4 August 2015. A Western diplomat with Taliban contacts in Doha said that within the group, the act of taking firm policy stances seems akin to an automobile's seatbelt mechanism when it locks tightly during an emergency brake: once a figure (or a faction) of the movement commits to a recommendation for a course of action or policy, they cannot wiggle out of it. The diplomat was speaking in reference to the political office's disposition in engagements after 29 February, as the period preceding intra-Afghan talks dragged into months: figures in Doha spoke about the Taliban's commitment to the U.S. deal, and its forward progress, as though their fates were bound to it. Crisis Group telephone interview, April 2020.

Some Taliban leaders, however, have understood for years that the movement needed to evolve politically. Former emir Akhtar Mansour initiated a process of internal consultation before the U.S. killed him in a 2016 drone strike. He gathered field commanders for seminars during the seasonal winter lull in fighting. Participants say they were encouraged to think about the Taliban's relations with the outside world and envision a future Afghanistan free of foreign militant groups, with a modern education system – including for women. The seminars continued under the leadership of Haibatullah Akhundzada, Mansour's successor, and included discussions of aspects of human rights and military discipline. Still, while long-term ideas were put forth, conversations were mostly confined to short-term objectives such as building popular support by reducing civilian casualties through tighter rules of engagement and improving relations with Afghans living in areas under Taliban control or influence.<sup>100</sup>

Since the Doha agreement, there are signs that the Taliban are thinking about formulating (and revealing) policy positions more quickly. The group's strategic communications have begun to outline stances with somewhat more clarity, and the internal discourse on peace among members and affiliated scholars has increased considerably.<sup>101</sup> Crisis Group has also learned that, over the past year, the movement formally surveyed its leadership circles and top commanders to assess their views on intra-Afghan talks and the post-peace order, with the express purpose of developing coherent, consensus positions for intra-Afghan talks.<sup>102</sup> Moreover, the movement has transferred a number of junior officials out of the political office in Doha to make room for a new rotation of senior religious scholars and respected military commanders. This measure is necessary to build consensus around peace among different wings of the movement and will endow the political office with sufficient authority to speak for the entire organisation.<sup>103</sup>

Even with these developments, Taliban views on the issues likely to be on the agenda for intra-Afghan talks remain vague at best. A number of questions have provoked particularly heated debate in Afghanistan and among donor governments: where, concretely, do the Taliban stand on human – including women's – rights? When the group calls for an emirate but also admits the need for "inclusive government", what might that look like? Will the Taliban take action to cut ties with foreign militants, and what future do they envision for their own members? Talks leading to the Doha agreement yielded partial answers to some of these questions. Others remain unanswered.

#### A. *Will the Taliban Really Cut Ties with Foreign Militants?*

Early in the U.S.-Taliban bilateral negotiations, many U.S. officials and observers expected that the group would have to denounce al-Qaeda and sever any relationships with its members.<sup>104</sup> The Taliban staunchly resisted a public denunciation, see-

---

<sup>100</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Taliban officials, November 2018. Haibatullah has consistently emphasised these points in his instructions to Taliban fighters. Crisis Group has heard several audio recordings of speeches by Haibatullah, apparently from 2012 to 2017.

<sup>101</sup> See Section IV above. Crisis Group interviews, Taliban figures and diplomatic officials, May 2020.

<sup>102</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Taliban figures, Doha, Afghanistan and Pakistan, May-July 2020.

<sup>103</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Taliban figures, Afghanistan, June-July 2020.

<sup>104</sup> See, for example, Borhan Osman, "Why a deal with the Taliban will prevent attacks on America", *The New York Times*, 7 February 2019.

ing it as an attempt to substantiate purported smears. In the face of this resistance, U.S. envoy Khalilzad changed approach.<sup>105</sup> In its final form, the Doha agreement instead called for the Taliban to prevent Afghan territory from being used as a staging ground for attacks on the U.S. or its allies, and detailed a number of prohibited measures of hosting and material support.

Although Western and Afghan government security officials routinely highlight concerns about a number of foreign militant groups present in Afghanistan, the Taliban tend to view such groups as oppressed Muslim dissidents, forced out of their own countries because of their beliefs. While the movement does not always welcome their presence in Taliban-controlled territory and claims to keep tabs on them when they are present, they are disinclined to treat them as a threat.<sup>106</sup> A Taliban negotiator said:

We don't consider them as armed individuals out there fighting for a cause, just as desperate homeless families who have nowhere to go. Is it fair for us to fight these poor second- and third-generation people in the name of a threat to the US? We want peace, not more fighting. We would do better if we find a township in Kabul for these families where they live under the surveillance of the future government and slowly integrate them into society.<sup>107</sup>

The remnants of al-Qaeda and its Indian subcontinent chapter have no significant role on Afghan battlefields, but the terrorist network's historical popularity with some Taliban rank and file was a concern to leaders, who claimed to fear the movement's fragmentation if they appeared to be colluding with the U.S. against al-Qaeda. One Taliban representative said, "There are so many people fighting this [Afghan] government mainly because it is an ally of a foreign power. [Kabul] fights its own people for the sake of America. If we pick the same fight, we would face the same resistance".<sup>108</sup>

Given the Taliban's resistance to firmer anti-terrorism language in the Doha agreement, and more than a year of intense negotiation on this point, it appears unlikely that the group will clearly denounce al-Qaeda or other foreign militants whom it views as posing no threat. Since February, U.S. military commanders have equivocated on the question of how much concrete action the Taliban have taken against

---

<sup>105</sup> The Taliban view Western and Afghan government descriptions of their relationship with al-Qaeda much as they do other external criticism: as a form of *takhrīb*, or subversion. Many Taliban members are still suspicious of Western accounts of the 11 September 2001 attacks and al-Qaeda's role therein. The group believes that the subsequent U.S. intervention was unwarranted (as well as malicious). In 2019, the group's political representatives suggested that the U.S. was focusing on the Taliban's continued relationship with al-Qaeda to delegitimise the movement and its achievements. Crisis Group interviews, Taliban figures, Doha and Afghanistan, 2018-2020.

<sup>106</sup> Not only do the Taliban not see such groups as a dire threat, they almost seem unable to grasp why the U.S. does. Even when implicitly acknowledging Western data that several hundred al-Qaeda affiliates are present in Afghanistan and have personal relationships with their members, the Taliban note how sharply these numbers contrast with their own membership of over 50,000 fighters, a nationwide insurgency controlling or contesting a majority of Afghanistan's territory. They are genuinely confused as to why a miniscule group whom they perceive as exiled outcasts is considered a global threat by the world's sole superpower. *Ibid.*

<sup>107</sup> Crisis Group interview, Taliban official, Doha, March 2019. This sentiment is particularly germane when it comes to groups perceived as oppressed in their home states, such as Uighurs from western China or Uzbeks who chafed under government restrictions on Islamic practice.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*

al-Qaeda.<sup>109</sup> Yet U.S. security officials say the direct channel established between the U.S. military and the Taliban in Doha in the wake of the agreement has resulted in “productive exchanges” on al-Qaeda, with what these officials assess as sincere interest in dealing with mutually understood threats.<sup>110</sup> Sustained dialogue, including laying out the logic of threat perceptions, will be key to continued cooperation – whatever limits the Taliban sets when it comes to such groups.

