

Rethinking Peacebuilding in Afghanistan:

From Elite Deals to Local Healing and Acknowledgment

A Policy Paper

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Abstract

This paper examines why four decades of peace initiatives in Afghanistan, ranging from the Geneva Accords in 1988 to the Doha Agreement in 2020, have produced only temporary political settlements. Based on fifteen semi-structured interviews with Afghan policymakers, civil society leaders, and peace practitioners, this study identifies four prerequisites for sustainable peace: justice, inclusivity, recognition, and accountable governance.

It finds that elite-driven processes have marginalized women, minorities, and grassroots actors, while neglecting historical grievances and local dispute resolution traditions. The analysis highlights persistent gaps between theory and practice, including the tokenistic application of liberal peace models, the absence of transformative justice, and the underutilization of community governance systems.

The paper argues for a reorientation toward community-centered reconciliation, in which village shuras (elected councils at the village level)¹, women's networks, and youth groups can serve as trusted brokers. This is integrated with national frameworks that embed justice, protect rights, and ensure equitable governance. The recommendations include institutionalizing local peace platforms, embedding peace education, leveraging women's and youth leadership, integrating transitional and transformative justice, and ensuring that international support respects Afghan agency.

¹ According to the Afghan Republic Sub-national Governance Roadmap 2018, the Community Development Council (CDC) is the representative body at the village level, which engages in local development planning, implementation of community projects, and oversight of government service delivery. CDCs were elected through the Citizens' Charter and the National Solidarity Program, which mobilized members from various councils formed by villagers. The Taliban Administration dissolved CDCs as formal community organizations in 2024. However, the donor community continued its work through informal community representative groups with similar memberships and capacities, performing the same functions. For more information about Village councils, see: The Fate of Village Councils: The Emirate's effort to institute hegemony over rural Afghanistan, Afghanistan Analysts Network, Political Landscape, June 2024



1. Introduction

“Peace for you is not necessarily peace for me” is a sentiment that I frequently encountered during my tenure as a peace negotiator and member of the Afghan High Peace Council between 2015 and 2021, and one I continue to encounter among members of the Afghan diaspora today. The phrase captures a fundamental truth about Afghanistan’s peace process: peace is perceived differently depending on one’s social position, region, and experience of deprivation and grievances.

An incident from 2010 exemplifies this divergence. That year, a ministerial delegation traveled to Bamyan for a retreat to prepare for a conference in Kabul, where the government was developing its National Priority Programs, a set of development programs to implement the Afghanistan National Development Strategy (ANDS). Bamyan was chosen as the location for this retreat partly because it was considered one of the country’s safest provinces, thereby allowing the cabinet to meet without security concerns. Yet, during the retreat, members of the Provincial Council staged a protest against the delegation. They denounced what they described as chronic inequality in the distribution of national resources. They argued that while Bamyan had maintained peace and stability, it had consistently been marginalized in development spending compared to the southern provinces.

The head of the Provincial Council, Jawad Zahhak, asserted that Bamyan was peaceful in terms of physical security but not in terms of economic justice. He argued that, because Bamyan was a secure province, it did not receive the dividends and resources for economic development relative to non-Hazara provinces in the South.

This distinction exposes how security without development can perpetuate a sense of exclusion. During my tenure as governor from 2005 to 2014, local representatives repeatedly invoked this argument: that peace also means fairness in access to resources, opportunities, and dignity. Their demands for me reflected a broader lesson from Afghanistan’s experience: peace built on the absence of violence alone cannot endure unless it addresses structural inequities and distributive injustices that shape how different communities experience peace.

Over the last three decades, Afghanistan’s attempts to move from violence to peace have yielded highly uneven results; while some groups have experienced greater freedom and opportunity, others have remained excluded from the benefits of nonviolence, justice, and economic stability. These competing versions of peace reflect Afghanistan’s stratified society, where ethnic identity, economic class, and political access determine one’s relationship to state power and security. Among experts, political elites, and rights activists, there is a range of sentiments and expectations regarding how peace should be measured and defined.

Three major peace agreements have been signed since the 1980s in Afghanistan to settle the conflict among the warring factions. The Geneva Accord was signed in 1988 to facilitate the withdrawal of the Soviet Union from Afghanistan. The Bonn Conference was held in 2001 to form the Republic after the Taliban regime was ousted. The Peace Deal 2020 was signed between the Taliban and the United States Government to pave the way for the US troop withdrawal from Afghanistan. Despite the signing of three major peace agreements in four decades, Afghanistan still does not experience stable and comprehensive security. In the Global Peace Index (GPI), Afghanistan ranks 158 out of 163 countries.²

These peace agreements not only failed to deliver peace but also intensified inter- and intra-ethnic and religious tensions, which have persisted for years and taken different and renewed shapes. For example, I received significant backlash from some Hazara youth when I was appointed as the negotiator for the Republic from September 2020 to August 2021. They believed that my engagement as a Hazara woman gave the negotiations between the Afghan Republic and the Taliban legitimacy as a stakeholder in Afghan politics and that Hazaras should not negotiate with the Taliban to facilitate their rule. Being a negotiator created a lack of trust among Hazara youth groups for some time, as tensions severely polluted media narratives, particularly on social media platforms, where young people from different ethnic backgrounds seek revenge for past grievances. These tensions were present during the Republic but have intensified after the 2021 collapse of the Afghan Republic.

The Taliban's totalitarian regime, which overtook the country in 2021, has further fueled these divisions. While the Taliban claim that Afghanistan is a peaceful and safe place, the reality is starkly different. Half of the population lacks fundamental rights, and there are extreme forms of discrimination and restrictions against minority ethnic and religious groups. For instance, the small Hindu and Sikh minority, once represented in Parliament, has now been slowly displaced from Afghanistan. According to a 2022 US Department of State report, an estimated nine Sikhs and Hindus remained in Afghanistan at year's end in 2022, down from approximately 150 at the beginning of the year, and more than 400 before August 2021.³ Simultaneously, Ismaili Shia communities in Badakhshan, northern Afghanistan, are under immense pressure to convert to Sunni Islam.⁴ The ongoing Taliban-led suppression and discrimination have significantly increased societal tensions, widening existing gaps day by day.⁵

Understanding why peace has remained elusive requires examining the underlying causes of conflict

² Vision of Humanity, *Global Peace Index & Maps*, accessed January 5, 2026, <https://www.visionofhumanity.org/maps/#/>.

³ U.S. Department of State, *2022 Report on International Religious Freedom: Afghanistan* (Washington, D.C.: Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, 2023), <https://www.state.gov/reports/2022-report-on-international-religious-freedom/afghanistan/>.

⁴ Rawadari, "The Human Rights Situation of Ismaili Shias in Afghanistan," accessed January 5, 2026, <https://rawadari.org/reports/the-human-rights-situation-of-ismaili-shias-in-afghanistan/>.

⁵ Farzad Ramezani Bonesh, "Afghanistan's Ismailis Face Systematic Persecution under the Taliban," *Zan Times*, September 8, 2025, <https://zantimes.com/2025/09/08/afghanistans-ismailis-face-systematic-persecution-under-the-taliban/>.

and the conditions that facilitate and perpetuate it. Amartya Sen claims that there is a very close relationship between inequality and conflict.⁶ Collier and Hoeffler provide one of the first empirical analyses that neither income inequality nor ethnic fractionalization is statistically significant in explaining the onset of a civil war. Still, fractionalization is weakly significant in explaining its duration.⁷ Bleaney and Dimico argue that in ethnically fractionalized countries, there are pockets of local polarization that increase the likelihood of local conflict.⁸ The extent to which ethnic divisions contribute to conflicts remains a topic of ongoing research, which falls beyond the scope of this paper.

While conflict onset may be triggered by a combination of political, economic, and social factors, it is often the conflict's continuity and recurrence that inflict the most significant harm. In peace and conflict studies, the recurrence of violence is attributed to unresolved root causes, weak institutions, economic deprivation, the presence of "spoilers," unaddressed transitional justice issues, external interference, and poorly designed peace agreements. Afghanistan reflects many of these dynamics. Successive efforts to transition from war to peace have been constrained by institutional fragility, persistent inequality, external involvement, and the exclusion of critical segments of society from decision-making processes.

Collier and Hoeffler introduce the idea of the "Conflict Trap", demonstrating that nearly 50% of civil wars relapse within a decade of ending.⁹ They argue that civil wars leave behind economic devastation, deeply rooted grievances, skilled combatants, and weakened institutions, all of which contribute to future conflict. This pattern is evident in Afghanistan's four-decade trajectory, where international interventions and state-building programs failed to redress the structural drivers of conflict, leaving the foundations of peace precarious.

Stedman, on the other hand, argues that peace agreements often face threats from "spoilers"—actors who perceive peace as undermining their power, worldview, or gains. In cases like Angola (1992) and Rwanda (1994), spoilers violently derailed peace, resulting in catastrophic cycles of renewed conflict and mass casualties.¹⁰ In Afghanistan, both political elites and armed factions have at various times acted as spoilers, eroding trust and continuity in peacebuilding efforts.

Walter argues that peace durability depends more on institutional strength than on democracy per se or economic status. Quality governance provides credibility and resilience to peace agreements.¹¹ This insight underscores Afghanistan's enduring governance challenge, where the absence of accountable,

⁶ Amartya Sen, *On Economic Inequality* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973).

⁷ Paul Collier and Anke Hoeffler, "On Economic Causes of Civil War," *Oxford Economic Papers* 50, no. 4 (1998).

⁸ Michael Bleaney and Arcangelo Dimico, "Ethnic Diversity and Conflict," *Journal of Institutional Economics* 13, no. 2 (2017).

⁹ Paul Collier, Anke Hoeffler, and Måns Söderbom, "Post-Conflict Risks," *Journal of Peace Research* 45, no. 4 (2008)

¹⁰ Stephen John Stedman, "Spoiler Problems in Peace Processes," *International Security* 22, no. 2 (1997).

¹¹ Barbara F. Walter, "The Critical Barrier to Civil War Settlement," *International Organization* 51, no. 3 (1997).

legitimate institutions has continually undermined the sustainability of peace.

