

# Reclaiming the Future: Rethinking Peace and Transitional Justice with Afghan Youth Amid Deepening Existential Threats

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The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Afghanistan Policy Lab.

## Executive Summary:

This policy paper examines the perspectives and experiences of Afghan youth as vital stakeholders in Afghanistan's future, particularly following the 2020 Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan and the subsequent Taliban takeover in 2021, to provide a bottom-up roadmap for peacebuilding in Afghanistan. Afghan youth have been continually marginalized from the Doha process and the culmination of the talks through U.N.-led frameworks, again taking place in Doha, including initiatives like the Mosaic. To inform these frameworks, the paper highlights their critical role in shaping Afghanistan's future, examining their pressing challenges, shared values and struggles, and articulated visions. Aligned with the Declaration for Future Generations, United Nations Security Council Youth, Peace, and Security Resolution 2250 this paper draws from: (i) two experts panels hosted at Princeton Afghanistan Policy Lab with international and Afghan transitional justice experts, (ii) 25 in-depth survey-interviews conducted online with Afghan youth in Afghanistan, and those recently exiled in Europe, North America, and Central Asia and (iii) desk research of pertaining documents and frameworks. The research examines how political or peace processes often overlook the key question of whose future is at stake — the youth and future generations. The expert conversations held with Afghan youth, academics, and international experts throughout this research highlighted that:

- While the so-called peace processes, exemplified in diverse contexts, are supposedly for the future and future generations, young people were not in the room.
- The future of Afghan youth was bargained away as a result of the 2020 peace deal with the Taliban, and they were left to deal with consequences that were not of their making.
- Afghan youth were disillusioned, and deep trust deficits ran through the society, fragmenting them along different values and visions, and their voices were not harmonized.

The conversations with youth reveal that Afghan youth feel the impact of the peace deal with the Taliban profoundly and often see themselves as tokens at the decision-making levels. Participants from the northern tip to the southernmost parts of Afghanistan consistently emphasize the values of freedom and unanimously identify the Taliban's regime and governance as the most pressing challenge. Building on these findings and conversations with youth, the paper offers policy recommendations to meaningfully include youth in future-oriented processes regarding Afghanistan alongside other stakeholders. Steeped in existential risks studies literature, the paper situates the Taliban's authoritarianism, gender apartheid, and the erosion of human rights, civic and educational spaces as long-term, irreversible threats for future generations. This brief is part of a longer research study conducted at Afghanistan Policy Lab (APL) from 2024-2025 to center the voices of youth in broader policy discussions and disseminate discourse among key actors. While grounded in the Afghan context, the study reflects broader global patterns: the absence of strategic foresight in peace processes carried out in the name of future generations without them in the room. In addition, expanding the existential risk framework to include permanent forms of totalitarianism offers valuable insights for future discussions on the topic in other totalitarian contexts.

*Keywords: Afghan youth, future generations, peacebuilding, transitional justice, human rights, existential risks, gender apartheid, hope.*

## Introduction:

Afghanistan has one of the youngest populations in the world, with approximately 27.5 million people under 25, accounting for 63% of the total population.<sup>1</sup> Although they represent a substantial demographic, Afghan youth have been largely excluded from meaningful discussions about the country's future. While they have endured decades of conflict, they have also experienced a period of unprecedented growth in democratic participation, human rights, youth movements, and education after the fall of the Taliban in 2001—all of which were later significantly undone after the 2020 peace deal with the Taliban. Although it was titled the “Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan,” the bilateral deal mainly served as a framework for the withdrawal of international troops, with the primary beneficiary being the Taliban.<sup>2</sup> The agreement consisted of four key components: the first three components pertained solely to the timeline and conditions for U.S. withdrawal, guarantees of counterterrorism, and the initiation of intra-Afghan peace talks; the fourth component was a commitment to a permanent ceasefire. The agreement did not lead to substantive intra-Afghan negotiations and the release of thousands of Taliban prisoners, as part of the agreement for confidence-building measures, enabled the group to launch a military offensive that led to the collapse of the republic in August 2021.