### B. *Under What Conditions Will the Taliban Agree to a Lasting Ceasefire?*

Since the week prior to the Doha agreement’s signing ceremony, the ambiguous definition and spotty implementation of “reduced violence” and the Taliban’s acceptance of two Eid ceasefires at the end of May and July have illuminated the group’s thinking on the issue of a ceasefire. These measures fell short of the permanent ceasefire repeatedly called for by the Afghan government and some of its allies, calls that have intensified since the spread of COVID-19. Yet they revealed a Taliban willingness to partially de-escalate the conflict, though only under U.S. pressure, and in return for cessation of U.S. strikes on their fighters.

As a growing number of Afghans and international actors condemned the Taliban’s continued operations since 29 February, with prominent Afghan officials questioning the worth of any peace process that took place amid violence, it is worth recalling that in 2019 many Taliban commanders and fighters urged their leadership to ditch talks with the U.S. while aerial bombardment was hitting record highs.<sup>111</sup> In this sense, the Taliban’s stance is inconsistent; the movement has steadily rejected calls to enter an open-ended ceasefire – which Kabul has repeatedly proposed since 2018 – but many of its members were affronted by the U.S. strategy of “fight and talk” that they now assert is their right according to the Doha agreement.<sup>112</sup> Taliban leaders are dismissive of criticisms of their continued operations against the Afghan government since February. They point to the Afghan security forces’ routine aerial and special operations in the same period, which they assert are impossible without several forms of U.S. support, as an equal violation of the spirit of reducing violence – although, unlike the government, they have not been prepared to accept a comprehensive ceasefire.<sup>113</sup>

As with other proposals the Taliban has resisted over the last year, a lengthy ceasefire is unappealing at least in part due to the negative impact it could have on their fighting force’s cohesion. Field commanders fear that the insurgency risks losing momentum once the rank and file stop fighting and that it would be hard for them to resume if talks break down. “It is difficult to warm up the mujahidin after cooling

---

<sup>109</sup> See, for example, Middle East Institute, “A conversation with CENTCOM Commander Gen. Kenneth F. McKenzie, Jr.,” video, YouTube, 10 June 2020.

<sup>110</sup> Crisis Group telephone interviews, U.S. officials, May-June 2020.

<sup>111</sup> Crisis Group Briefing, *Getting the Afghanistan Peace Process Back on Track*, op. cit.

<sup>112</sup> “Doha Agreement – the only path to resolution!”, Voice of Jihad, 15 July 2020.

<sup>113</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, Taliban official, July 2020. The Taliban’s observations about the dependence of Afghan aerial and special military operations on Western support are largely accurate, especially in terms of logistics and maintenance. The U.S. military claims that it halted some measures of intelligence and coordination support to Afghan security forces after 29 February, but many elements of its “train, advise and assist” mission did continue. See the report “Enhancing Security and Stability in Afghanistan – June 2020”, U.S. Department of Defense, 1 July 2020.

them down”, said one Taliban commander.<sup>114</sup> They are particularly worried that the Afghan population might welcome a new ceasefire as warmly as it did the first one in 2018, making it even harder for fighters to restart shooting – which is why during both of its ceasefires in 2020, the group restricted its own members from traveling into government-held areas.<sup>115</sup> Since February, the group has demonstrated a desire to retain its ability to pressure the Afghan government (and potentially segments of Afghan society) via continued violence throughout negotiations.

But the group's stance on a ceasefire is also grounded in its mistrust of Kabul and Washington. As a recent Taliban communiqué explained,

Demands for ending the war before the start of intra-Afghan negotiations mentioned in the Doha agreement mean that the Kabul administration wants to take weapons and power away from the Islamic Emirate – an absurdly irrational demand and impossible for the Islamic Emirate to accept because this means that after a long war, one side stopped at the demand of the other before achieving its goals and this can only be interpreted as surrender, a word that has no place in Islamic Emirate's dictionary.<sup>116</sup>

In this sense, Taliban resistance to a ceasefire taking place at an early stage of the peace process is based on twofold reasoning. First, the group does not trust that it will be treated fairly and able to achieve its desired end state if it cannot threaten violence. Secondly, even if it trusted Western and Afghan government agendas, it cannot accept the premise of sitting down to talk as a disarmed party, due to its insistence that negotiations are a product of its military victory. The first issue may be mitigated over time if negotiations progress and confidence-building measures can establish some atmosphere of trust. The second can be set aside only by the Taliban themselves.

Given the seemingly firm Taliban stance, the most realistic means of reducing the war's deadly impact in the near term is to follow and build upon the U.S. approach in the Doha agreement's unofficial terms: identifying behaviours that both sides agree to restrict, in order to reduce violence incrementally.<sup>117</sup> In its current state, the group is highly unlikely to commit to a lengthy comprehensive ceasefire until it feels confident that talks have secured (enough of) its objectives – regardless of diplomatic pressure or the impact of continued fighting.

### C. *What Kind of Constitution and Political System Would Be Acceptable?*

Since February, a growing number of prominent Taliban figures have professed readiness to form an “inclusive government” as part of a political settlement. Several Taliban figures privately say they do not envision a return to the Islamic Emirate's harsh

---

<sup>114</sup> Crisis Group interview, Taliban commander, Ghazni province, 21 August 2018.

<sup>115</sup> Crisis Group Asia Report N°298, *Building on Afghanistan's Fleeting Ceasefire*, 19 July 2018.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>117</sup> There are many possible approaches to meaningful violence reduction that can circumvent suspicion-raising proposals of a comprehensive ceasefire: parties could discuss restricting use of specific weaponry, such as improvised explosive devices or aerial bombardment. They could address and restrict specific tactics, such as night raids, or certain targets, such as government facilities in civilian population centres.

rules in the 1990s – a sentiment that has begun to surface publicly.<sup>118</sup> But it is unclear what a system of inclusive governance that can meaningfully be reconciled with certain Taliban objectives would entail. Even Taliban officials willing to compromise say they want to retain a strongly centralised system of government, capable of “decisively” establishing their vision of the rule of law.<sup>119</sup> The Taliban have a well-documented history of intolerance – including strict edicts regarding personal behaviour, the status of women and treatment of ethnic minorities – that survives in restrictions on free expression in communities where they operate.<sup>120</sup>

Taliban officials say they will “never go along with” preserving the 2004 constitution, given its origins at the behest of foreign powers. Nor do they seem willing to simply change Afghanistan’s system using constitutionally prescribed processes of amendment (the government’s preferred approach). But they have indicated that they are amenable to preserving elements of the text. The group’s leaders have spent years discussing options for changing or replacing the constitution, but – beyond suggesting, generally, that it should be more “Islamic” – have been vague about what a new one might look like.<sup>121</sup> They have, for example, said they would interpret certain clauses “in the light of Islamic principles and Afghan traditions”, potentially placing ultimate authority in the hands of religious scholars or elders sympathetic to their views.<sup>122</sup>

Even the willingness to compromise on a constitution should be taken with some caution: some Taliban figures seem to be interested in a constitutional order that would grant additional authority to the Afghan leader, further concentrating the power that now resides in the president and allies in what is already a winner-take-

---

<sup>118</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Taliban figures, 2018-2020. Taliban figures have quietly discussed the concept of “inclusive government” since Mullah Aktar Mansour’s tenure as emir (2015-2016), but the degree to which senior figures openly say so has increased significantly in the last year.