2. Purpose of the Paper

The purpose of this paper is to examine whether a future Afghan peace process can succeed in bringing people together through dialogue, community engagement, and reconciliation, and whether such a bottom-up approach can overcome the failures of past elite-driven models. The central research question guiding this inquiry is: *Can community-based, locally owned peacebuilding approaches offer a more sustainable path to peace and social cohesion in Afghanistan?*

This question matters because Afghanistan's previous peace efforts have primarily been dominated by political elites and external actors, producing fragile settlements that excluded ordinary citizens from decision-making and reconciliation. Without meaningful community participation and acknowledgment of historical grievances, peace processes have struggled to generate legitimacy or lasting stability. Understanding how inclusion, dialogue, and reconciliation are perceived and practiced at both local and policy levels is therefore critical to rethinking the design of any future peace process.

To explore this question, the paper draws on both theoretical insights from liberal and transformative peacebuilding and empirical evidence from Afghanistan's peace experiences between 1979 and 2021, and onwards. It integrates findings from desk research and expert interviews to illuminate how policymakers, practitioners, and peacebuilding experts conceptualize local buy-in and bottom-up participation within broader political frameworks for peace.

3. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design to explore how Afghan policymakers, practitioners, and peacebuilding experts perceive the role of local buy-in and bottom-up approaches within broader political frameworks for peace. The research is interpretive in nature, seeking to understand meanings and perceptions rather than to predict outcomes. It applies insights from liberal and transformative peacebuilding theories to the Afghan context, analyzing how these theoretical frameworks resonate or conflict with the lived experiences of Afghan peace actors.

The study draws on two primary sources of data:

1. *Comprehensive desk research* covering Afghanistan's peace processes from 1979 to 2021, including formal peace agreements, negotiation frameworks, and secondary literature; and
2. *Fifteen semi-structured interviews* with academics, human rights advocates, gender specialists, and victims of war and terrorism.



The interviews were conducted online in 2025, in Dari and English, reflecting the dispersion of Afghan experts globally following the 2021 political transition. In one case, the responses were provided in writing. The discussions explored both structural and relational dimensions of peace, focusing on how inclusion, dialogue, and reconciliation are perceived across different institutional and generational contexts.

Participants were purposively selected to ensure diversity in expertise, age, ethnicity, geographic origin, and institutional affiliation. This strategy aimed to capture a broad spectrum of perspectives on past and present peace processes in Afghanistan. Snowball sampling was deliberately avoided to prevent overreliance on a single professional network and to minimize bias in representation.

One limitation of the sample is that only two participants currently reside in Afghanistan. Two potential participants declined to participate due to security concerns. Nevertheless, the diversity of respondents provides valuable comparative insights into how Afghan and diaspora experts view the prospects for locally grounded peacebuilding.

Participation in the interviews was voluntary and based on informed consent. In total, fifteen interviewees participated in this study. Thirteen participants provided written consent for their names and quotations to be used in this paper. Two interviewees, currently living in Afghanistan, requested anonymity for security reasons. All data were treated confidentially and stored securely.

As a researcher, I also acknowledge my positionality as Governor of Bamyan, Member of the Peace Council, and a former member of the Republic Negotiation Team. My first-hand observations during the peace talks have informed the analytical interpretation, particularly regarding the disconnect between political negotiations and grassroots realities. I have reflected on my personal experiences rather than giving biased analysis throughout the paper.

The study is qualitative and interpretive; therefore, it does not claim generalizability. The findings represent a snapshot of expert perceptions rather than an exhaustive account of all actors involved in Afghanistan's peace processes. However, by combining empirical evidence with theoretical analysis, the research provides grounded insights into how Afghan peacebuilding can move beyond elite-centric paradigms toward more inclusive, locally driven approaches.

4. Theoretical and Analytical Framework

Peace is a multidimensional concept that extends beyond the mere cessation of hostilities. Traditional approaches often define peace as the absence of violence and the maintenance of stability or order.¹² In contrast, broader perspectives emphasize justice, equality, and human fulfillment as integral to peace. The

¹² United Nations Department of Peace Operations. *United Nations Peacekeeping Operations: Principles and Guidelines (Capstone Doctrine)*. New York: UN DPKO, 2008.

United Nations articulates peace as not only the absence of armed conflict but also the presence of economic and social justice, equality, and human rights.¹³ Johan Galtung's distinction between negative peace, the absence of direct violence, and positive peace, the absence of structural violence such as inequality and exclusion, remains foundational. His work expanded peace research to include the systemic conditions that sustain conflict, highlighting the need for structural justice and inclusion.¹⁴ This framework is particularly relevant for Afghanistan, where decades of inequality and exclusion have continually undermined peace.

Liberal peacebuilding theory builds on these foundations, asserting that peace can be sustained through democratic governance, the rule of law, and economic interdependence. Proponents such as Paris and the United Nations' Agenda for Peace (1992)¹⁵ emphasize strong state institutions as prerequisites for stability. After 2001, these principles guided Afghanistan's reconstruction under the Bonn Agreement and UNAMA¹⁶, focusing on constitution-building and administrative reform. While these efforts strengthened the formal state, they failed to address deep-seated grievances and localized mistrust. Consequently, Afghanistan's peacebuilding experience became dominated by an elite-driven, externally directed model—technocratic in design but socially disconnected.

John Paul Lederach's transformative peacebuilding theory provides an alternative lens. Lederach argues that lasting peace is achieved not through elite agreements alone but through the transformation of relationships across society.¹⁷ His framework emphasizes long-term trust-building, reconciliation, and the restoration of social relationships grounded in truth, mercy, justice, and peace. Central to his model is the pyramid of peacebuilding leadership, which distinguishes between top-level elites, middle-range leaders, and grassroots actors. Middle-range leaders—including civil society professionals, educators, and religious figures—are particularly crucial, as they maintain credibility with both elites and communities, thereby facilitating vertical linkages between political settlements and local reconciliation efforts.

Integrating Galtung's structural analysis with Lederach's relational transformation provides the theoretical foundation for this paper. Together, they offer a comprehensive framework for understanding why peace in Afghanistan has been challenging to sustain and how it might be re-envisioned. Galtung's concept of positive peace explains the structural roots of Afghanistan's recurring conflict, while Lederach's theory

¹³ United Nations General Assembly, Declaration on the Preparation of Societies for Life in Peace, A/RES/33/73, December 15, 1978.

¹⁴ Johan Galtung, "Violence, Peace, and Peace Research," *Journal of Peace Research* 6, no. 3 (1969).

¹⁵ Roland Paris, *At War's End: Building Peace After Civil Conflict* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

United Nations, *An Agenda for Peace: Preventive Diplomacy, Peacemaking and Peace-Keeping* (New York: United Nations, 1992).

United Nations, *Report of the Secretary-General on the Rule of Law and Transitional Justice in Conflict and Post-Conflict Societies* (New York: United Nations, 2004).

¹⁶ "Agreement on Provisional Arrangements in Afghanistan Pending the Re-Establishment of Permanent Government Institutions (Bonn Agreement)," December 5, 2001.

¹⁷ John Paul Lederach, *Building Peace: Sustainable Reconciliation in Divided Societies* (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace Press, 1997).

illustrates how trust, empathy, and inclusive participation can transform relationships at multiple societal levels. This transformative lens anchors the central argument of this study that sustainable peace in Afghanistan requires a shift from elite-centered negotiation toward meaningful community-based reconciliation and local ownership. By linking structural justice to relational transformation, the paper argues that only through the inclusive integration of bottom-up processes with national processes can Afghanistan create the conditions for positive and lasting peace.

5. Brief History of Peace Processes and Their Failures

Afghanistan's recent history has been marked by a series of peace agreements that, while ambitious in design, failed to produce sustainable stability. The Geneva Accord that was signed in April 1988¹⁸ between Afghanistan, Pakistan, the United States, and the Soviet Union was intended to end the Soviet occupation but excluded one of the main parties to the conflict, the Mujahideen, from the negotiations. Without their participation, the agreement lacked legitimacy among Afghan factions, and U.S. and Pakistani support for armed resistance continued. The accord also contained no clear plan for inclusive governance after Soviet withdrawal, and the resulting power vacuum descended into civil war in 1992, with patches of armed conflict starting right after in provinces as a “transitional war”.¹⁹

More than a decade later, the 2001 Bonn Agreement²⁰ was shaped in the aftermath of the U.S.-led intervention that overthrew the Taliban. The process of forming a new government was deeply influenced by the imperatives of the U.S. War on Terror, which prioritized rapid political stabilization over inclusive state-building.²¹ This externally driven approach, undertaken in haste, once again excluded a major actor, the Taliban, on the assumption that they had been decisively defeated. Power was instead concentrated in the hands of the Northern Alliance, primarily composed of Mujahideen commanders, sidelining other groups like civil society, the Taliban themselves, and leaving little room for a genuinely shared national vision. The focus was on rapid institutional rebuilding rather than on addressing social reconciliation or healing historical grievances, a missed opportunity to create a durable, inclusive political settlement that could have built domestic momentum despite external forces, such as great-power competition.

¹⁸ United Nations, *The Geneva Accords on the Settlement of the Situation Relating to Afghanistan*, April 14, 1988, <https://peacemaker.un.org/afghanistan-genevaaccord88>; see also Afghanistan Analysts Network, “The Geneva Accords on Afghanistan,” <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/resources/peace-process/the-geneva-accords-on-afghanistan/>.

¹⁹ Barnett R. Rubin, *The Fragmentation of Afghanistan: State Formation and Collapse in the International System*, 2nd ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002). Gilles Dorronsoro, *Revolution Unending: Afghanistan, 1979 to the Present* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005).

²⁰ United Nations, Agreement on Provisional Arrangements in Afghanistan Pending the Re-establishment of Permanent Government Institutions (Bonn Agreement), December 5, 2001, <https://peacemaker.un.org/afghanistan-bonnagreement2001>.

²¹ Conciliation Resources, “Lessons from Bonn: Victors’ Peace,” *Accord: Afghanistan*, accessed January 5, 2026, <https://www.c-r.org/accord/afghanistan/lessons-bonn-victors%E2%80%99-peace>.