After decades of war and loss, Afghanistan has not achieved positive peace. The 2020 agreement failed to establish a clear political roadmap for Afghanistan's future and mechanisms to protect democratic institutions, uphold human rights, and foster long-term stability. Afghan youth, despite being the majority of the population and among the most affected by the conflict, remained at the fringes of formal and informal talks held in Moscow and Doha between 2018 and 2020.<sup>3</sup> Their continued marginalization reflects a broader failure to include Afghanistan's emerging political actors in shaping the country's future. While the ongoing Doha process, initiated by Resolution 2679<sup>4</sup>, and the independent assessment in April 2023, have culminated in intra-Afghan talks, the third round of negotiations in Doha, held in June 2024, once again sidelined women's rights activists and civil society.<sup>5</sup> The talks prompted protest and controversy, particularly from Afghan women and human rights activists who characterized the process as an appeasement of the Taliban and complicity in their crimes.<sup>6</sup>

Today, young Afghans, both within the country and in exile, are grappling with the repercussions of the war and peace deal in question, which was not their making. Although young people are at the heart of the movement resisting the Taliban's rollback measures, their vision for Afghanistan's future is often sidelined or echoed in fragmented ways. As the Taliban continue to erode human rights and institutionalize systematic erasure of women, enforce discriminatory policies, and foster conditions that undermine education, culture, and the freedoms of young people, they pose existential risks and effectively compromise the potential of youth and future

<sup>1</sup> “UNFPA Calls on the Global Community to Stand with Women and Youth in Afghanistan,” UNFPA Asiapacific, accessed November 23, 2025, <https://asiapacific.unfpa.org/en/news/unfpa-calls-global-community-stand-women-and-youth-afghanistan>.

<sup>2</sup> Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan, accessed November 24, 2025, <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Agreement-For-Bringing-Peace-to-Afghanistan-02.29.20.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup> Thomas Ruttig, “A Troika of Four: Looking Back at the March 2021 Afghanistan Meeting in Moscow,” Afghanistan Analysts Network - English, October 20, 2023, <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/reports/regional-relations/a-troika-of-four-looking-back-at-the-march-2021-afghanistan-meeting-in-moscow/>.

<sup>4</sup> Resolution 2679, United Nations Security Council, 16 March 2023, [https://docs.un.org/en/S/RES/2679\(2023\)](https://docs.un.org/en/S/RES/2679(2023)).

<sup>5</sup> What's next for the U.N.'s Doha process on Afghanistan? | United States Institute of Peace accessed February 13, 2025, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2024/07/whats-next-uns-doha-process-afghanistan>.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

generations to flourish and realize fundamental human rights, and engage as agents of peace and development in society.

At a time when the very foundations of civil society, sustainable peacebuilding, and human rights are under threat, addressing youth as key stakeholders in Afghanistan's future becomes a moral imperative. Hence, the domain of inquiry of this research is threefold: (i) identifying steps to inform policies to effectively integrate Afghan youth into peace processes and highlight their critical role in shaping Afghanistan's future; (ii) examining shared values, struggles, and priority issues among Afghan youth; and (iii) exploring their visions for Afghanistan's future. By integrating expert panels and the voices of Afghan youth, this paper lays the groundwork for ensuring intergenerational equity and a future of progress and peace in Afghanistan.

### Research Framework:

This policy paper employs multiple methodologies. In addition to two expert panels and discussions, the researcher conducted online survey interviews with over 25 young Afghans, both inside Afghanistan and those recently exiled, to capture a diverse range of youth perspectives and offer a deeper understanding of their fears, aspirations, and anxieties about the country's future. The interview process used purposive sampling to identify well-connected, well-positioned youth with strong ties to their communities and a deep understanding of local risks and challenges. Youth spoken to in this study were sometimes seated at or around the table or the room, but outside the room, they channeled their efforts on multiple fronts. One of the youth participants in the research named this the 'middle-out', stating that, "I also advocate at the top level, but I am somewhere at the middle-out; youth activists are in the middle-out with access to the below the grassroots level where the young people are and some access and influence to the top where policymakers are"<sup>7</sup> All interviews were conducted in accordance with the research protocol approved by Princeton University's Institutional Review Board for studies involving human subjects, and participant identifiers from Afghanistan have been removed from this paper. An intersectional and trauma-informed approach has been key, given the diverse and complex experiences of Afghan youth. Hence, the interview process included youth from Hazara, Pashtun, Uzbek, Sadat, Turkmen, Tajik, ethnic groups, as well as the LGBTQ+ youth, youth with disabilities, and those in refugee camps. The interview structure incorporated both qualitative open-ended questions and quantitative Likert scales (1-5) to assess multiple dimensions of participants' experiences and perspectives, with follow-up questions exploring in-depth core thematic areas on trust and collaboration, optimism and future vision, core values, and existential risks and challenges.