<sup>119</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Taliban officials, July 2019-July 2020. In addition to desiring a strongly centralised system, many Taliban figures seem to take for granted that their side would run it. Discussions of “inclusiveness” often seem based on the assumption that when the Taliban are leading a hypothetical future government, they will appoint a generous number of officials and bureaucrats from other factions. This notion is not too different from the perspectives of Afghan government officials interviewed about potential power-sharing arrangements during the same period, who also seem to envision simply allotting the Taliban a share of “seats” in the current system.

<sup>120</sup> “You Have No Right to Complain”, Human Rights Watch, op. cit.

<sup>121</sup> Since 1998, the Taliban have drafted several versions of a document resembling a “constitution”, but the movement’s leadership has never ratified one. Sporadic attempts to codify the movement’s hierarchy, governing structure and practices, which have taken written form in complex, lengthy codes of conduct called *layha*, show that the group has not left policy formation untended purely out of neglect. Why leaders have decided at several points over two decades to halt constitution-building efforts in mid-pursuit is unknown; in any event, the history suggests the difficulty of these tasks today. For background, see Mujib Mashal, “What do the Taliban want in Afghanistan? A lost constitution offers clues”, *The New York Times*, 28 June 2019, and Kate Clark, “The *Layha*: Calling the Taleban to Account”, Afghanistan Analysts Network, 4 July 2011.

<sup>122</sup> See Section II on the varied meanings of an “Islamic system”. Crisis Group interviews, Taliban and Western officials, 2018 and 2019.

all system.<sup>123</sup> This preference would set them at odds with the views of groups representing ethnic minorities, which favour constitutional change to decentralise power.<sup>124</sup>

Power-sharing arrangements raise a different set of challenges. Some Taliban members claim that Islamic rules of governance allow a leader to share power voluntarily, but forbid factions from demanding power sharing as a right.<sup>125</sup> This could mean that the Taliban leadership imagines itself leading a new government with the authority to dole out power to some factions but not others, or to make appointments benefiting selected factions based on patronage, even as the Taliban retain core authority over all major decisions. Indeed, statements such as Mullah Fazl's speech give the impression that some leaders have precisely this expectation.

One particular aspect of governance has come to dominate the discourse surrounding intra-Afghan talks: where the Taliban stand on an emir, or autocratic ruler. Many Taliban rank-and-file fighters seem to expect that any settlement will establish an emirate, even if it is not clear precisely what form an emirate might take.<sup>126</sup> Even more pragmatic Taliban figures muse about restoring a "symbolic" emir as part of a future government, albeit without the sweeping powers enjoyed by their former emir in the 1990s.<sup>127</sup>

As Taliban leaders consult religious figures and survey their top ranks, and as members express growing irritation with adversaries' use of the "Islamic Republic" mantra, consensus around restoring some form of the emirate seems to be hardening. Crisis Group learned in July that Taliban leaders had begun to formulate a detailed negotiating position on government structure. This position was described as allowing voting for local and provincial government and preserving many social rights, but also insistent on having an emir with real power over national security issues and a high council of religious scholars and figures with sweeping authority – possibly akin to the framework of the Islamic Republic of Iran.<sup>128</sup> This draft proposal was

---

<sup>123</sup> Crisis Group Asia Report N°260, *Afghanistan's Political Transition*, 16 October 2014.

<sup>124</sup> The Taliban originated from tribal structures within the country's largest ethnic group, the Pashtuns, and while their membership now includes local fighters of many of the country's ethnicities, their leadership remains predominantly Pashtun from particular areas of the south. The group is viewed with suspicion by many among minorities who resent the historical dominance of Pashtuns in the country's monarchy and other forms of centralised government. See Nazif Shahrani, "Conflict and Peace in Afghanistan: A Northern, Non-Pashtun Perspective", *Accord*, no. 27, June 2018. The Taliban have resisted decentralisation proposals, but without expressing alternative preferences beyond remarks such as "a strong central government is necessary for the rule of law". Crisis Group interview, Taliban official, Doha, March 2019.

<sup>125</sup> Some Taliban officials have even suggested that peace negotiations should have a religious track, with each side nominating scholars to debate questions from their respective viewpoints. Crisis Group interviews, Taliban officials, Doha, April 2019.

<sup>126</sup> See Osman, "A Negotiated End to the Afghan Conflict: The Taliban's Perspective", *op. cit.*, as well as Susannah George and Aziz Ahmad Tassal, "Within the Taliban, clashing views of post-war Afghanistan", *Washington Post*, 12 July 2020.

<sup>127</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Taliban-affiliated figures, Kabul, August 2019.

<sup>128</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Taliban officials and affiliated figures, June-July 2020. The assumption among the Taliban is that the emir and most of this high council would come from their ranks. Sources specified that this high council of religious scholars would have the authority to select and even dismiss the emir, very much akin to some of the powers of Iran's Council of Guardians – but that the emir would appoint most members of this council. Sources also noted that the movement

acknowledged by Taliban sources as a maximalist position that opposing parties would challenge, but was also presented seriously by pragmatic voices within the movement.<sup>129</sup> Several Taliban interlocutors pointed out that pragmatic members presenting such a maximalist position highlighted the extreme sensitivity of beliefs regarding governing structures among different wings of the movement.<sup>130</sup> Given the controversy it is likely to generate, detailed debate on the structure of a post-settlement government should almost certainly be left for a later stage in intra-Afghan talks.

Some Taliban members have made clear that they are not ready to embrace core democratic precepts, even elections. “We cannot have blind faith in elections”, said a Taliban official in Doha, pointing to the short-lived government of former Egyptian President Mohamed Morsi (an Islamist elected in 2012 after the toppling of President Hosni Mubarak but subsequently overthrown by the military) as evidence of elected governments’ potential weakness. “Democracy did not come to rescue him”.<sup>131</sup> This camp within the Taliban argues that electoral democracy is intrinsically tainted in Afghanistan because U.S. invaders introduced it.<sup>132</sup>

Yet other insurgents say they have pushed the group to accept the idea of contesting power at the ballot box. As early as 2018, one senior Taliban member said:

Some among us have distorted what elections are. For me, elections are just a natural evolution and modernisation of our traditional system of jirgas. Jirgas used to decide village-level issues and represented a collective decision-making mechanism. Now when it comes to the entire nation’s decision-making about leadership and government, elections are just a modern form of that traditional mechanism. If everybody would look at elections from this perspective and avoid seeing them as a Western phenomenon, it would make life easier for us.<sup>133</sup>

---

would entertain discussion on a greater role for popular elections, but within this proposed structure. There are elements of this proposal that seem similar to the Taliban’s never-adopted constitutional draft (such as a high council of religious scholars and respected elders carrying the prestigious title *Ahl al-Hall wa-l-‘Aqd*, or “Those Who Loose and Bind”), but, on the whole, it seems to be a novel – if still quite authoritarian – state structure.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid.