The 2020 U.S.–Taliban Doha Agreement followed a similar pattern of failure and exclusion.²² Its failure stemmed from several interlinked flaws.²³ Negotiated primarily between U.S. representatives and the Taliban, the agreement centered on troop withdrawal, counterterrorism assurances, and the promise of intra-Afghan dialogue. However, the Afghan government was not a party to the deal, and the intra-Afghan talks it envisioned never materialized. The Afghan Government, civil society groups, and international stakeholders sought a negotiation in which the Afghan Government could be a party to the agreement.²⁴ The agreement itself was structurally unequal: the United States made concrete, time-bound commitments, including troop withdrawal, sanctions relief, and the release of more than 5,000 Taliban prisoners, while Taliban obligations remained vague, unenforceable, and largely unverifiable. In practice, the Taliban exploited the agreement to intensify military operations, consolidate territorial control, and maintain ties with al-Qaeda, as documented by a UN report.²⁵ The subsequent rapid and unconditional U.S. withdrawal, undertaken without a realistic assessment of Afghanistan’s political and security conditions, shattered the morale and operational capacity of Afghan security forces by abruptly removing critical air support, logistics, and training. These external dynamics were compounded by internal fragmentation: political infighting, weak national cohesion, and excessive centralization of power prevented the emergence of a unified response to the Taliban’s advance. Finally, the exclusion of key regional actors, including Iran, Russia, India, and China, further undermined the agreement by encouraging proxy competition rather than regional buy-in. Ultimately, the Doha Agreement facilitated an orderly exit for the United States rather than a sustainable peace for Afghanistan, demonstrating that peace processes lacking legitimate representation, internal unity, and enforceable accountability mechanisms merely transfer power rather than resolve conflict.

Across all three agreements, the common denominator was a top-down, elite-driven, and internationally orchestrated model of peacemaking that prioritized the interests of powerful domestic and foreign actors over the voices and needs of local communities. It is also worth noting that the peace agreements referenced above were all preceded by informal negotiations among political elites, which added another layer of exclusion to the process. In these informal settings, the most consequential discussions and trade-offs took place, often without representation from broader societal groups. This raises important questions about the *forms and quality of inclusion* in peace processes, and about how inclusion might be designed to be both more effective and more

²² U.S. Department of State, Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan between the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan and the United States of America (Doha Agreement), February 29, 2020, <https://www.state.gov/agreement-for-bringing-peace-to-afghanistan/>.

²³ Written notes shared with the author by Masoom Stanekzai, former chief negotiator, March 2025.

²⁴ Author’s personal accounts during the peace talks.

²⁵ United Nations Security Council Committee Established pursuant to Resolution 1988 (2011), *Letter dated 23 May 2023 from the Chair of the Security Council Committee Established pursuant to Resolution 1988 (2011) addressed to the President of the Security Council* (S/2023/370), May 23, 2023, transmitted 14th report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team concerning the Taliban and associated individuals and entities, <https://docs.un.org/en/S/2023/370>.

legitimate, issues that, while significant, lie beyond the scope of this paper.

This persistent exclusion of key stakeholders, combined with the failure to address historical injustices and local grievances, left each process vulnerable to collapse and ultimately deepened mistrust among Afghanistan's diverse population. A persistent top-down approach in Afghan peace processes fostered cycles of exclusion and resentment. These models routinely overlooked the local social fabric, ignored community grievances, and rarely incorporated justice or reconciliation at the grassroots level. As Heela Najibullah, daughter of former President Dr. Mohammad Najibullah Ahmadzai (often referred to as Dr. Najib), has remarked in her book, *Afghan Attempts at Peace and Reconciliation 1986 and 2010: A Comparison*, "Afghanistan has long been a battleground for global powers. When they reached agreements, the Afghan people were left out of the picture."²⁶

International actors frequently prioritized strategic interests over genuine national reconciliation, thereby politicizing peace processes. Agreements crafted in foreign capitals or negotiated in elite hotels failed to resonate with rural communities, deepening distrust between the people, the government, and political elites. Moreover, these initiatives largely ignored pressing local grievances, including ethnic tensions, land disputes, and deep-seated historical traumas. Most programs lacked essential healing components, such as truth-telling, restitution, and acknowledgment of past wrongs—leaving the wounds of conflict unattended and the prospects for lasting peace fragile. While internationally mediated peace negotiations are necessary, community input could have been incorporated into the multilateral processes through civil society and community-based consultation mechanisms during each phase of the peace process.

6. Current Context in Afghanistan and Challenges for Reconciliation

The aftermath of the 2020 Doha deal and the subsequent withdrawal of the USA and international forces from Afghanistan in 2021 have unleashed new challenges for Afghanistan. The humanitarian, political, and social situation in Afghanistan is extremely dire. The Taliban's return to power in 2021 has resulted in widespread human rights violations²⁷, suppression of dissent, and exclusion of ethnic and religious minorities²⁸. Afghanistan under Taliban rule has become the only country in the world where girls are banned from secondary and higher education. Women are excluded from most forms of employment, face strict restrictions on public appearance, and are subject to arrest or abuse for

²⁶ Heela Najibullah, *Afghan Attempts at Peace and Reconciliation 1986 and 2010: A Comparison* (Geneva: The Peace and Conflict Programme, 2011).

²⁷ United Nations Human Rights Council, *The Situation of Human Rights in Afghanistan: Report of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, A/HRC/60/23*, advance unedited version (Geneva: United Nations, September 5, 2025), <https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/country-reports/ahrc6023-situation-human-rights-afghanistan-report-office-united-nations>.

²⁸ U.S. Department of State, *2022 Report on International Religious Freedom: Afghanistan* (Washington, D.C.: Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, 2023), <https://www.state.gov/reports/2022-report-on-international-religious-freedom/afghanistan/>.

alleged violations of dress and behavior codes. As Human Rights Watch reported in September 2024, “Women and girls have been disproportionately affected by the health care crisis... bans on their employment and education have created severe shortages of women healthcare workers.”²⁹ The denial of women’s participation not only violates human rights obligations but also undermines the country’s socio-economic stability.

Journalists, writers, and activists face harassment, arbitrary detention, and torture, as freedom of speech has come under severe attack. Independent media outlets have been shut down or forced to operate under heavy censorship, and investigative reporting has all but disappeared, replaced by state-controlled narratives that leave little room for critical voices. Minority groups, including Hazaras, Uzbeks, Tajiks, and Turkmen, face systemic discrimination in education, employment, and public life. Amnesty International (2024) documented that “Shia Hazaras have been systematically targeted in attacks on places of worship and education.”³⁰ Such attacks perpetuate cycles of fear and trauma, deepening intergroup mistrust.

Former government officials, security personnel, and perceived political opponents have been subjected to arbitrary arrest, forced disappearance, and extrajudicial execution, acts that violate fundamental norms of international humanitarian law. Meanwhile, the humanitarian crisis continues to worsen. According to UN estimates, over 28 million Afghans, two-thirds of the population, require humanitarian assistance. The collapse of public services, economic contraction, and escalating poverty have led to widespread food insecurity and deteriorating health conditions, with entire communities now dependent on humanitarian aid for survival.

Ethnic divides are not confined to Afghanistan’s borders. Among the Afghan diaspora, particularly on social media platforms, debates about the peace process often devolve into hostile exchanges along ethnic lines. These virtual arenas have become spaces in which unresolved grievances are reinforced rather than bridged, thereby making reconciliation more challenging.³¹

Despite the Taliban’s claim that Afghanistan is now “at peace,” conditions on the ground reveal a deeply divided, traumatized, and politically isolated society. The absence of active large-scale combatants in the country who are engaged in active fighting with hot and cold weapons does not equate to reconciliation or stability.

A core obstacle to restoring a government recognized by the international community is the Taliban’s outright rejection of reconciliation or intra-Afghan peace processes. The group asserts that peace

²⁹ Human Rights Watch, “*A Disaster for the Foreseeable Future*: Afghanistan’s Healthcare Crisis (New York: Human Rights Watch, February 12, 2024), <https://www.hrw.org/report/2024/02/12/disaster-foreseeable-future/afghanistans-healthcare-crisis>.

³⁰ Amnesty International, “Afghanistan,” *Amnesty International*, accessed October 2025, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/location/asia-and-the-pacific/south-asia/afghanistan/report-afghanistan/>.

already exists under its rule, thereby dismissing the need for dialogue, healing, or inclusion of diverse perspectives.³² This narrative impedes the acknowledgment of past and ongoing injustices, a fundamental precondition for any genuine reconciliation effort.

The Taliban's stance has undoubtedly stalled prospects for reconciliation, yet the roots of Afghanistan's divisions extend far beyond the current regime.

7. Unacknowledged Violence and Historical Injustice

Afghanistan has never implemented a comprehensive process of truth-telling or acknowledgment for victims of violence and discrimination. The absence of formal recognition, whether through truth commissions, memorialization, or public apologies, has fueled intergenerational resentment and hindered reconciliation. Communities remain locked in cycles of blame and mistrust, with historical wounds left to fester.

A powerful illustration of this tension emerged in 2017, when the High Peace Council convened a national consultation on peace, bringing together political leaders and civil society representatives. Among the participants was Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, leader of *Hezb-i-Islami* political faction, a former military commander widely held responsible for much of the destruction in Kabul and the deaths of thousands during the civil war of 1992-1996 and the early years of the republic. He was also held high among his disciples for his motto of Jihad against "international occupation" in Afghanistan. Hekmatyar signed a peace agreement with the Republic in September 2016, under which he was granted immunity in exchange for peace. The hope was that Hekmatyar could influence Taliban commanders who once operated under his banner and show the group that a peaceful solution to the conflict is possible. It was a gesture of goodwill by the government for peace, especially the High Peace Council, and was also welcomed by the United States.³³ During his speech at the agreement signing ceremony, Hekmatyar called upon the Taliban to follow his example of entering into an Afghan-led talk and not provide an excuse for further presence of the USA in Afghanistan.³⁴ Having signed the peace agreement with the government, Hekmatyar attended the High Peace Council meeting in 2017 as a symbol of political reconciliation.

During the event, Mary Akrami, then head of the *Afghan Women's Network (AWN)*, which was one of the country's most respected women's organizations, publicly addressed Hekmatyar. With tears in her eyes, she recounted that he had been responsible for her mother's death, yet she was willing to

³² Farid Ahmad Atifi, "Omari: There Are No Differences Among Senior Officials of the Islamic Emirate," *Tolo News* (Afghanistan), February 4, 2025. <https://tolonews.com/fa/afghanistan-192913>.