The term "existential risks" appears five times in Our Common Agenda<sup>8</sup>, the U.N. Secretary-General's proposal for the 2023 Summit for the Future, and twice in the Pact for the Future.<sup>9</sup> While "an effort is warranted to better define" the term, it loosely refers to describe phenomena such as "the dawn of the nuclear age," "continued technological advances," "accelerating climate change," pandemics, large-scale disinformation, etc.<sup>10</sup> This paper situates itself within philosophical discussions that allow for context-based semantic pluralism: as Torres notes, "it

<sup>7</sup> Ramiz Bakhtiari, Google Meet Interview with author, June 26, 2025.

<sup>8</sup> UN Secretary General's Our Common Agenda (2021): United Nations, Our Common Agenda: Report of the Secretary-General, A/75/982 (2021), [https://www.un.org/en/content/common-agenda-report/assets/pdf/Common\\_Agenda\\_Report\\_English.pdf](https://www.un.org/en/content/common-agenda-report/assets/pdf/Common_Agenda_Report_English.pdf).

<sup>9</sup> UN Summit Outcome Document: Pact for the Future (2024): United Nations, Pact for the Future: Outcome Document of the Summit for the Future (2024), <https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/soft-pact-for-the-future-adopted.pdf>.

<sup>10</sup> Phil Torres, "Existential Risks: A Philosophical Analysis," *Inquiry* 66, no. 4 (August 23, 2019): 614–39, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0020174x.2019.1658626>.

would be misleading to equate existential risks with [...] mere human extinction”<sup>11</sup> than a context-based understanding that phenomenon with long-lasting effects that drastically curtail humanity’s long-term potential, eliminating opportunities for flourishing across generations could also constitute existential threats.<sup>12</sup> This framing is used to delineate terminal risks posed by the Taliban regime and regimes similar to it.

Furthermore, A participatory approach has been at the core of this research, allowing youth respondents to share their wisdom and expertise on research design and outcomes. Ajmal, who has reinstated the Afghan U.N. Youth representative program through his organization, Afghans for Progressive Thinking (APT), stated that:

“We receive a lot of requests, like I have connected with some [Non-Governmental Organizations] (NGOs), and [International Non-Governmental Organizations] (INGOs), but at the end of the day, they’re just collecting their data to complete their project. But at the end of it, they never share like, okay, what? What happened to this data? Or like the research or the survey they have completed.”<sup>13</sup>

Hence, the study emphasized reciprocity, with findings shared with participants, and was designed to amplify the voices of Afghan youth in policy discussions.

## Key Findings:

### Impacts of a Failed Process:

The interviews revealed that young Afghans possess sophisticated visions for their country’s future despite being systematically excluded from decision-making. Participants specifically highlighted critical challenges, including severely limited educational access for youth inside Afghanistan, particularly those in rural areas. Respondents also reflected on the profound impacts of the 2020 peace deal, which led to a Taliban takeover in every aspect of their lives. One respondent said: “I saw friends leave the country, some forced to hide, and others just trying to survive. Emotionally, it was heavy. The future felt unclear, and I often asked myself: Where do I belong in this so-called peace?”<sup>14</sup> The respondent further lamented the impact: “I think it was such a big shock. I mean, I managed to overcome it. My parents did not. I don’t know. I mean, I became an immigrant. I lost my circle of friends. I lost my family...I lost my career.”<sup>15</sup> Experts in panels acknowledged the exclusion of young people from peace processes despite their status as intended beneficiaries. While peace agreements were intended to safeguard the future, they frequently failed to incorporate the voices of those who would bear the consequences. Graeme Simpson, one of the panelists and author of the *Youth Progress Study*<sup>16</sup>, emphasizing a right of review for past peace accords, stated, “In every instance, the rhetoric is that these peace processes are supposedly in the name of future generations. They’re supposed to create an environment in which the future of young people in these societies will be different, that they will