<sup>131</sup> Crisis Group interview, Taliban official, Doha, April 2019.

<sup>132</sup> Indeed, beyond elections, many Taliban objections to the current Afghan state and its constitution are rooted in the idea that the mere influence of Western powers has nullified the government’s professed Islamic characteristics. See Borhan Osman and Anand Gopal, “Taliban Views on a Future State”, Center on International Cooperation, 2016: “Under the current constitution, no law may contradict Sharia. Furthermore, powerful conservative forces within the government seek to limit civil liberties in just the way the Taliban propose. In what way, then, is the current state not sufficiently Islamic? While the state does not enforce certain *hudood* punishments like stoning, interlocutors rarely brought this up as an objection. Instead, for nearly all interviewees, the key issue defining an Islamic state is the degree to which it is independent from foreign – and particularly, Western – influence”.

<sup>133</sup> A *jirga*, or tribal council, is a traditional assembly of elders with broad authority to resolve disputes and community issues by consensus decision. Crisis Group interview, senior Taliban official, November 2018.

The debate among the Taliban on the future of Afghans' right to vote and their insistence on an absolute ruler reveals just how unsettled their views on some critical questions still are. It also reveals the considerable work the group has in store in order to participate coherently in intra-Afghan talks, especially given the intensity of open public debate on political arrangements, electoral systems and governance among populations under government control.

#### *D. What Provisions Will Exist for Women's and Minorities' Rights?*

One of the most widely expressed concerns about Taliban demands for a more "Islamic" system is the potential erosion of women's and minorities' rights, including those of smaller ethnic and non-Sunni religious groups.<sup>134</sup> Since February, after the U.S. decision to finalise an agreement with the Taliban while leaving the issue of rights protections for intra-Afghan talks, Afghan political figures, civil society organisations and foreign allies have amplified these concerns. In May, the European Union called for a peace settlement to reflect "republican, democratic and values-based principles", suggesting that it would condition future funding for the Afghan state upon their adoption.<sup>135</sup> The Afghan government has insisted from the start that a peace agreement must protect the "constitutional rights and obligations of all citizens, especially women".<sup>136</sup> Afghan minorities are increasingly vocal about their vulnerability as the Taliban gain international legitimacy but keep waging war in the countryside. In 2018, the Hazara, a sizeable and predominantly Shiite ethnic minority, protested the government's failure to protect them from the Taliban.<sup>137</sup>

Consistent with their claim that they do not seek to return to the way they ruled in the 1990s, Taliban representatives in Doha say they do not intend to reimpose the strict regulations enforced then by the Ministry for the Propagation of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice. Among others, these restrictions included a prohibition on women venturing outside without being sufficiently covered, or without a male relative escort, on pain of arrest. A Taliban official said, "Many negative things within the Taliban definitely need reforming, such as the rigid rules of the Vice and Virtue Department".<sup>138</sup> Human rights monitors, however, have observed that local Taliban officials often restrict women's rights based on the standards of conservative elders or even their own moral codes.<sup>139</sup> If pressed, the group may be keen to adopt a stance

---

<sup>134</sup> See Crisis Group Briefing Note, "What Will Peace Talks Bode for Afghan Women?", *op. cit.* Also see, for example, "Peace, but not at our cost: Afghan women fear Taliban return", AFP, 1 March 2020; or Frud Bezhan, "Living scared: in Kabul's Shi'ite enclave, Hazara fear a Taliban return", RFE/RL, 5 April 2020.

<sup>135</sup> "Council adopts conclusions on the Afghanistan peace process and future EU support for peace and development in the country", Council of the European Union, press release, 29 May 2020. The Taliban rejected the EU's statement, accusing it of interference in domestic Afghan issues – foreshadowing to some extent the difficulty Western powers might face in their attempts to engage with the Taliban in a post-peace settlement.

<sup>136</sup> Shereena Qazi, "Afghan president announces team to hold peace talks with Taliban", Al Jazeera, 28 November 2018.

<sup>137</sup> Ali Yawar Adili and Martine van Bijlert, "Taliban Attacks on Khas Uruzgan, Jaghori and Malestan (II): A New and Violent Push into Hazara Areas", Afghanistan Analysts Network, 29 November 2018.

<sup>138</sup> Crisis Group interview, Taliban official, November 2018.

<sup>139</sup> "You Have No Right to Complain", Human Rights Watch, *op. cit.*

on human rights that Afghanistan's ethnic minorities hold on political power arrangements: in favour of decentralisation and local decision-making.

The insurgents have tried to reassure minorities through local relationship-building. In one instance dating back before 2014, Taliban commanders operating near Hazara villages in Ghazni were tasked to increase their outreach to the community's leaders, leading in some places to unannounced non-aggression agreements and even active security cooperation. This outreach expanded somewhat following IS-KP's emergence and abduction of Hazaras in Zabul province in the autumn of 2015, but has struggled to gain traction since then.<sup>140</sup> In Kabul, Hazaras and other minorities continued to be consistently targeted in terror attacks – including in the months after the Doha agreement – which the Taliban consistently deny but that members of those communities still blame on the group.<sup>141</sup>

Another refrain among members of the Taliban's political office is that women could theoretically hold any position in government, with the notable exceptions of president and chief justice of the supreme court.<sup>142</sup> Yet while such thinking may be current in some Taliban circles, it has yet to be cemented into formal Taliban policy. Indeed, the group has lacked much in the way of formal policy on women's rights since 2001, a stance that has enabled commanders and local elders to restrict rights in places where the Taliban exert influence.

The Taliban struggle to address the cultural gap between conservative rural communities, where they find most of their recruits, and cities, where women and minorities have enjoyed significant freedoms since 2001.<sup>143</sup> Some tentative thinking among Taliban leaders suggests that they might be prepared to acknowledge women's rights to work and education, while insisting on separation of men and women in workplaces, schools and universities.<sup>144</sup> A Taliban figure stated that while he believed women should be allowed to work only if they cover their hair, the Taliban do not want to impose draconian rules that could push youth from cities or the central highlands, where social norms are less conservative, to leave.<sup>145</sup> The group is also well

---

<sup>140</sup> In April 2020, after the Doha agreement, the Taliban publicised the promotion of a single Hazara commander within their ranks, in what some Afghans lampooned on social media and in the local press as a weak and unsubtle attempt at outreach. See Ruchi Kumar, "Taliban attempts to woo Afghanistan's Hazara community with new appointment", *The National*, 28 April 2020.