³³ Khalid Mafton, "Afghanistan's Hekmatyar Gets Peace Deal Mixed Reaction," *Voice of America*, September 23, 2016, <https://www.voanews.com/a/afghanistan-hekmatyar-peace-deal/3522105.html>

³⁴ Borhan Osman, "Peace With Hekmatyar: What Does It Mean for Battlefield and Politics?," *Afghanistan Analysts Network*, September 29, 2016, <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/reports/war-and-peace/peace-with-hekmatyar-what-does-it-mean-for-battlefield-and-politics/>

forgive him for the sake of peace. She appealed to him to acknowledge the suffering of ordinary Afghans. Participants from civil society and the Peace Council, particularly women, commended Akrami's courage in confronting a powerful warlord and breaking the silence surrounding past injustices. It was one of the rare instances in Afghanistan's reconciliation efforts in which a victim and a perpetrator sat at the same table. Hekmatyar, however, offered no remorse in response and instead continued to assert political power and seek greater authority within the government.

Such encounters underscore the fragile moral foundations of Afghanistan's reconciliation processes, wherein victims are often expected to extend forgiveness in the absence of acknowledgment, remorse, or accountability from perpetrators. The persistent lack of truth-telling and transitional justice mechanisms has entrenched the perception that peace agreements in Afghanistan have historically prioritized political expediency over moral and legal accountability, as evidenced by the Geneva, Bonn, and Doha agreements. The government's expectation that Hekmatyar's reintegration would moderate insurgent activity or reduce Taliban-led violence proved misguided, as subsequent developments demonstrated both the continuation of conflict and the normalization of impunity for high-profile offenders. During the agreement ceremony, I read the statement on behalf of the High Peace Council (HPC), a symbolic act in a room dominated by Hezb-i-Islami members and other former Jihadi leaders, thereby asserting inclusion through the presence of a Hazara woman who represents Afghanistan's pluralistic aspirations. Yet for many observers, the episode illustrated a broader truth: reconciliation without acknowledgment or accountability risks perpetuating structural injustice rather than fostering genuine peace.

8. Suppression of Civil Society and Local Initiatives

Under Taliban rule, civil society organizations have been systematically restricted as part of a deliberate effort to eliminate public oversight and accountability. Interviewees emphasized that the Taliban view civil society as a direct threat because it functions as a watchdog demanding transparency, questioning authority, and exposing abuse. These roles fundamentally contradict the Taliban's autocratic governance model, which depends on unchallenged authority and the suppression of dissent.

Participants noted that the Taliban are particularly wary of empowered and organized communities. Once citizens gain the capacity to mobilize, articulate grievances, and engage collectively, the Taliban's ability to exert control through coercion is significantly weakened. Civil society, therefore, represents not only critique but a long-term constraint on authoritarian power.

Interviewees also highlighted Afghanistan's experience over the past two decades, during which civil society, despite its limitations, played a meaningful role in service delivery, local mediation, women's empowerment, and accountability. This period fostered civic awareness and normalized public questioning of authority. According to participants, the Taliban seek to weaken or dismantle civil

society precisely to prevent the revival of these practices and lessons.

As a result, independent community-led peace initiatives, including dialogue forums, cultural programs, and women-led reconciliation efforts, are now prohibited or forced underground. There are no inclusive structures that allow civil society actors to collaborate, share strategies, or influence policy. Without these connective networks, local-level reconciliation efforts remain fragmented, isolated, and vulnerable, significantly undermining bottom-up peacebuilding and social cohesion.

9. Fragmented Social Cohesion and Inter-Group Relations

More than four decades of armed conflict have eroded trust among Afghanistan's diverse communities living both inside and outside Afghanistan, embedding mistrust and hostility into the fabric of everyday life. Many communities view the Republic-era governing authorities with suspicion, shaped by a history of political manipulation and unfulfilled promises regarding representation and development, and cite corruption as a primary issue.³⁵ In almost all consultation meetings on the situation of Afghanistan with country representatives in the United States, Afghan women in the diaspora are considered by ambassadors or officials as not capable of representing Afghan women.

The legacy of violence has been cumulative, with each political era adding new layers of division. The Soviet invasion in 1979 and the years that followed, during which the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) ruled till 1992, disputes over the Soviet-backed regime sparked deep ideological rifts, splitting communities and even families along political lines. These divisions often persisted long after the immediate conflict, shaping patterns of alliance and enmity. During the Mujahideen era, 1992-1996, political struggles became increasingly ethnically driven, with civil war pitting armed groups against each other along ethnic lines.

The Taliban's first regime (1996–2001) saw targeted persecution of ethnic and religious minorities like Hindus, Sikhs, Uzbeks, most notably the Hazaras and Shias,³⁶ intensifying grievances by the people on past persecution and leaving deep scars. Such acts of violence reinforced perceptions of existential threat among minority communities. In the post-2001 Republic, the centralization of political power in Kabul, often in ways perceived as ethnically imbalanced by non-Pashtun political leaders, generated resentment toward the state. Unequal access to political influence, resources, and development opportunities fueled distrust, as rural communities frequently viewed Kabul's policies as disconnected from their lived realities. One such example is the Enlightenment Movement or the TUTAP protests in 2016, which exemplify local (especially Hazara-led) mobilization, arguing that

³⁵ Author's personal experience from interacting with people and reading social media accounts daily.

³⁶ "After capturing Mazar-i Sharif on August 8, 1998, Taliban forces carried out a systematic killing campaign targeting ethnic Hazaras. Thousands of civilians, men, women, and children, were executed, and bodies were left rotting in the streets. Witnesses reported that Taliban soldiers went door to door, pulling out Hazara men for summary execution." Human Rights Watch. *The Massacre in Mazar-i Sharif*. New York: Human Rights Watch, November 1998. <https://www.hrw.org/legacy/reports98/afghan/>.

the central government's decision-making and infrastructure routing ignored underserved provinces (e.g., Bamyan) and regional demands.³⁷ Another example is the 2020 uprising in Ghor province, which documents local grievances that the central government had neglected development in Ghor for years, prompting sustained protests and demands for roads and services.³⁸

During my tenure as Deputy High Peace Council, I interacted with people from various provinces in Afghanistan, including many villages, where revenge became normalized as a socially accepted form of justice. It was not uncommon for one son in a family to serve in the ranks of the Taliban, while another served in the Afghan National Army, turning local disputes into microcosms of the national conflict. Unequal access to education further compounded these divisions. Many Taliban fighters, educated in radical madrasas in Pakistan, developed deep suspicion toward urban, educated Afghans, whom they often perceived as culturally alien. As Dr. Sayed Askar Mosavi emphasized, “We have to create platforms where people can talk, share grievances, and listen to each other. That is how trust can be rebuilt.”³⁹ Without such spaces for dialogue, historical grievances remain unaddressed, and opportunities for reconciliation are lost. The impact of conflict on inter-group relations is therefore not merely a matter of political disagreement. It is a deeply personal, emotional legacy of injustice and exclusion that continues to shape Afghan society today. Therefore, reconciliation and peace-building should be a result of both top-down and bottom-up approaches.

The following analysis of the interviews further elaborates on these challenges and offers recommendations.

10. Analysis

10.1. Conceptualizing Peace: From Absence of War to Positive Transformation

One recurring theme was the definition of peace itself. Twelve of fifteen interviewees consistently rejected the notion of peace as simply the absence of war, emphasizing instead that peace must encompass broader social, moral, and structural dimensions. Their conceptions resonate with Galtung's notion of positive peace and Lederach's idea of conflict transformation, emphasizing that sustainable peace in Afghanistan requires addressing both structural and relational dimensions of conflict.

The analysis identified five interrelated yet analytically distinct ways in which participants

³⁷ Thomas Ruttig, “Power to the People (2): The TUTAP Protests,” *Afghanistan Analysts Network*, May 16, 2016, <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/reports/economy-development-environment/power-to-the-people-2-the-tutap-protests/>.

³⁸ *Placating Ghor, For Now: 10-days Protest Pushed the Government to Respond*, *Afghanistan Analysts Network*, February 5, 2020, <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/reports/economy-development-environment/placating-ghor-for-now-10-days-protest-pushed-the-government-to-respond/>.

³⁹ Interview with Sayed Askar Mosawi, academic, conducted by the author, 2025.

conceptualized peace. While these categories naturally overlap, reflecting the holistic nature of peace, they are distinguished here by their primary emphasis: justice and equality (structural), dignity and recognition (moral), social cohesion and reconciliation (relational), governance and stability (institutional), and development and opportunity (material). Together, they illustrate that for Afghan experts, peace is not a singular outcome but a multidimensional process encompassing justice, rights, and human flourishing.

10.2. Peace as Justice and Structural Equality

Most participants described peace as a condition in which justice, fairness, and equality prevail, alongside the protection of rights and the elimination of discrimination, particularly gender-based discrimination. As Anwar-ul-Haq Ahadi noted, “the leadership of a country... should bring justice and equality among the people... how can we reconcile them on the village level?”⁴⁰ Dr. Sima Samar similarly stressed that “peace will not be sustainable without justice... Justice is to acknowledge people’s pain.”⁴¹ Fatema Amiri added, “Justice means... equal opportunity for all people, like for women and men.”⁴² For many, silencing the guns was not enough; peace required tangible justice, dignity, and everyday security that protects all citizens equally. Mawlawi Saleem considered justice and peace to be necessary elements in tandem. “Until justice is implemented, there will be no peace.”⁴³ Others deepened this understanding by linking justice to daily life and opportunity. Mariam Durani described peace without justice as a “false calm,”⁴⁴ while interviewee-2 defined justice as “equal access to education, safety, and respect.”⁴⁵ These perspectives underscore that for Afghans, justice is not abstract legality but lived equality, what Galtung calls the dismantling of structural violence. Interviewee-2 expanded the definition of peace to include basic human security, education, and gender equality, rights she described as “systematically denied.” Ehsan Zia proposed a more profound cultural shift: peace must become “a daily practice,” requiring Afghans to unlearn the “culture of violence” embedded in attitudes and language.⁴⁶

Across interviews, justice emerged as the single most critical precondition for sustainable peace. While theoretical frameworks assume justice can be institutionalized, the Afghan experience shows that political interference and elite bargaining often undermine such mechanisms. Interviewees distinguished between *transitional justice*, short-term, often symbolic measures, and *transformative*

⁴⁰ Interview with Anwar ul Haq Ahadi, former Minister of Finance, conducted by the author, 2025.

⁴¹ Interview with Dr. Sima Samar, former Chair, Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission, conducted by the author, 2025.