<sup>11</sup> UN Secretary General’s Our Common Agenda (2021): United Nations, Our Common Agenda: Report of the Secretary-General, A/75/982 (2021), [https://www.un.org/en/content/common-agenda-report/assets/pdf/Common\\_Agenda\\_Report\\_English.pdf](https://www.un.org/en/content/common-agenda-report/assets/pdf/Common_Agenda_Report_English.pdf).

<sup>12</sup> Thomas Hale, Finlay Moorhouse, and Anne-Marie Slaughter, Toward a Declaration on Future Generations, January 12, 2023, [https://doi.org/10.35489/bsg-pb\\_2023/001](https://doi.org/10.35489/bsg-pb_2023/001).

<sup>13</sup> Ajmal Ramyar, Google Meet Interview with author, June, 2025.

<sup>14</sup> Ziafatullah Saeedi, Google Meet Interview with the author, June 2025.

<sup>15</sup> Ziafatullah Saeedi, Google Meet Interview with the author, June 2025.

<sup>16</sup> Graeme Simpson, UNFPA, The missing peace: independent progress study on youth and peace and security, March 2018, <https://www.unfpa.org/resources/missing-peace-independent-progress-study-youth-and-peace-and-security>.

be protected from the cyclical patterns of violence and conflict, and in every single one of these societies, young people are looking back...and saying this was all done in our name but often without us, without young people in the room.”<sup>17</sup> Another young Afghan expert adding: “many feel that their voices were ignored, and their futures bargained away without their consent.”<sup>18</sup>

Central to participants’ worldviews were core values emphasizing mainly “freedom,” with priorities focused on accountability, education, gender and racial equality, inclusive justice, non-recognition of the Taliban, equality, security, access to healthcare, and employment, among other issues. When asked to identify their three core values, a youth participant responded with “freedom, freedom, freedom.”<sup>19</sup> While freedom was the most common core value among them, their definitions varied. Some referred to it as contextual freedom, others sought freedoms they observed in countries they had resettled to, and a few called it Islamic freedom. Despite this, they all echoed similar visions of freedom rooted in the human rights framework.

*Figure 1: The most common words when asked what some core values were among Afghan youth. The maximum number of words was set at 35.*



A 23-year-old man from Kandahar said, “By freedom, I mean Islamic rights. Currently, we don't have freedom of education; girls cannot go to school. That's not a freedom. In Islam, girls are permitted to go to schools and universities, get an education, and get a job... The first university was founded by a Muslim woman. And I don't think in that sense we have any freedom.”<sup>20</sup> Young men narrated stringent and humiliating Taliban punishments against them, such as public forced shaving of hair.<sup>21</sup> Among other values, a 27-year-old woman working with an international organization in Kabul mentioned: “As an Afghan youth, my core values are respect for others and my community, courage to stand up for what is right despite challenges, and unity that embraces

<sup>17</sup> Unveiling Potential: Afghan Youth as Architects of Peace and Reconciliation, Afghanistan Policy Lab, Princeton SPIA, <https://spia.princeton.edu/events/unveiling-potential-afghan-youth-architects-peace-and-reconciliation>, 42:46, 2024.

<sup>18</sup> Unveiling Potential: Afghan Youth as Architects of Peace and Reconciliation, Afghanistan Policy Lab, Princeton SPIA, <https://spia.princeton.edu/events/unveiling-potential-afghan-youth-architects-peace-and-reconciliation>, 42:46, 2024.

<sup>19</sup> Ejaz Malikzada, Google Meet Interview, June 2025.

<sup>20</sup> Google Meet Interview with the author, June 2025.