<sup>141</sup> Since February 2002, several attacks have taken place upon Hazara communities or within Hazara neighbourhoods in Kabul, in addition to two attacks on Kabul's Sikh community. These include the lethal hospital attack on 12 May. See Mushal and Abed, "From maternity ward to cemetery, a morning of murder in Afghanistan", op. cit. While the Islamic State has claimed most of these attacks, and the Taliban have consistently denied taking part in sectarian violence in the last decade, a number of Hazara have begun using language that assigns guilt to the Taliban simply due to their past activity: any group that has attacked civilians is "part of a nexus of actors", they say, that is culpable for contributing to an environment of terrorism. Crisis Group interview, rights activist, Kabul, May 2020.

<sup>142</sup> Crisis Group interview, Taliban-affiliated political figure, Doha, May 2019. In some conservative Islamist ideologies more globally, the same positions are thought to be unfit for women based on misogynistic perceptions of women as "too emotional" to hold authority over life-or-death decisions. See Wesam Shahed, "Reexamination of Islamic Laws: The Entrance of Women in the Sharia Courts", *Michigan State International Law Review*, vol. 28, no. 1 (2019).

<sup>143</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Taliban members, September-November 2018.

<sup>144</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Taliban officials, July 2019.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid.

aware that donors, especially from the West, could withdraw post-peace funding if rules are too harsh.<sup>146</sup> But, revealingly, during talks in Doha, Taliban representatives repeatedly cited Washington's close ties with Saudi Arabia, historically notorious for restrictions on women's and other human rights – asking why the U.S. would hold Afghanistan to a different standard as a partner.<sup>147</sup>

*E. What Should Happen to Taliban Fighters  
and Afghanistan's Security Forces?*

The Taliban have started to anticipate the need to negotiate future security arrangements in Afghanistan, but here again their thinking appears to be at an early stage.

In January 2019, chief Taliban negotiator Sher Abbas Stanekzai said in an interview that a peace agreement would require disbanding the Afghan security forces.<sup>148</sup> Taliban opponents saw the comment as evidence that the insurgents would seek to destroy state institutions.<sup>149</sup> Stanekzai subsequently softened his position. In early February 2019, at a Moscow gathering of representatives of various Afghan political factions (other than the government), his delegation agreed to a joint declaration calling for the preservation of state institutions on condition that they undergo “systematic reforms”.<sup>150</sup> The Taliban's view had evolved further by July 2019, when an insurgent spokesman predicted that thousands of Taliban fighters would join the Afghan security forces after withdrawal of U.S. troops.<sup>151</sup> Other Taliban have repeated that suggestion since then.<sup>152</sup>

Nevertheless, the Taliban have kept mum regarding their demands for “systematic reform” of Afghan forces' structure and leadership. Some Taliban have speculated that reforms could include purging these forces of those they consider war criminals.<sup>153</sup> But the group does not appear to have reflected on accountability for its own abuses. Periodically, Taliban officials hint that any power-sharing deal should give them control of the interior and defence ministries and the intelligence agency – in effect, the Afghan state's entire security apparatus.<sup>154</sup> The U.S. military has briefly suggested that Taliban rank and file be integrated into the security forces by channelling them into a local defence structure run by the Afghan National Army.<sup>155</sup> Many

---

<sup>146</sup> The Taliban's leadership, in particular members of its political office and public relations wing, debated how to respond to the European Union's May 2020 statement on conditional, principles-based aid (see op. cit.); figures privy to that debate said the first draft response was watered down and softened significantly, after a discussion on how a sharply negative reaction might potentially impact post-peace investment. Crisis Group interviews, Taliban officials, July 2020.

<sup>147</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Taliban and U.S. officials, Doha, June and November 2019.

<sup>148</sup> “Special interview with Taliban leader Sher Muhammad Abbas Stanikzai on recent talks”, *Nunn* (online), 30 January 2019.

<sup>149</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, Afghan official, Kabul, February 2019.

<sup>150</sup> Syed Zabiullah Langari, “Joint declaration issued after Moscow talks”, *TOLO News*, 6 February 2019.

<sup>151</sup> Tahir Khan, “Taliban says its fighters will join Afghan security forces after US troops leave”, *Arab News*, 23 July 2019.

<sup>152</sup> Crisis Group discussion, U.S. security and diplomatic officials, May 2020.

<sup>153</sup> Crisis Group interview, Taliban official, February 2019.

<sup>154</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, U.S. official, April 2020.

<sup>155</sup> See “Operation Freedom's Sentinel Lead Inspector General Report to the United States Congress, July 1 2019–September 30 2019”, U.S. Department of Defense, 20 November 2019.

Taliban fighters, however, consider the army their nemesis, and this scheme does not match the group's stated expectations of a future security apparatus.<sup>156</sup> It is doubtful that Taliban leaders or field commanders would approve, though they have put forth no alternatives. Nor have the group's leaders meaningfully discussed other options for fighters, such as their demobilisation.

Nor have the insurgents decided whether they could accept foreign funding for the security forces, which now require billions of dollars in annual support.<sup>157</sup> Since beginning bilateral talks with the U.S., the group has grown more receptive (publicly as well as privately) to the idea of benefiting from international aid and investment. But the Taliban consider themselves a bulwark against the outside world's financial and moral corruption (which is at the core of their contest with the Afghan government). It is unclear to what degree they would seek to change Afghanistan's relationships with donors, particularly in the security sphere. While Sirajuddin Haqqani's op-ed may have held out the possibility for "partnership" after reaching an eventual peace, it remains deeply uncertain how much, if any, "train, advise and assist" support the Taliban would want Afghanistan's post-peace security forces to receive or, indeed, how much the U.S. would be willing to provide.

---

<sup>156</sup> See the joint report by researchers with the Afghanistan Analysts Network and the Global Public Policy Institute, "Ghosts of the Past: Lessons from Local Force Mobilisation in Afghanistan and Prospects for the Future", 1 July 2020. Also see Crisis Group Asia Report N°268, *The Future of the Afghan Local Police*, 4 June 2015.

<sup>157</sup> Crisis Group interview, Taliban official, Doha, March 2019. While on paper the U.S. bilateral security agreement with the Afghan government remains valid until 2024, the future of military aid to Afghanistan was revealed to be quite tenuous after Secretary of State Pompeo's March visit to Kabul, where he informed President Ghani and Dr Abdullah that lack of progress in peace efforts would result in a \$1 billion cut to aid – half of which would come out of military funding. See Watkins, "Afghan Leaders End Political Impasse", op. cit.

## VI. Conclusion

---

The Taliban have significant work ahead of them to make the transition from armed insurgency to political bargaining with their domestic opponents. Throughout their insurgency, the Taliban's narrative has focused on what they are against – the presence of foreign forces and what they call a “puppet” regime – rather than what they are for, beyond general assertions of the need for Islamic governance.