⁴² Interview with Fatema Amiri, a conflict victim and human rights advocate, conducted by the author, 2025.

⁴³ Interview with Mawlawi Saleem, religious scholar and former member of the High Peace Council, conducted by the author, 2025.

⁴⁴ Interview with Mariam Durani, civil society leader and women’s empowerment practitioner, conducted by the author, 2025.

⁴⁵ Interview with anonymous interviewee (interviewee 2), civil society leader and peace activist, conducted by the author, 2025.

⁴⁶ Interview with Ehsan Zia, former Minister of Rural Rehabilitation and Development, conducted by the author, 2025.

justice that reforms systems and addresses root causes. Maryam Safi explained: “Justice means having a system that is transparent, equitable, inclusive... based on the rule of law.”⁴⁷ Mirwais Balkhi argued that “any aspect of the society has to be granted at least the structural justice,” adding, “I am for transformative justice... justice must be incorporated into legal process, constitution, daily practice, and political structure.”⁴⁸ These perspectives reflect a consensus that symbolic or time-bound justice processes cannot address structural violence, and that the absence of such reform has led to the relapse into peace in past efforts.

10.3. Peace as Human Dignity and Recognition

Samar, Akbari⁴⁹, Amiri, Saleem, Balkhi, and Safi defined peace in moral and cultural terms, centering on dignity, rights, identity, and respect. They associated peace with being recognized as equal members of society, free from humiliation or exclusion. For these participants, peace entails governance systems that affirm the worth of individuals and communities, particularly marginalized groups. Durani and interviewee-2, speaking from within Afghanistan, extended this view to the right to exist and act as equal citizens despite repression. Dignity thus becomes both a personal condition and a political statement, an ethical foundation for peacebuilding where recognition of suffering and inclusion restore human value.⁵⁰

10.4. Peace as Social Cohesion and Reconciliation

Interviewees emphasized the relational dimension of peace, highlighting the need to heal past wounds, rebuild trust, and foster relationships that can withstand political tensions and conflict triggers.⁵¹ Healing fractured relationships and restoring trust were central themes across both interview rounds. Early respondents highlighted the need for dialogue, forgiveness, and acknowledgment of harm across ethnic and regional divides, echoing Lederach’s conception of reconciliation as the restoration of relationships. Some practitioners offered concrete examples: Interviewee-1 cited the 2023 “Bridge of Friendship” initiative between Hazara and Pashtun communities, a significant example of community-led reconciliation.⁵² The “Bridge of Friendship” initiative was launched in December 2023 between Jaghori District in Ghazni Province and Khak-e-Afghan District in Zabul Province, within the Hicha region. Hazaras and Pashtuns both live in the same region. This initiative was established to address a long-standing conflict between Pashtun and Hazara communities. The origins of hostility in this area trace back many years, notably to the killing of Tabasum and her companions, which had deepened mistrust and intercommunal resentment. On October 13, 2015, armed militants abducted seven Hazara

⁴⁷ Interview with Maryam Safi, Director, DROPS, conducted by the author, 2025.

⁴⁸ Interview with Mirwais Balkhi, former Minister of Education and peace and reconciliation expert, conducted by the author, 2025.

⁴⁹ Interview with Farkhunda Akbari, Women, Peace and Security advocate, conducted by the author, 2025.

⁵⁰ Interviews with Samar, Akbari, Amiri, Balkhi, Safi, Durrani, and Interviewee 2, conducted by the author, 2025.

⁵¹ Data from interviews conducted by the author, 2025.

⁵² Interview with an anonymous civil society peace practitioner (Interviewee 1), conducted by the author inside Afghanistan, 2025.

civilians, including two women, two boys, and a nine-year-old girl named Shukria Tabassum⁵³, in Ghazni while they were traveling on the Kabul-Kandahar highway. Between November 6 and 8, the militants executed all seven individuals, including the children, by slitting their throats brutally with kite threads. Their bodies were subsequently left at a hospital in the Zabul Valley. This incident led to significant protests in Kabul, collectively known as the Tabassum Movement, which called for greater accountability and stronger protection for the Hazara community. ISIL-KP claimed responsibility for these killings but this has caused mistrust between Hazara and Pashtun communities in the region.

Initially, the “Bridge of Friendship” was received with skepticism and even ridicule. Local narratives portrayed it as a superficial gesture, with some suggesting that Pashtuns benefited from a bridge constructed through Hazara efforts, while their livestock damaged Hazara farmland and their apricot trees were later cut down. However, over time, the initiative evolved into a meaningful mechanism of reconciliation. It fostered dialogue, mutual understanding, and social contact between the two communities, gradually transforming hostility into cooperation. Participants noted that many Pashtuns expressed remorse for past actions, and that Hazara residents later proposed building a library for their Pashtun brothers—an act symbolizing moral restoration and the consolidation of peace through shared community development.

Durani affirmed that trust in mediators and inclusive participation determine the success of such efforts. While all agreed on the moral necessity of reconciliation, they warned that localized efforts often remain “micro-zones of calm”, fragile without institutional backing or national recognition. This underscores Lederach’s argument that sustainable peace depends on connecting grassroots relationships to top-level political processes. These complementary visions frame reconciliation not simply as a political settlement but as a transformation of values and relationships. They underscore that any sustainable peace process must integrate justice and inclusion as foundational, not secondary, objectives.⁵⁴

10.5. Peace as Governance and Stability

Good governance, rule of law, and accountable leadership were consistently described as the structural backbone of sustainable peace. Interviewees saw the absence of legitimate institutions as both a cause and symptom of conflict. Shah Mahmood Miakhel observed that “justice cannot be achieved without good governance... otherwise peace cannot be sustained.”⁵⁵ Similarly, Zia drew on his experience with the National Solidarity Program to show how Community Development Councils (CDCs) fostered trust and representation at the village level, offering a blueprint for institutionalized participation. Respondents

⁵³ Afghanistan Memory Home, “Abduction and Killing of Shukria Tabassum and Six Hazara Civilians in Zabul (2015),” Afghanistan Human Rights and Democracy Organization, accessed January 5, 2026, <https://afghanistanmemoryhome.org/fa/entity/bm7tjwli46m>.

⁵⁴ Interview with Durrani, 2025.

⁵⁵ Interview with Shah Mahmood Miakhel, former Minister of Interior and peace expert, conducted by the author, 2025.

agreed that when local governance structures are responsive and linked to national frameworks, they strengthen citizens' trust. However, Afghanistan's history of elite capture and international dependency has often reduced these institutions to technical rather than political platforms. Zia believes that if the community development councils (CDCs) under the NSP and its offspring, the Citizens' Charter Program, were used for peacebuilding, Afghanistan could achieve better peacebuilding mechanisms and outcomes.⁵⁶

10.6. Peace as Development and Opportunity

Finally, many participants linked peace to economic and social opportunity, emphasizing access to education, employment, and social mobility as preconditions for lasting stability. They saw poverty and exclusion as drivers of conflict and believed that expanding opportunities—especially for youth and women—would reinforce peaceful relations and strengthen social cohesion. Peace, in this view, is sustained when citizens can envision and pursue better futures within a fair and functioning system. Amiri remarked that “education changes everything,” framing it as both a means of preventing violence and a form of healing. Interviewee-2, Durrani, and Interviewee-1 reinforced this connection, arguing that visible “peace dividends”, employment, learning, and social mobility, cultivate a sense of shared progress that anchors peace in everyday life.⁵⁷

Taken together, these five dimensions reveal that Afghan experts conceive of peace as a multifaceted and interdependent process. While justice, dignity, reconciliation, governance, and development overlap, each represents a distinct sphere of peacebuilding activity. Their convergence reflects the broader notion of *positive peace* (Galtung, 1969) and of *elicitive peacebuilding* (Lederach, 1997), in which structural transformation, moral recognition, and participatory governance are mutually reinforcing pillars of sustainable peace in Afghanistan.

11. Transformative Peacebuilding: Inclusion, Local Participation, and Reconciliation Under Constraint

11.1. Inclusion and Local Reconciliation

Participants agreed that exclusion from peace processes, especially of women, ethnic minorities, and grassroots actors, undermines legitimacy. Samar observed that “the whole process of reconciliation should be inclusive,” criticizing past initiatives, such as the High Peace Council, for lacking commitment and inclusivity. Akbari questioned, “What does inclusion really mean?” noting that tokenistic bodies, such as past peace jirgas, were elite-based and donor-driven, failing to integrate diverse voices meaningfully.⁵⁸

⁵⁶ Interview with Zia, 2025.

⁵⁷ Interview with Amiri, Durrani, Interviewee 2 and anonymous peace activist, 2025.

⁵⁸ Interview with Samar, Saleem and Akbari, 2025.

The interviews revealed tension over whether the inclusion of the Taliban strengthens or weakens peace. While theory generally assumes inclusion enhances legitimacy, the Afghan experience suggests that elite-driven inclusion can remain hollow.

Acknowledgment of suffering was repeatedly cited as essential to reconciliation, echoing Lederach's reconciliation model and truth-and-reconciliation frameworks. Akbari asserted: "Recognition is the magic, but so far I have never seen recognition in the past." Amiri and Miakhel similarly emphasized that recognition, combined with accountable governance and participatory structures, is crucial for establishing trust. Saleem, however, stressed the issue of forgiveness.⁵⁹ He believed that without forgiveness for past acts, a society cannot enter into a process of reconciliation. Disagreements persist over whether formal processes (e.g., truth commissions) or informal, local mechanisms are more effective in Afghanistan's context. However, the Hekmatyar–Akrami encounter, discussed earlier in this paper, starkly demonstrates that without recognition, even formal peace remains emotionally hollow and socially fragile.

Interviewees also identified education and sustained dialogue as both preventive and restorative tools for peace. Amiri remarked: "The only way is to speak, commemorate, educate... education changes everything," adding that forgiveness is possible "if they change... bring justice, rights to education/work/equality."

Several participants argued for community-led reconciliation, emphasizing the role of local shuras, grassroots women's networks, and village-level initiatives in addressing the root causes of conflict. Afghan communities have long-standing traditions of local dispute resolution; however, formal peace processes have often relegated these mechanisms to symbolic consultations after key decisions have already been made. This disconnect has limited their effectiveness and undermined the legitimacy of national peace efforts. Matin Bek⁶⁰ emphasized that decentralization must be both cultural and administrative, allowing communities to govern through their own locally grounded institutions. He argued that empowering local actors to manage affairs in accordance with their traditions and social structures would strengthen accountability and make peacebuilding more responsive to Afghanistan's diverse realities.