<sup>21</sup> “X Post,” X, accessed July 8, 2025, <https://x.com/TajudenSoroush/status/1616108524026617856>.



our diversity as a strength. I deeply believe in the power of education to open doors and justice to ensure fairness for all...”<sup>22</sup>

#### A Hope-Optimism Continuum:

Participants exhibited varying degrees of future-oriented thinking; however, in general, they expressed pessimism about the future, and those who responded as somewhat optimistic attributed their optimism to working closely with youth in Afghanistan and witnessing their resilience. One such response “I’m not optimistic but I am hopeful”<sup>23</sup> described and distinguished optimism from hope in such a way that was a poignant reminder of Solnit’s words: “Hope locates itself in the premises that we don’t know what will happen, and that in the spaciousness of uncertainty is room to act... Optimists believe it will all be fine without our involvement”.<sup>24</sup> Ramiz, a former U.N. Youth Representative for Afghanistan, refused to be optimistic as a form of resistance and activism, as a young activist stated. “...generally, I’m an optimist, but the reason I’m going to say this: I’m not optimistic about the future of Afghanistan in this specific survey, is because that would be a credit to the current group ruling the country, to the Taliban... But still, for this survey, no. My answer would be no.”<sup>25</sup> However, feelings of disillusionment were very strong among youth respondents, particularly women and girls in Afghanistan. A young woman from Samangan stated: “Everyone is just thinking about when? When will we find an opportunity again, and when will we wake up from this nightmare?”<sup>26</sup> The interviews were additionally marked by profound personal trauma, particularly those among women who were deprived of their rights and access to education and still navigated fear and anxiety, and the possibility of losing their only means to online education. One teacher in Afghanistan who taught students online voiced this concern three months prior to the Taliban’s internet shutdown, capturing how young women’s anxieties foreshadowed the Taliban’s crackdown: “We had schools, now we have none, but we have online education, what if they take this away, what if there is no more online education, then what?”<sup>27</sup>

Respondents articulated democratic visions with respect for differences being central to conversations in which youth envisioned “a country where all ethnic groups live united in mutual respect and shared purpose.”<sup>28</sup> A respondent articulated this democratic aspiration: “My vision for Afghanistan over the next 10 to 20 years is a democratic Afghanistan and a democratic and peaceful Afghanistan. I think without democracy there is no peace...”<sup>29</sup> The sentiments were strongly reflected by other youth as: “I want to be in control of who I am and what I am. Like, nobody decides for me to wear this and that, like my clothes, my beard, my whatever, my education. And again, I want to be able to participate in a political process. I want to be able to vote. I want to be able to choose who runs my country.”<sup>30</sup> Youth also emphasized the importance of having honest dialogues and conversations, as well as the need for safer spaces to facilitate

<sup>22</sup> Google Meet Interview with the author, June 2025.

<sup>23</sup> Google Meet Interview with the author, June 2025.

<sup>24</sup> Rebecca Solnit, *Hope in the Dark: Untold Histories, Wild Possibilities* (Chicago, IL: Haymarket Books, 2016).

<sup>25</sup> Ramiz Bakhtiari, Google Meet Interview with author, June, 2025.

<sup>26</sup> Google Meet Interview with the author, June 2025.

<sup>27</sup> Google Meet Interview with the author, June 2025.

<sup>28</sup> Google Meet Interview with the author, June 2025.

<sup>29</sup> Ramiz Bakhtiari, Google Meet Interview with author, June, 2025.

<sup>30</sup> Ejaz Malikzada, Google Meet Interview, June 2025.

honest reckoning and heal intergenerational wounds. Reflecting on ethnic tensions, Pashtana, the executive director of LEARN Afghanistan, mentioned:

“I think we're also scared of talking about our ethnicities, our religious beliefs, our minority status, or our majority status, or what our ancestors have done. Like, we're super scared of all of those things. And when you go to a peace deal, you cannot make a new peace with older wounds. You cannot do that, you know...”<sup>31</sup>