This will have to change. Political thinkers within the movement have begun to develop answers to the critical questions discussed in this report, as well as others, such as the nature of Afghanistan's future foreign policy.<sup>158</sup> They now need to move quickly to share their thinking beyond closed Taliban leadership circles, in order to begin the herculean task of getting their base accustomed not only to the idea of a negotiated peace but also to that of an integrated Afghan society. The Taliban's leaders will need to debate their opponents at the bargaining table in an intra-Afghan process, persuade their tens of thousands of fighters to follow their lead, and eventually engage with the wider Afghan public through local media to the same extent they have reached out to international audiences.

Once at the intra-Afghan negotiating table, the Taliban are certain to face a number of difficult questions. These include what they want to change in the constitution and political system, and by what mechanism; how to protect the rights of women and minorities; and how to reform Afghan security forces, including what roles their own fighters should have. Detailed debate on the most divisive questions, including proposals for the structure of a post-settlement government, should almost certainly be left for a later stage in intra-Afghan talks.

One of the more emotionally charged subjects will be the persistent question from many Afghans – namely, when violence will finally subside. As long as the movement insists on rejecting comprehensive ceasefires out of suspicion, it should at a minimum demonstrate willingness to incrementally reduce violence while engaged in direct dialogue with Kabul. Expanding the U.S.-Taliban military deconfliction channel in Doha to include the Afghan security forces might serve as a bridging mechanism for future steps. The movement should also calibrate its internal messaging to reflect the growing priority of negotiation and go further in its shift away from war-related rhetoric.

As a movement representing tens of thousands of fighters and a wide geographic swath of rural Afghanistan, the Taliban need to accept the reality that any stable, lasting political settlement will require compromise. In spite of their military prowess and whatever advantages they perceive in their own negotiating leverage, large percentages of Afghan society have expressed rejection of their practices.<sup>159</sup> Some senior members of the group privately admit the need to reach compromises on a number of substantive issues; they and the group's other leaders need to urgently begin to steer their rank and file toward the same conclusion.

---

<sup>158</sup> Some Taliban officials say Afghanistan should strive for diplomatic neutrality and non-interference with other countries. Crisis Group interviews, Taliban officials, July 2019. The group reaffirmed this stance in May 2020, though complicating it, by retracting Taliban negotiator Stanekzai's comments about relations with India. See “Fake news’: Taliban disowns statement on ... India”, *op. cit.*

<sup>159</sup> Asia Foundation, “Afghanistan in 2019: A Survey of the Afghan People”, 2 December 2019.

The Afghan government should carefully monitor and mirror such shifts, scaling back aggressive rhetoric from its security officials in return. President Ashraf Ghani and Chairman of the High Council of National Reconciliation Dr Abdullah Abdullah should remain committed to steady progress in intra-Afghan talks, even in the event of harsh Taliban denunciations, continued violence or turbulent political developments on their own side. Uninterrupted communication between the Taliban and Afghan government could foster buy-in on both sides and develop momentum for the cause of peace.

To that end, the Taliban should dedicate time and resources to engage with Afghan civil society and expand dialogue with humanitarian and civil society actors. Such outreach should span organisational levels, from provincial “shadow governors” and field commanders to affiliated religious scholars and political thinkers. A few attempts to host dialogue are already under way in Doha and other international locations, but these should take place inside Afghanistan as soon as feasible.

Relatedly, Afghan civil society should directly engage with the Taliban, in an effort to understand its positions and influence the movement, and to stimulate dialogue as well as seek common ground between Taliban supporters and the “new Afghanistan” that has emerged since 2001. Ideally, this engagement would lead to greater participation by civilians in Taliban-held areas in discussions and activities that currently tend to be dominated by mostly Kabul-based civil society organisations. By easing security concerns that have long prevented such organisations from conducting extensive outreach into rural areas, the Taliban could win popular good-will *and* ensure better representation for perspectives from areas under their influence.

Donors and peace process supporters should recognise that the movement will take time to build internal consensus on negotiating positions. While some insurgencies around the world have developed sophisticated political wings during active conflicts, in some cases easing the transformation that a political settlement requires, the Taliban remain a primarily military organisation. Even the most successful transition from the Taliban’s current state to a primarily political entity will be gradual – and a steep hill to climb.

**Doha/Kabul/Washington/Brussels, 11 August 2020**

Appendix A: Map of Afghanistan



## Appendix B: About the International Crisis Group

---

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 80 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 co-chaired by President & CEO of the Fiore Group and Founder of the Radcliffe Foundation, Frank Giustra, as well as 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, Addis Ababa, Bahrain, Baku, Bangkok, Beirut, Caracas, Gaza City, Guatemala City, Jerusalem, Johannesburg, Juba, Kabul, Kiev, Manila, Mexico City, Moscow, Seoul, 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 Emergency Trust Fund for Africa, European Union Instrument contributing to Stability and Peace, Finnish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, French Development Agency, French Ministry of Europe and Foreign Affairs, Global Affairs Canada, Iceland Ministry for Foreign Affairs, Irish Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, the Principality of Liechtenstein Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Luxembourg Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs, Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Qatar Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs, UK Department for International Development, and the World Bank.

Crisis Group also holds relationships with the following foundations: Carnegie Corporation of New York, Global Challenges Foundation, Henry Luce Foundation, John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, Open Society Foundations, Ploughshares Fund, Robert Bosch Stiftung, and Rockefeller Brothers Fund.

**August 2020**

---

## Appendix C: Reports and Briefings on Asia since 2017

---

### Special Reports and Briefings

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

*Council of Despair? The Fragmentation of UN Diplomacy*, Special Briefing N°1, 30 April 2019.

*Seven Opportunities for the UN in 2019-2020*, Special Briefing N°2, 12 September 2019.

*Seven Priorities for the New EU High Representative*, Special Briefing N°3, 12 December 2019.

*COVID-19 and Conflict: Seven Trends to Watch*, Special Briefing N°4, 24 March 2020 (also available in French and Spanish).

### North East Asia

*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).

*The Case for Kaesong: Fostering Korean Peace through Economic Ties*, Asia Report N°300, 24 June 2019.

### South Asia

*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.

*Countering Jihadist Militancy in Bangladesh*, Asia Report N°295, 28 February 2018.

*China-Pakistan Economic Corridor: Opportunities and Risks*, Asia Report N°297, 29 June 2018 (also available in Chinese).

*Building on Afghanistan's Fleeting Ceasefire*, Asia Report N°298, 19 July 2018 (also available in Dari and Pashto).

*Shaping a New Peace in Pakistan's Tribal Areas*, Asia Briefing N°150, 20 August 2018.

*Sri Lanka: Stepping Back from a Constitutional Crisis*, Asia Briefing N°152, 31 October 2018.

*After Sri Lanka's Easter Bombings: Reducing Risks of Future Violence*, Asia Report N°302, 27 September 2019.

*Getting the Afghanistan Peace Process Back on Track*, Asia Briefing N°159, 2 October 2019.

*Twelve Ideas to Make Intra-Afghan Negotiations Work*, Asia Briefing N°160, 2 March 2020.