Durrani, Interviewee-2, Zia, and Interviewee-1 recognized local reconciliation as both essential and fragile in the current Afghan context. For Interviewee-1, local peacebuilding remains "impactful and realistic" when organized through coherent networks supported by national or international institutions. Drawing on examples from Bamyan and Ghazni provinces, such as the 2023 "Bridge of Friendship" between Hazara and Pashtun communities, he demonstrated that well-facilitated dialogue can transform hostility into coexistence when mediators are perceived as neutral, and communities assume ownership of outcomes. Durani similarly linked success to trust and inclusivity, noting that reconciliation "depended on how much people trusted the mediator and their neutrality." Her experience in local mediation showed

⁵⁹ Interview with Saleem, 2025.

⁶⁰ Interview with Matin Bek, former Director General of the Independent Directorate for Local Governance and peace negotiator, conducted by the author, 2025.

that when all social groups are represented, and government institutions provide minimal support, dialogue can yield tangible social peace. However, she emphasized that such peace is contingent on broader political stability, a condition rarely met in Afghanistan. For Interviewee-2, the necessity of reconciliation has only intensified since the Taliban takeover. She described a “deep distance between people and the current government” and argued that reconciliation is “for the survival of Afghanistan itself.” Still, she viewed its feasibility as dependent on the empowerment of community-level peacebuilders who can operate even in restrictive environments. Together, these accounts indicate that localized peacebuilding is feasible and socially legitimate, but its endurance depends on external recognition, political space, and resource support. Without these, local peace remains episodic, producing “micro-zones of calm” rather than sustained reconciliation.⁶¹

Several local cases illustrate both the potential and limitations of community-based reconciliation efforts. Interviewee-1 recounted several disputes from Bamyan and Ghazni provinces. The first occurred in Naitaq in 2022, where tensions arose between villages over access to an agricultural water source. Naitaq, located in Yakawlang district of Bamyan Province, comprises fourteen villages. A dispute over water distribution among twelve of these villages persisted for nearly a year. In one incident, local authorities sought assistance from Taliban soldiers operating without uniforms, who reportedly displayed their weapons to intimidate residents. Although the situation nearly escalated into violence, it was ultimately resolved through mediation and dialogue facilitated by neutral local elders and influential community figures.

A second case, in Chaman village of Yakawlang in early spring 2023, centered on the construction of a road intended to pass through two villages inhabited by Hazara and Sadat communities. During this dispute, cold weapons were used, and one individual was injured. Despite multiple mediation attempts, reconciliation efforts failed because neither side was genuinely willing to compromise. As a result, the road was never built, and tensions between the Hazara and Sadat communities persisted. According to participants, the Sadat side benefited from the influence of certain local government and intelligence officials, whose biased interference obstructed a fair resolution.

In a third case from Malistan District in Ghazni Province, a dispute between Kuchi nomads and local villagers resulted in a comparatively positive outcome. Since 1991 (1369 SH), conflicts between the Hazara and Kuchi communities had typically been resolved through negotiations led by local elders. However, following the Taliban takeover in 2021, Kuchi communities began demanding compensation for livestock losses incurred in previous years. In response, a dispute resolution commission was established between the Kuchi and Hazara villagers. This process resulted in compensation payments by Hazara villages. Interviewees noted that Kuchis were able to leverage the Taliban as a source of power and coercion over Hazara communities, resulting in Hazaras bearing a disproportionate share of the reconciliation costs, amounting to approximately USD 280,000. This imbalance was attributed to the monopoly of power by one ethnic group and the absence of Hazara representation in local governance

⁶¹ Interview with Durrani, Interviewee 2, Zia, and Interviewee 1, 2025.

structures. Interviewees emphasized that even limited Hazara representation at the provincial or central level could have reduced this burden. Nevertheless, the communities ultimately prioritized peace over procedural fairness, opting for stability rather than prolonged confrontation.

In contrast, reconciliation efforts between Kuchi groups and villagers in Behsud and Daimirdad districts, as well as in Panjab district of Bamyan Province, were unsuccessful. These processes were undermined by the interference of politicians and land mafias. Although some of these actors served nominally on mediation committees, they acted not as neutral facilitators but as representatives of their own factions. This partisanship prevented meaningful resolution, as each side sought to shape outcomes in its own favor.

An illustrative example from Bamyan Province further demonstrates the role of community-led mediation. Tensions emerged between two local government officials—Abdul Salam Sarhadi, the current governor of Bamyan, a Pashtun, and Sediqullah Shaheen, the provincial security chief, a Tajik. Their intense political rivalry deepened administrative divisions and exacerbated the daily challenges faced by ordinary citizens, as governance became increasingly politicized and inefficient. In response, a coalition of community representatives from Hazara (Shia) and Pashtun (Sunni) groups mobilized to advocate for peace and cooperation. They traveled to Kabul and met with Taliban officials at the Ministry of Borders and Tribal Affairs. In a rare display of solidarity, Hazara representatives advocated for Tajiks, while Tajik representatives advocated for Hazaras. As they explained to officials, it was the people of Bamyan, not political elites, who bore the costs of conflict and administrative rivalry. This episode illustrates how local communities often transcend elite divisions in their pursuit of justice and administrative fairness.⁶²

Participants consistently emphasized that inclusive, transparent, and independently monitored dialogue processes can serve as genuine connectors between divided communities; however, when power monopolies and exclusionary practices dominate, such mechanisms risk reproducing the very injustices they are meant to address, potentially reigniting patterns of violence and mistrust reminiscent of the civil war of the 1990s.⁶³

Durani provided another illustrative example from 2012 in Zhari district, following the clearance of armed opposition from the area. She recalled:

“As part of the provincial council, we met with religious scholars and elders, who raised concerns about the unfair distribution of resources and development projects. Gradually, we began building trust through dialogue. We sought to normalize relations and initiated programs, including literacy and sewing classes for women. Over time, women from this community, some of whom had links to the Taliban, began participating in these programs. Because trust had been established, they were even willing to take photographs with us, on the condition that the images not be shared on social media. Unfortunately, due to the lack of political stability, this process was not

⁶² Interview with Interviewee 1, 2025.

⁶³ Interview data, 2025.

sustainable.”⁶⁴

11.2. Linking Local Dialogue to National Political Settlements

A consistent theme across interviews was the failure of past peace processes to institutionalize links between community dialogues and national decision-making. Interviewee-1 stressed that while local agreements can create relative stability, they remain “very fragile and short-lived” without legal recognition and monitoring mechanisms. He proposed documentation, media oversight, and inclusion of local representatives in national councils as concrete bridging mechanisms.

Zia advanced a complementary institutional vision. Drawing on his experience with Afghanistan’s Community Development Councils (CDCs) under the National Solidarity Program, he argued that these bodies built trust, accountability, and representation across villages. For Zia, the CDC model illustrates how participation and ownership at the grassroots can lay the foundation for national reconciliation, provided that governments treat them as political, not merely developmental actors. They could be linked institutionally to national structures in the center of the provinces and capital.

Durani supported this view, observing that CDCs “had more organized election systems” and could have served as bridges to national policymaking if elections had been transparent and legally protected. By contrast, the provincial councils where she served were politicized and vulnerable to elite interference.

Across interviews, then, there was a shared recognition that bottom-up initiatives must be institutionally connected to national peace infrastructures. When such vertical linkages are absent, community reconciliation risks remaining isolated, unable to influence the macro-political environment or protect its outcomes from reversal.⁶⁵

Masoom Stanekzai cited the Afghanistan Peace and Reintegration Program (APRP)⁶⁶ as an example that illustrates both the potential and the limitations of hybrid peacebuilding models and of combined community-level engagement with elite-driven political processes.⁶⁷ At the local level, the program demonstrated that broad-based inclusion, through provincial peace committees involving elders, ulema, women, youth, and peace activists, can generate initial momentum and measurable security dividends. The reintegration of approximately 18,000–20,000 Taliban fighters and commanders, alongside localized reductions in violence and the implementation of peace-district projects, underscores the effectiveness of bottom-up mechanisms when adequately resourced and politically

⁶⁴ Interview with Durrani, 2025.

⁶⁵ Interview data, 2025.

⁶⁶ The Afghanistan Peace and Reintegration Program was a three-phase program (2010-2015) by the Afghan Government and funded by donors. It aimed to promote peace and reconciliation and integrate combatants and insurgents into society through community development, security, and governance. It was created and mandated by the 2010 Peace Jirga.

⁶⁷ Written notes shared with the author by Stanekzai, March 2025

supported. However, APRP also reveals the fragility of such gains in the absence of coherent top-down political alignment. Resistance by both Afghan and international actors to engaging Taliban leadership at a critical moment prevented the translation of local reintegration into a broader political settlement. This disconnect was exacerbated by policy incoherence between U.S. and Afghan leadership, including actions that undermined trust, such as the detention of program participants by coalition forces. Later attempts at discreet engagement with the Taliban further exposed divisions and were weakened by the mismanagement of diplomatic openings. Regional interference compounded these structural weaknesses. Pakistan’s strategic calculus, centered on preserving influence in Afghanistan through the Taliban, actively constrained the peace process and contributed to internal political fractures within the republic. Moreover, the announcement of international troop withdrawal without linkage to political benchmarks enabled the Taliban to regroup and expand support networks. Russia, India, and Pakistan, now among the Taliban’s most active interlocutors, were opposed to talks during the APRP period, reinforcing a fragmented external environment that constrained the program’s capacity to evolve from reintegration into settlement. Finally, corruption and elite capture at the local level eroded the credibility of reintegration efforts, illustrating how governance failures can hollow out peace initiatives from within.