Both the expert panels and the interviews with youth revealed that trust deficits are deeply embedded in Afghan society at multiple levels, from family relationships to institutions to broader social structures. The roots of trust deficits were mainly due to ethnic and linguistic tensions, polarization, radicalization, experiences of deception, and fund mismanagement or corruption by those in leadership positions, particularly toward those in Western countries, and in positions of power and leadership. A young Afghan scholar at the panels hosted by APL stated: “[Youth] feel that both the Taliban and the former Republic's political representatives are often involved in high levels of corruption and should also be held accountable for the ongoing injustices.”<sup>32</sup>

Sentiments were similar among the youth in exile when asked to rate trust levels. Some of the mistrust stemmed from concerns about symbolic participation. One youth, concerned with genuine and meaningful inclusions, said, “The sad reality is I am sure that young people will be the last ones to be part of it...They're going to be tokens. I have been tokenized. A lot of my peers have been tokenized. And that just happens.”<sup>33</sup> One participant expressed extreme distrust, stating that the organizational representatives they worked with misrepresented program activities and outcomes, leading to the participant's withdrawal from the project. Several participants addressed the issue of resigning from their position due to misconduct in Afghanistan-related projects. A young woman in Afghanistan narrated her rationale for mistrust:

“When the Taliban closed our schools, several online schools made promises. They just said we would give you a certificate at the end, so you could continue your higher education, whether abroad or inside the country. But it was all lies, and they even charged fees from us, and then they disappeared.”<sup>34</sup>

All youth, both in Afghanistan and those recently exiled, agreed that a space for dialogue is urgently needed, not only for healing past wounds but also for building trust and reconciliation. Artemis, executive director of Afghanistan LGBTIQ+ Organization (ALO), was actively in touch with queer youth in Afghanistan remarked that: “I think we've never had a proper, safe, and secure space for dialogue...I think this is one of the reasons that we don't have trust.”<sup>35</sup> Many of the interviewees, themselves activists involved in bottom-up efforts in Afghanistan and now in exile, noted that initial distrust in dialogue typically evolved into collaboration as conversations progressed. Among others, Ziafatullah, the former director of the Rainbow Culture Diversity Program in Afghanistan, said, “[The program] intentionally included disturbing topics on the agenda, leading to heated discussions about ethnic grievances where young participants shared personal experiences of discrimination.”<sup>36</sup> These discussions, he said, brought about

<sup>31</sup> Pashtana Durrani, Google Meet Interview with author, June, 2025.

<sup>32</sup> Unveiling Potential: Afghan Youth as Architects of Peace and Reconciliation, Afghanistan Policy Lab, Princeton SPIA, <https://spia.princeton.edu/events/unveiling-potential-afghan-youth-architects-peace-and-reconciliation>, 42:46, 2024.

<sup>33</sup> Pashtana Durrani, Google Meet Interview with author, June, 2025.

<sup>34</sup> Google Meet Interview with the author, June 2025.

<sup>35</sup> Artemis Akbary, Google Meet Interview with author, June, 2025.

<sup>36</sup> Ziafatullah Saeedi, Google Meet Interview with the author, June 2025.

generational breakthrough moments where youth found common ground and discovered “that ethnicity wasn’t the ultimate determinant of their identity.” However, these, according to the youth, were also gains that are profoundly imperiled now under the Taliban’s radicalization.

Almost all participants unanimously responded that the current governance regime, the Taliban, is the biggest challenge facing the country’s future, along with the radicalization of not only young boys but also girls. A concern echoed by participants at the APL panels—experts cautioned against the Taliban’s systematic campaign to reshape youth through top-down ideological socialization and silencing dissent since 2021 and warned that ungoverned spaces in the country could become potential safe havens for violent extremist groups, threatening regional stability.<sup>37</sup> A respondent in Afghanistan stated in an interview: “If the current regime remains, I envision a closed-minded, uneducated, oppressed society that is trapped in poverty and hopelessness.”<sup>38</sup> Afghan youth with democratic visions face persecution not only at home but also are targets of transnational repression in exile, threatened with death, sexual assault<sup>39</sup>, and stabbed in their apartments.<sup>40</sup> Bostrom, who defines ‘existential risks’ himself, cautions against “permanent forms of totalitarianism” as a profound existential threat.<sup>41</sup> Exemplified by radicalization, the silencing of dissent at home and abroad, and gender apartheid, the Taliban continue to undermine the foundations of human rights and peaceful coexistence, and pose long-term, irreversible risks by endangering the present and future generations, particularly women and young girls in Afghanistan.