*Raising the Stakes in Jammu and Kashmir*, Asia Report N°310, 5 August 2020.

*Pakistan's COVID-19 Crisis*, Asia Briefing N°162, 7 August 2020.

### South East Asia

*Building Critical Mass for Peace in Myanmar*, Asia Report N°287, 29 June 2017 (also available in Burmese).

*Buddhism and State Power in Myanmar*, Asia Report N°290, 5 September 2017 (also available in Burmese).

*Jihadism in Southern Thailand: A Phantom Menace*, Asia Report N°291, 8 November 2017 (also available in Malay and Thai).

*Myanmar's Rohingya Crisis Enters a Dangerous New Phase*, Asia Report N°292, 7 December 2017 (also available in Burmese).

*The Long Haul Ahead for Myanmar's Rohingya Refugee Crisis*, Asia Report N°296, 16 May 2018 (also available in Burmese).

*Myanmar's Stalled Transition*, Asia Briefing N°151, 28 August 2018 (also available in Burmese).

*Bangladesh-Myanmar: The Danger of Forced Rohingya Repatriation*, Asia Briefing N°153, 12 November 2018.

*Fire and Ice: Conflict and Drugs in Myanmar's Shan State*, Asia Report N°299, 8 January 2019 (also available in Burmese).

*A New Dimension of Violence in Myanmar's Rakhine State*, Asia Briefing N°154, 24 January 2019 (also available in Burmese).

*Building a Better Future for Rohingya Refugees in Bangladesh*, Asia Briefing N°155, 25 April 2019.

*An Opening for Internally Displaced Person Returns in Northern Myanmar*, Asia Briefing N°156, 28 May 2019 (also available in Burmese).

*The Philippines: Militancy and the New Bangsamoro*, Asia Report N°301, 27 June 2019.

*Peace and Electoral Democracy in Myanmar*, Asia Briefing N°157, 6 August 2019.

*Myanmar: A Violent Push to Shake Up Cease-fire Negotiations*, Asia Briefing N°158, 24 September 2019.

*A Sustainable Policy for Rohingya Refugees in Bangladesh*, Asia Report N°303, 27 December 2019.

*Southern Thailand's Peace Dialogue: Giving Substance to Form*, Asia Report N°304, 21 January 2020 (also available in Malay and Thai).

*Commerce and Conflict: Navigating Myanmar's China Relationship*, Asia Report N°305, 30 March 2020.

*Southern Philippines: Tackling Clan Politics in the Bangsamoro*, Asia Report N°306, 14 April 2020.

*Conflict, Health Cooperation and COVID-19 in Myanmar*, Asia Briefing N°161, 19 May 2020.

*An Avoidable War: Politics and Armed Conflict in Myanmar's Rakhine State*, Asia Report N°307, 9 June 2020.

*Rebooting Myanmar's Stalled Peace Process*, Asia Report N°308, 19 June 2020.

*COVID-19 and a Possible Political Reckoning in Thailand*, Asia Report N°309, 4 August 2020.

---

## Appendix D: International Crisis Group Board of Trustees

---

### PRESIDENT & CEO

**Robert Malley**  
Former White House Coordinator for the Middle East, North Africa and the Gulf region

### CO-CHAIRS

**Lord (Mark) Malloch-Brown**  
Former UN Deputy Secretary-General and Administrator of the United Nations Development Programme

**Frank Giustra**  
President & CEO, Fiore Group; Founder, Radcliffe Foundation

### OTHER TRUSTEES

**Fola Adeola**  
Founder and Chairman, FATE Foundation

**Hushang Ansary**  
Chairman, Parman Capital Group LLC; Former Iranian Ambassador to the U.S. and Minister of Finance and Economic Affairs

**Gérard Araud**  
Former Ambassador of France to the U.S.

**Carl Bildt**  
Former Prime Minister and Foreign Minister of Sweden

**Emma Bonino**  
Former Foreign Minister of Italy and European Commissioner for Humanitarian Aid

**Cheryl Carolus**  
Former South African High Commissioner to the UK and Secretary General of the African National Congress (ANC)

**Maria Livanos Cattai**  
Former Secretary General of the International Chamber of Commerce

**Ahmed Charai**  
Chairman and CEO of Global Media Holding and publisher of the Moroccan weekly *L'Observateur*

**Nathalie Delapalme**  
Executive Director and Board Member at the Mo Ibrahim Foundation

**Hailemariam Desalegn Boshe**  
Former Prime Minister of Ethiopia

**Alexander Downer**  
Former Australian Foreign Minister and High Commissioner to the United Kingdom

**Sigmar Gabriel**  
Former Minister of Foreign Affairs and Vice Chancellor of Germany

**Hu Shuli**  
Editor-in-Chief of Caixin Media; Professor at Sun Yat-sen University

**Mo Ibrahim**  
Founder and Chair, Mo Ibrahim Foundation; Founder, Celtel International

**Wadah Khanfar**  
Co-Founder, Al Sharq Forum; former Director General, Al Jazeera Network

**Nasser al-Kidwa**  
Chairman of the Yasser Arafat Foundation; Former UN Deputy Mediator on Syria

**Bert Koenders**  
Former Dutch Minister of Foreign Affairs and Under-Secretary-General of the United Nations

**Andrey Kortunov**  
Director General of the Russian International Affairs Council

**Ivan Krastev**  
Chairman of the Centre for Liberal Strategies (Sofia); Founding Board Member of European Council on Foreign Relations

**Tzipi Livni**  
Former Foreign Minister and Vice Prime Minister of Israel

**Helge Lund**  
Former Chief Executive BG Group (UK) and Statoil (Norway)

**Susana Malcorra**  
Former Foreign Minister of Argentina

**William H. McRaven**  
Retired U.S. Navy Admiral who served as 9th Commander of the U.S. Special Operations Command

**Shivshankar Menon**  
Former Foreign Secretary of India; former National Security Adviser

**Naz Modirzadeh**  
Director of the Harvard Law School Program on International Law and Armed Conflict

**Federica Mogherini**  
Former High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy

**Saad Mohseni**  
Chairman and CEO of MOBY Group

**Marty Natalegawa**  
Former Minister of Foreign Affairs of Indonesia, Permanent Representative to the UN, and Ambassador to the UK

**Ayo Obe**  
Chair of the Board of the Gorée Institute (Senegal); Legal Practitioner (Nigeria)

**Meghan O'Sullivan**  
Former U.S. Deputy National Security Adviser on Iraq and Afghanistan

**Thomas R. Pickering**  
Former U.S. Under-Secretary of State and Ambassador to the UN, Russia, India, Israel, Jordan, El Salvador and Nigeria

**Ahmed Rashid**  
Author and Foreign Policy Journalist, Pakistan

**Ghassan Salamé**  
Former UN Secretary-General's Special Representative and Head of the UN Support Mission in Libya; Former Minister of Culture of Lebanon; Founding Dean of the Paris School of International Affairs, Sciences Po University