11.3. Ethnic Divides and the Politics of Representation

Interviewees diverged on whether local reconciliation can transcend Afghanistan’s entrenched ethnic divisions. Interviewee-1 rejected the assumption that ethnic hostility runs deep among ordinary Afghans, arguing that “ethnic and religious gaps mostly do not exist among people; political elites inflame these.” He recalled instances of inter-ethnic solidarity in Bامyān and Kabul, where families from different sects celebrated religious ceremonies together despite national polarization. Zia echoed this view, emphasizing that “grass-roots people do not have animosity; it was the political elites who promoted poisonous ideas of hatred.” He warned, however, that social media now amplifies divisive narratives and, without deliberate peace education, may entrench digital polarization. Interviewee-2, while agreeing that communities remain resilient, offered a more cautious reading: ethnic identity continues to shape participation and outcomes in reconciliation efforts. She argued that processes are “always more effective when representatives from all ethnic groups are present,” and that exclusion or tokenism perpetuates local hierarchies. This range of views suggests that local dialogue can mitigate, but not erase, ethnic and sectarian divides. It can rebuild everyday coexistence but cannot substitute for the political inclusion and power-sharing arrangements required at the national level.⁶⁸

11.4. Traditional Jirgas/Shuras (People’s Councils) and the Question of Legitimacy

The role of jirgas (councils) elicited contrasting evaluations. Interviewee-1 regarded traditional councils as “influential and convincing” instruments in a society lacking legal authority. However, he

⁶⁸ Interviews with Interviewee 2, Zia, and Interviewee 2, 2025.

acknowledged their patriarchal bias: "Women's and youth voices are eliminated"; their participation is merely symbolic. In contrast, both Interviewee-2 and Zia questioned the representativeness of jirgas.⁶⁹ Interviewee-2 observed that these bodies were "politically influenced" and often "not genuine in terms of community support." At the same time, Zia argued that they lack mechanisms for participation and accountability, functioning more as instruments of customary authority than as vehicles for democratic deliberation. These critiques align with broader scholarship that highlights the tension between traditional legitimacy and inclusive participation. The interviews suggest that jirgas retain cultural authority but require structural reform, possibly through integration with elected or mixed-gender community bodies, to function as credible peacebuilding platforms.

11.5. Peacebuilding Under Authoritarian Rule

All respondents acknowledged the immense constraints imposed by the Taliban's authoritarian governance. Interviewee-1 described reconciliation as "very difficult in suffocating conditions" but urged persistence, citing a Sufi proverb: "Useless effort is better than sleep." He proposed leveraging moderate officials and religious references within Islam to reopen avenues for dialogue. Interviewee-2, who remains active in Afghanistan, offered a vivid account of how activists sustain micro-level engagement despite restrictions on movement, assembly, and speech. Women continue to run informal education circles, conduct virtual focus groups, and provide humanitarian coordination through encrypted channels. For her, these acts constitute "parallel social reconciliation processes" that quietly preserve the possibility of civic peace. Durani viewed sustainability as unattainable without political guarantees: community initiatives are easily undermined by armed actors or by the absence of executive protection. Zia added that repression risks producing "unrepresentative, illegitimate governance," which fuels future conflict rather than reconciliation.⁷⁰

Collectively, these testimonies illustrate that peacebuilding under authoritarianism persists as moral resistance rather than political transformation. Dialogue becomes informal, gender-segregated, or digital, yet it remains a crucial social lifeline.

11.6. Governance, Rule of Law, and Participation

There was a broad consensus among interviewees that accountable governance, the rule of law, and functional institutions are essential for achieving and maintaining durable peace. Miakhel noted that "justice cannot be achieved without good governance... otherwise peace cannot be sustained,"⁷¹ while also emphasizing the role of traditional, participatory governance structures in Afghan districts that

⁶⁹ These are councils constituted by village elders and religious leaders that resolve disputes and make decisions, and are separate from CDCs, which are for development purposes. Under the Citizens' Charter Program, an attempt was made to integrate all councils, but the success was not widespread.

⁷⁰ Interview with Durrani and Zia, 2025.

⁷¹ Interview with Miakhel, 2025.

can lend legitimacy to national efforts. However, opinions diverged on whether international intervention strengthens or undermines local governance capacity.

My own experience as governor of Bamyan Province in the mid-2000s reinforced the view that governance can directly contribute to peace by meeting citizens' basic needs. During that time, security was deteriorating across central Afghanistan, particularly along the road connecting Mazar-e-Sharif to Kabul via Baghlan and Bamyan. In the remote district of Tala Barfak in northeastern Baghlan—overlooking the Shikari Valley—poverty and the absence of government services had driven many families to send their children to Pakistani madrasas. The lack of infrastructure and opportunity had also led some residents to resort to banditry and the illegal exploitation of small mines, which in turn threatened the security of neighboring Bamyan. Recognizing that insecurity in one province could easily spill over to another, I proposed a joint meeting between the governors of Bamyan and Baghlan, bringing together local representatives from both sides.⁷²

When I visited Tala Barfak with the joint commission, I was struck by how isolated the district was and how strongly residents expressed their frustration at being neglected by the state. Yet, many also voiced admiration for Bamyan's more participatory and service-oriented governance model, noting how it had helped maintain stability. The joint commission could not bring many tangible changes for the people of Baghlan, but it did reduce incidents on the Bamyan side. Security forces present in Bamyan, at checkpoints, were encouraged to see their governor visiting. It boosted their morale. On the contrary, the governor of Baghlan did not pay much attention to the work of the joint commission. I had visitors from Baghlan province who brought their issues to Bamyan as they did not see anyone helping them on the Baghlan side.

This experience underscored that peace is not only the product of political settlements but also of responsive governance, one that delivers services, builds trust, and makes citizens feel seen and protected by their institutions at the local level.

12. Points of Convergence

12.1. Peace as Justice

Across the interviews, several strong points of convergence emerged, revealing a shared diagnosis of why past peace efforts in Afghanistan failed and of the conditions necessary for a more sustainable reconciliation process. First, justice was universally recognized as a prerequisite for durable peace. Participants, including Samar, Miakhel, Balkhi, Akbari, and Amiri, consistently rejected notions of peace defined solely by the absence of violence. Instead, they linked peace to fairness, equality, accountability, and the protection of rights, arguing that peace processes that sideline justice merely

⁷² Author's personal accounts from 2004-2013 as Governor of Bamyan Province.

postpone conflict rather than resolve it.⁷³ This understanding closely aligns with Galtung’s distinction between negative peace (the absence of direct violence) and positive peace, which entails dismantling structural and cultural violence. Interviewees’ reflections suggest that Afghanistan’s post-2001 settlements prioritized stability and order while leaving intact the injustices that later undermined peace.

12.2. Inclusivity

Second, there was a broad consensus that past peace processes in Afghanistan suffered from a profound inclusivity deficit. As Samar and Akbari observed, reconciliation initiatives were largely elite-driven, with women, ethnic minorities, victims, and grassroots actors relegated to symbolic or consultative roles rather than meaningful participation.⁷⁴ This exclusion not only weakened legitimacy but also deepened mistrust among communities most affected by violence. Such critiques echo Lederach’s argument that elite-centric peacebuilding, when disconnected from society, fails to generate the relational foundations necessary for reconciliation. Interviewees further emphasized that women and young people possess critical social networks that often transcend ethnic, tribal, and regional boundaries—networks that, in many cases, prove more resilient than formal political structures. When meaningfully engaged, these actors can help transform peacebuilding from a narrow political settlement into a broader process of social reconciliation. One illustrative example is the *Mothers for Peace Initiative*, which I founded with the support of the High Peace Council in 2017. The initiative established a network of women across fourteen provinces, creating spaces for sharing grievances and learning from one another, transcending regional and ethnic boundaries. During a 2018 exchange, a participant traveling from Jalalabad to Bamyan reflected on her desire for her province to learn from Bamyan’s governance experience, particularly its role in fostering justice and social cohesion.

12.3. Recognition of past grievances

Third, interviewees converged on the view that mutual recognition and healing are essential components of reconciliation. Akbari, Amiri, and Miakhel emphasized that acknowledging suffering, both individual and collective, is a necessary first step toward rebuilding trust across fractured communities.⁷⁵ The absence of recognition was frequently described as a form of secondary harm, one that reinforces resentment rather than enabling healing. This emphasis reflects Lederach’s relational understanding of reconciliation, in which peace emerges not only through institutional arrangements but through processes that address broken relationships, truth, and moral accountability.

⁷³ Interviews with Samar, Balkhi, Akbari, Amiri, 2025

⁷⁴ Interviews with Samar, Saleem and Akbari, 2025.

⁷⁵ Interviews with Akbari, Amiri, and Miakhel, 2025.

My own experience as a peace negotiator reinforces this finding while also highlighting its persistent neglect in practice. Across successive regimes, grievance handling in Afghanistan has rarely been approached in a comprehensive, neutral, or victim-centered manner. During the Republic period, victims were neither systematically listened to nor meaningfully acknowledged; instead, political expediency often took precedence, with amnesty extended to warlords without parallel recognition of the harms suffered by communities over decades of conflict. A similar pattern was evident during the Doha process, in which political arrangements were negotiated without any serious engagement with past grievances or victim narratives. This dynamic has continued into the present: even within some diaspora forums, I have observed resistance from certain ethnic groups to allowing others to articulate their historical grievances. Rather than fostering reconciliation, such silencing has further entrenched mistrust and intensified conflict narratives.

These experiences underscore a central analytical point: grievance recognition cannot be treated as optional or symbolic. It must be a core component and a precondition of any peace agreement or settlement process. Without mechanisms that allow grievances to be voiced, acknowledged, and addressed in a credible and inclusive manner, peace processes risk reproducing the very resentments they seek to resolve. In Lederach's terms, reconciliation that bypasses recognition fails to repair relationships and instead deepens relational fractures, undermining the prospects for sustainable peace.

12.4. Governance and Rule of Law

Finally, governance emerged as a foundational pillar of peace. Miakhel, Ahadi, and Zia underscored that the rule of law, meaningful participation, and transparency are not merely normative ideals but practical conditions for stability and reconciliation.⁷⁶ Weak governance, they argued, perpetuates impunity and exclusion, eroding public trust and undermining any attempt at societal healing. In this sense, governance failures constitute a form of structural violence, reinforcing Galtung's insight that peace cannot be sustained where institutions systematically reproduce inequality and injustice.

13. Areas of Tension and Divergence

13.1. Diagnosing the Conflict

Despite these areas of agreement, the interviews revealed important tensions, beginning with the lack of consensus on the root causes of Afghanistan's conflict. Balkhi cautioned that "until we do not have consensus on the source of conflict, there will not be any reconciliation in practice."⁷⁷ Interviewees differed in their assessment of the primary drivers of the conflict: political exclusion, ethnic fragmentation,

⁷⁶ Interviews with Miakhel, Ahadi, and Zia, 2025.