Overall, my conversations with youth revealed that healing requires both structural change and a commitment to difficult conversations, emphasizing that avoiding historical wounds only perpetuates existing divides. I noticed throughout interviews that Afghan youth had a lot to say but limited opportunities to express themselves, a reality reflected in how some interviews extended beyond their intended duration. They often found it meaningful, empowering, and uplifting to have space to reflect and share their grievances during the interviews. My findings suggest that Afghan youth navigate between despair and determination by maintaining hope and activism and finding resilience through grassroots educational efforts, dialogue, and community engagement amidst existential dangers. The future of Afghanistan, as well as its present conditions, remains precariously balanced as its most significant demographic segment—its youth—continues to be excluded from processes that influence their prospects. Despite these immense challenges, Afghan youth both within the country and in exile continue to resist, advocate, and imagine alternatives beyond cycles of violence, exclusion, and failed leadership. Their resilience, however, cannot substitute for structural change. The lessons drawn from Afghanistan echo broader global patterns: peace processes conducted “in the name of future generations” often fail when those generations are excluded from the room. Ensuring their inclusion is not only an investment in peace but in preserving the possibility of a future Afghanistan where the rights, aspirations, and contributions of its next generation are no longer undermined but actively shape the nation’s path forward.

<sup>37</sup> The Afghanistan Question: America’s Policy Impasse , Afghanistan Policy Lab Princeton SPIA, <https://spia.princeton.edu/events/afghanistan-question-americas-policy-impasse>, 23:23, 2024.

<sup>38</sup> Google Meet Interview with the author, June 2025.

<sup>39</sup> Joseph Ataman and Li-Lian Ahlskog Hou, “‘We Have Your Location’: The Taliban Death Threats Hounding This Afghan Woman,” CNN, October 13, 2024, <https://edition.cnn.com/2024/10/13/sport/marzieh-hamidi-afghanistan-taekwondo-spt-intl>.

<sup>40</sup> “Taliban Critic Stabbed in London, Attackers Flee Scene,” Afghanistan International, February 14, 2025, <https://www.afintl.com/en/202502143060>.

<sup>41</sup> Nick Bostrom, 2002. “Existential Risks: Analyzing Human Extinction Scenarios and Related Hazards.” *Journal of Evolution and Technology* 9.

### Policy Recommendations:

- Integrating Youth Participation in Peace Negotiations: Establishing formal programs and mechanisms for the integration of young people, particularly underrepresented youth, in the implementation design and leadership of peace and transitional justice programs. Recognize that “the future generations of those peace processes are in front of us right now” and actively engage them in decision-making.<sup>42</sup>
- Implement the Right of Review for Future Generations: Develop programs that enable young people to critically assess past peace processes in Afghanistan, identify deficits, failures, and limitations, and engage in scholarship, advocacy, and discussion to learn from past lessons.
- Accountability for Corruption and Injustice: Both the Taliban, the international community, and former Afghan political elites must be held accountable for their roles in perpetuating cycles of injustice, including corruption and human rights violations. An inclusive transitional justice process should enable youth participation through a local mechanism, such as a people’s tribunal.
- Establish Safe and Neutral Spaces for Cross-Ethnic Dialogue: Focus on building trust among Afghanistan’s diverse groups by emphasizing shared values; create trauma-informed, collaborative efforts among youth to address contested narratives and grievances; build mutual understanding; and engage in honest conversations about Afghanistan’s complex history.
- Adopt an Expanded Framework of Existential Risk that includes authoritarian regimes like the Taliban, whose systematic oppression and gender apartheid result in irreversible harm to a population’s human rights, cultural life, and democratic potential, and create other cycles of existential threats.

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<sup>42</sup> Unveiling Potential: Afghan Youth as Architects of Peace and Reconciliation, Afghanistan Policy Lab, Princeton SPIA, <https://spia.princeton.edu/events/unveiling-potential-afghan-youth-architects-peace-and-reconciliation>, 1:08:41, 2024.

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