**Juan Manuel Santos Calderón**  
Former President of Colombia; Nobel Peace Prize Laureate 2016

**Wendy Sherman**  
Former U.S. Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs and Lead Negotiator for the Iran Nuclear Deal

**Ellen Johnson Sirleaf**  
Former President of Liberia

**Alexander Soros**  
Deputy Chair of the Global Board, Open Society Foundations

**George Soros**  
Founder, Open Society Foundations and Chair, Soros Fund Management

**Jonas Gahr Støre**  
Leader of the Labour Party and Labour Party Parliamentary Group; former Foreign Minister of Norway

**Jake Sullivan**  
Former Director of Policy Planning at the U.S. Department of State, Deputy Assistant to President Obama, and National Security Advisor to Vice President Biden

**Lawrence H. Summers**  
Former Director of the U.S. National Economic Council and Secretary of the U.S. Treasury; President Emeritus of Harvard University

**Helle Thorning-Schmidt**  
CEO of Save the Children International; former Prime Minister of Denmark

**Wang Jisi**  
Member, Foreign Policy Advisory Committee of the Chinese Foreign Ministry; President, Institute of International and Strategic Studies, Peking University

**PRESIDENT'S COUNCIL**

A distinguished group of individual and corporate donors providing essential support and expertise to Crisis Group.

CORPORATE	INDIVIDUAL	
<b>BP</b>	<b>(2) Anonymous</b>	<b>Stephen Robert</b>
<b>Eni</b>	<b>David Brown &amp; Erika Franke</b>	<b>Alexander Soros</b>
<b>Shearman &amp; Sterling LLP</b>	<b>The Edelman Family Foundation</b>	<b>Ian R. Taylor</b>
<b>White &amp; Case LLP</b>		

**INTERNATIONAL ADVISORY COUNCIL**

Individual and corporate supporters who play a key role in Crisis Group's efforts to prevent deadly conflict.

CORPORATE	INDIVIDUAL	
<b>(1) Anonymous</b>	<b>(3) Anonymous</b>	<b>David Jannetti</b>
<b>APCO Worldwide Inc.</b>	<b>Mark Bergman</b>	<b>Faisal Khan</b>
<b>Chevron</b>	<b>Stanley Bergman &amp; Edward Bergman</b>	<b>Cleopatra Kitt</b>
<b>Edelman UK &amp; Ireland</b>	<b>Herman De Bode</b>	<b>Samantha Lasry</b>
<b>Equinor</b>	<b>Ryan Dunfield</b>	<b>Lise Strickler &amp; Mark Gallogly Charitable Fund</b>
<b>M&amp;C Saatchi World Services</b>	<b>Tanaz Eshaghian</b>	<b>The Nommontu Foundation</b>
<b>Ninety One</b>	<b>Seth &amp; Jane Ginns</b>	<b>Brian Paes-Braga</b>
<b>Shell</b>	<b>Ronald Glickman</b>	<b>Kerry Propper</b>
<b>Tullow Oil plc</b>	<b>Geoffrey R. Hoguet &amp; Ana Luisa Ponti</b>	<b>Duco Sickinghe</b>
<b>Warburg Pincus</b>	<b>Geoffrey Hsu</b>	<b>Nina K. Solarz</b>
		<b>Raffi Vartanian</b>

**AMBASSADOR COUNCIL**

Rising leaders from diverse fields who contribute their talents and expertise to support Crisis Group's mission.

<b>Christina Bache</b>	<b>Arohi Jain</b>	<b>Betsy (Colleen) Popken</b>
<b>Alieu Bah</b>	<b>Tina Kaiser</b>	<b>Sofie Roehrig</b>
<b>Amy Benziger</b>	<b>Jennifer Kanyambwa</b>	<b>Perfecto Sanchez</b>
<b>James Blake</b>	<b>Gillian Lawie</b>	<b>Rahul Sen Sharma</b>
<b>Thomas Cunningham</b>	<b>David Litwak</b>	<b>Chloe Squires</b>
<b>Matthew Devlin</b>	<b>Christopher Louney</b>	<b>Leeanne Su</b>
<b>Sabrina Edelman</b>	<b>Madison Malloch-Brown</b>	<b>Sienna Tompkins</b>
<b>Sabina Frizell</b>	<b>Megan McGill</b>	<b>AJ Twombly</b>
<b>Andrei Goldis</b>	<b>Hamesh Mehta</b>	<b>Theodore Waddelow</b>
<b>Sarah Covill</b>	<b>Clara Morain Nabity</b>	<b>Zachary Watling</b>
<b>Lynda Hammes</b>	<b>Gillian Morris</b>	<b>Grant Webster</b>
<b>Joe Hill</b>	<b>Katera Mujadidi</b>	<b>Sherman Williams</b>
<b>Lauren Hurst</b>	<b>Duncan Pickard</b>	<b>Yasin Yaqubie</b>
<b>Reid Jacoby</b>	<b>Lorenzo Piras</b>	

**SENIOR ADVISERS**

Former Board Members who maintain an association with Crisis Group, and whose advice and support are called on (to the extent consistent with any other office they may be holding at the time).

<b>Martti Ahtisaari</b> Chairman Emeritus	<b>Christoph Bertram</b> <b>Lakhdar Brahimi</b>	<b>Aleksander Kwasniewski</b> <b>Ricardo Lagos</b>
<b>George Mitchell</b> Chairman Emeritus	<b>Kim Campbell</b> <b>Jorge Castañeda</b>	<b>Joanne Leedom-Ackerman</b> <b>Todung Mulya Lubis</b>
<b>Gareth Evans</b> President Emeritus	<b>Joaquim Alberto Chissano</b> <b>Victor Chu</b>	<b>Graça Machel</b> <b>Jessica T. Mathews</b>
<b>Kenneth Adelman</b> <b>Adnan Abu-Odeh</b>	<b>Mong Joon Chung</b> <b>Sheila Coronel</b>	<b>Miklós Németh</b> <b>Christine Ockrent</b>
<b>HRH Prince Turki al-Faisal</b>	<b>Pat Cox</b> <b>Gianfranco Dell'Alba</b>	<b>Timothy Ong</b> <b>Roza Otunbayeva</b>
<b>Celso Amorim</b>	<b>Jacques Delors</b> <b>Alain Destexhe</b>	<b>Olara Otunnu</b> <b>Lord (Christopher) Patten</b>
<b>Óscar Arias</b>	<b>Mou-Shih Ding</b> <b>Uffe Ellemann-Jensen</b>	<b>Surin Pitsuwan</b> <b>Fidel V. Ramos</b>
<b>Richard Armitage</b>	<b>Stanley Fischer</b> <b>Carla Hills</b>	<b>Olympia Snowe</b> <b>Javier Solana</b>
<b>Diego Arria</b>	<b>Swanee Hunt</b>	<b>Pär Stenbäck</b>
<b>Zainab Bangura</b>	<b>Wolfgang Ischinger</b>	
<b>Nahum Barnea</b>		
<b>Kim Beazley</b>		
<b>Shlomo Ben-Ami</b>		