⁷⁷ Interview with Balkhi, 2025.

socioeconomic inequality, external intervention, or a combination of these. The absence of a common diagnosis, participants argued, has repeatedly hindered the design of coherent reconciliation strategies.

13.2. Sequencing Justice and Peace

Another key point of divergence concerned the sequencing of justice and peace. Some interviewees argued that peace must come first, providing the stability necessary to pursue justice gradually. Others insisted that justice must be embedded from the outset, warning that postponement risks entrenching impunity and producing fragile, short-lived settlements. This tension reflects a broader debate within peacebuilding theory: while pragmatic approaches emphasize political feasibility, both Lederach and Galtung caution that peace processes that defer justice often reproduce the conditions for renewed violence. The interviews illustrate how this unresolved tension has played out in practice in Afghanistan.

I believe that framing justice and peace as sequential is itself misleading. Rather than being postponed or prioritized in isolation, justice must operate in parallel with peace negotiations and be embedded at every stage of the process. Justice in this sense extends beyond prosecutions to include recognition of victims and minorities in the text of agreements, inclusive composition of negotiation teams, and explicit commitments to rights and accountability. These elements constitute justice not as an outcome deferred to a post-conflict phase, but as a process integral to peacemaking itself. In the Doha negotiations, however, the focus remained narrowly on political and security arrangements, with little attention to victim recognition, minority inclusion, or broader societal justice.

13.3. Top-Down versus Bottom-Up Approaches

A further divide emerged regarding peacebuilding approaches related to the paper's central research question. Some participants emphasized the necessity of top-down, state-led, or elite-driven mechanisms, arguing that without political agreements among power holders, grassroots efforts cannot be sustained. Others contended that durable peace must be rooted in bottom-up, community-driven initiatives that enjoy local legitimacy and address everyday grievances. This divergence aligns with Lederach's peacebuilding pyramid, highlighting the absence of effective vertical integration among grassroots actors, mid-level leaders, and national elites in Afghanistan's past peace efforts.

Drawing on my experience as a peace negotiator at the High Peace Council, I argue that elite consensus alone is insufficient to sustain peace if society at large and different groups do not reconcile at the grassroots level. Although consultations were formally conducted, community perspectives were often treated as procedural requirements rather than as substantive inputs to decision-making. In practice, public views rarely shaped negotiation positions or outcomes. This disconnect was particularly evident during the lead-up to the Doha Agreement, when civil society conducted consultations, yet the agreement had already been signed, leaving little room for genuine societal dialogue.

13.4. Gaps Between Theory and Practice

When the Afghan experience is mapped against contemporary peacebuilding theories, several persistent gaps become apparent. Liberal peace models emphasize the creation of formal institutions; however, in Afghanistan, tokenism and weak political will have undermined their inclusivity and legitimacy. Transitional justice mechanisms were introduced in some instances, but these short-term, symbolic measures failed to evolve into transformative justice capable of addressing structural harms. Theories of reconciliation emphasize the importance of mutual acknowledgment of suffering; however, in practice, such recognition was largely absent from Afghan peace processes.

Similarly, participation often existed in name only. While local governance structures possessed the capacity to contribute meaningfully to peacebuilding, they were underutilized, and decision-making remained concentrated among national elites. These gaps not only weakened the effectiveness of past peace initiatives but also contributed to the fragility of outcomes such as the Doha Agreement, which reproduced many of these shortcomings.

14. Conclusion and Recommendations

This paper asked whether community-based, locally owned peacebuilding approaches can offer a more sustainable path to peace and social cohesion in Afghanistan. Based on fifteen semi-structured interviews with Afghan peace practitioners, former government officials, women's rights leaders, civil society actors, and victims of conflict, the findings suggest that while community-based approaches alone cannot resolve Afghanistan's conflict, they are indispensable to any peace process that seeks durability, legitimacy, and social cohesion. Past peace initiatives failed not because dialogue was absent, but because reconciliation was pursued primarily through elite bargains that were disconnected from societal realities, deferred justice, and excluded those most affected by violence.

Agreements such as the Geneva Accords and the Bonn Agreement reduced open conflict temporarily but left structural grievances unaddressed, allowing violence to re-emerge in new forms. In contrast, community-based peacebuilding, when rooted in acknowledgment of harm, dialogue, and everyday problem-solving, was seen as equipped to address the relational and emotional dimensions of conflict that formal settlements often overlook.

At the same time, the findings caution against romanticizing local peacebuilding. Interviewees emphasized that community-level reconciliation cannot survive in isolation from political structures. Local initiatives remain vulnerable to repression, elite manipulation, and resource constraints when they are not embedded within broader political frameworks. This reinforces John Paul Lederach's argument that sustainable peace requires vertical integration, linking grassroots trust-building with national-level political agreements. In Afghanistan, the absence of such integration meant that top-

down processes lacked legitimacy, while bottom-up efforts remained fragmented and precarious.

Empirical insights from local contexts, including Bamyan and Ghazni, further illustrate how conflict in Afghanistan is experienced as deeply personal and relational, shaped by decades of injustice and exclusion. After 2021, divisions intensified as ideological polarization intersected with long-standing ethnic hierarchies, particularly between Taliban fighters and educated urban communities. These dynamics cannot be resolved through elite negotiations alone. Interviewees consistently argued that reconciliation must be lived in homes, villages, and neighborhoods before it can be declared at national or international forums. Community-based approaches are uniquely positioned to foster this form of lived peace by enabling dialogue, mutual recognition, and incremental trust-building across social divides.

An important implication emerging from the interviews is the need for governments and peacebuilders to pay closer attention to “micro-zones of calm,” localized spaces where violence is reduced, cooperation persists, and social relations remain functional despite broader conflict. These zones often emerge organically through community agreements, informal mediation, shared economic interests, or trusted local leadership. Rather than treating them as isolated or temporary anomalies, interviewees suggested that such micro-zones should be recognized, protected, and institutionally linked to wider peace and development frameworks. Doing so would allow peacebuilding actors to scale what works locally, while grounding national political processes in lived experiences of coexistence.

Critically, strengthening micro-zones of calm requires institutional linkages that bridge peace, development, and political governance. Development interventions, such as service delivery, livelihoods, and local infrastructure, can reinforce trust when aligned with local reconciliation efforts. At the same time, political recognition and legal protections can shield these zones from coercion and collapse. Without such linkages, development risks becoming technocratic and peace efforts symbolic; together, they can create mutually reinforcing pathways toward stability. This insight aligns with Lederach’s emphasis on connecting everyday peace practices with formal political processes, and with Galtung’s call to address structural conditions that sustain positive peace.

The research also reveals why such approaches have remained marginal. Development programs and local governance initiatives, including the National Solidarity Program, possessed significant peacebuilding potential but were primarily oriented toward technical or infrastructural objectives, neglecting social healing and reconciliation. Peace education initiatives and trauma-healing efforts were piloted but never scaled or institutionalized. These missed opportunities underscore that community-based peacebuilding in Afghanistan has not failed; instead, it has rarely been treated as a core strategic investment.

Several policy-relevant implications follow from these findings. Community-based peacebuilding

must be institutionalized rather than treated as ad hoc or symbolic. Village- and district-level forums should be empowered to identify grievances, mediate disputes, and feed into national peace processes in inclusive and locally legitimate ways. Peace education and social healing should be embedded in both formal schooling and community learning spaces. Women's and youth leadership should be supported as transformative forces capable of bridging social divides. Transitional justice must move beyond symbolic measures toward reforms that address structural exclusion. Finally, international actors should recalibrate their engagement to enable Afghan-led priorities, support local agency, and avoid externally imposed timelines and models.

This study does not claim to predict Afghanistan's political trajectory or offer a comprehensive blueprint for peace under current conditions. Its findings are grounded in qualitative evidence and reflect particular perspectives and lived experiences. Nevertheless, the evidence clearly demonstrates that without community-based, locally owned peacebuilding—particularly when anchored in micro-zones of calm and linked institutionally to development and political processes—peace agreements are unlikely to translate into lasting social cohesion.

In sum, the answer to the research question is conditional but firm: community-based peacebuilding can offer a more sustainable path to peace in Afghanistan only when it is treated as central rather than peripheral, scaled through institutional linkages, and integrated with national political and development strategies. Ignoring these lessons risks repeating the cycle of elite agreements, societal exclusion, and renewed conflict that has defined Afghanistan's recent history.

The road to a just and lasting peace in Afghanistan will require the courage to confront these past failures, the commitment to empower communities, and the foresight to integrate grassroots and national strategies into a single, coherent vision for the country's future.



15. List of Interviewees

Interviewee	Role / Background	Gender	Location (at time of interview)	Interview Date
Anwar ul Haq Ahadi	Former Minister of Finance, economist, and political leader	Male	Outside Afghanistan	2025
Dr. Sima Samar	Former Chair, Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission; women's rights advocate	Female	Outside Afghanistan	2025
Interviewee 1	Civil society activist and peace practitioner	Male	Inside Afghanistan	2025
Ehsan Zia	Former Minister of Rural Rehabilitation and Development; governance specialist	Male	Outside Afghanistan	2025
Farkhunda Akbari	Women, Peace and Security (WPS) advocate; civil society leader	Female	Outside Afghanistan	2025
Fatema Amiri	Victim of conflict; human rights advocate	Female	Outside Afghanistan	2025
Interviewee 2	Civil society leader, education and peace activist	Female	Inside Afghanistan	2025
Mariam Durani	Civil society leader; women's empowerment practitioner	Female	Outside Afghanistan	2025
Maryam Safi	Director, DROPS; peace practitioner	Female	Outside Afghanistan	2025
Shah Mahmood Miakhel	Former Minister of Interior and peace expert	Male	Outside Afghanistan	2025
Mirwais Balkhi	Former Minister of Education, peace and reconciliation advisor	Male	Outside Afghanistan	2025

Sayed Askar Mosawi	Academician	Male	Outside Afghanistan	2025
Matin Bek	Former Director General of the Independent Directorate for Local Governance and Peace Negotiator	Male	Outside Afghanistan	2025
Masoom Stanekzai	Chief Negotiator for the Republic and Former Head of APRP	Male	Outside Afghanistan	2025
Mawlawi Ata-ur-Rahman Saleem	Member of the High Peace Council, member of Hezb Jamiat Islami	Male	Outside Afghanistan	2025



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