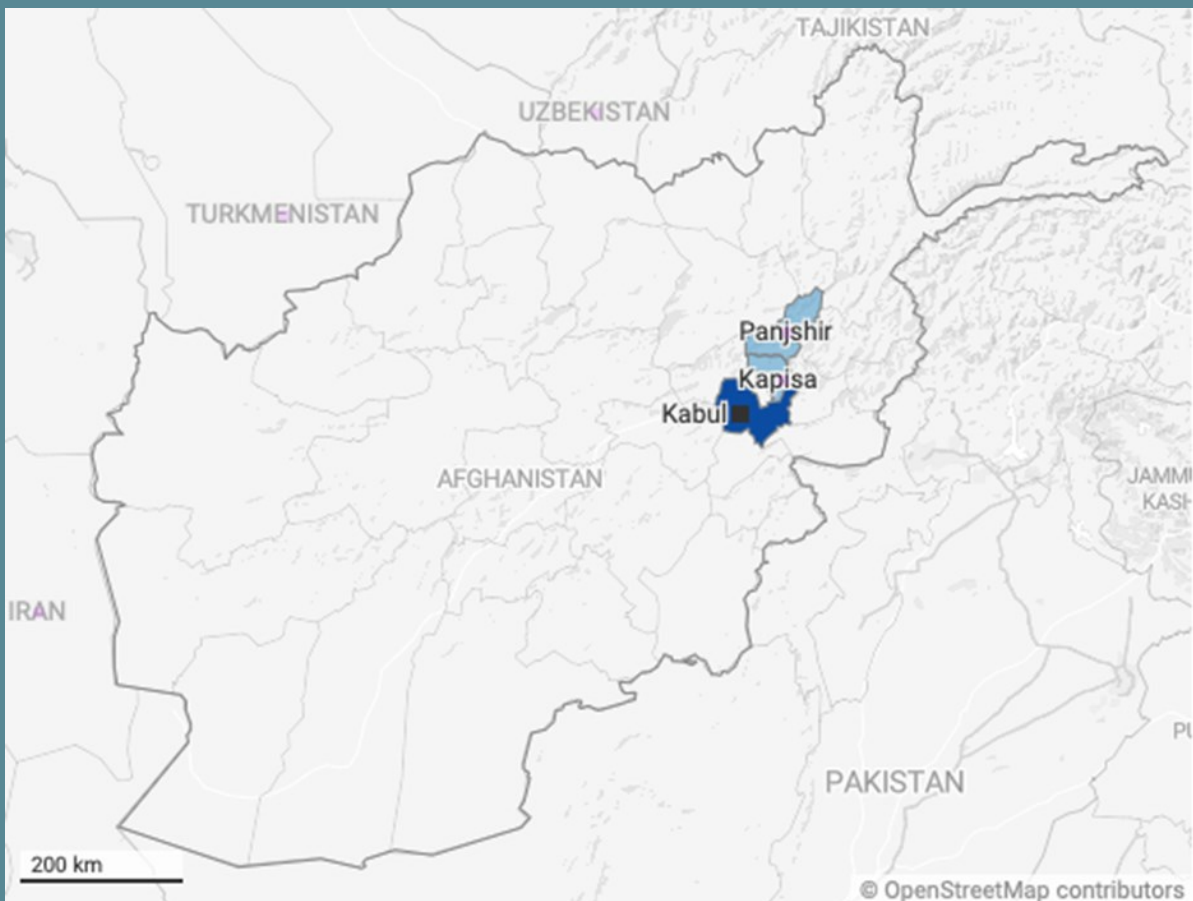




Local Dynamics of Conflict and Peace in the Kabul Region

Findings from a Local Forum for Peace



October 2021

Reaching Out for Peace is a joint project of Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES) Afghanistan, Afghanistan Public Policy Research Organization (APPRO) and Mediothek Afghanistan for Development and Peace Organization (MADPO).

The project is designed to facilitate regular community level exchanges on local impediments to and opportunities for peace in and between eight regional nodes: Kandahar, Herat, Balkh, Badakhshan, Bamiyan, Nangarhar, Khost, and Kabul.

Local forums for peace are held to engage Afghans “where they are” on ways to overcome conflict through dialogue, exchange, and activism. As such, these events encourage active participation at the community level in efforts to build a common vision for peace. Ensuing publications and visual media outputs help to inform sub-national, national, and international stakeholders and provide recommendations for future engagement.

This brief was prepared by Saeed Parto and Martha Le Grand as part of a partnership between FES, MADPO, and APPRO.

On August 2, 2021, a local forum for peace was held in Kabul city, bringing together participants from Kabul province, neighboring Panjshir, and Kapisa. The Kabul forum took place when the Taliban were taking control over vast swathes of the country rapidly. The Taliban officially entered Kabul on August 15, 2021. When finalizing this brief in October 2021, the Taliban had taken control of the entire country and formed their first caretaker government.

The findings outlined below should be taken as a snapshot of a moment within the intra-Afghan peace process, albeit with heightened uncertainty due to the Taliban's rapid territorial advances, which was soon to end with the Taliban entering and taking power in Kabul. An overview of each province's basic demographic, geographic, economic, and conflict features is provided below, followed by an overview of the proceedings from the forum.

Background

Kabul province hosts the largest and most diverse urban population in Afghanistan, concentrated in Kabul city. Kapisa has a small urban population concentrated in Nijrab and Mahmud-i Raqi. All Panjshir inhabitants live in rural dwellings (Table 1 and Figure 1).

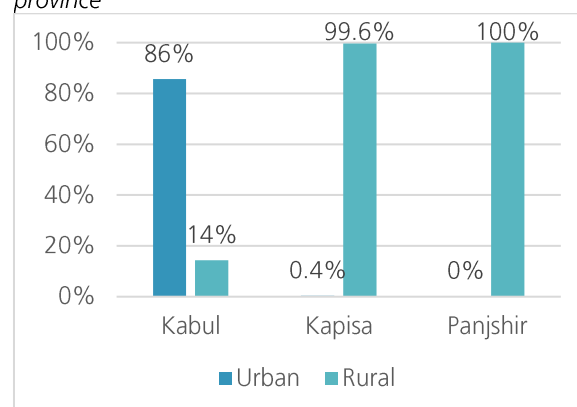
Kabul is the main attracter for the neighboring provinces' informal labor force/migrant labor and the internally displaced families. They come to Kabul to seek relatively better essential services, employment, and security.

Table 1: Population estimates (2020)¹

Province	Total	Urban	Rural
Kabul	5,204,667	4,459,463	745,204
Kapisa	488,298	1,770	486,528
Panjshir	169,926	0	169,926

¹ Demographic estimates are based on NSIA (2021). There are indications actual numbers are higher.

Figure 2: Proportion of urban and rural population per province



Poverty rates in Panjshir and Kapisa are at around 25%. Kabul's poverty rate is estimated at 15%. The average national poverty rate is 52% (UNDP, 2020). However, these figures are debatable as almost half of the urban poor population lives in Kabul city and its outskirts (CSO, 2018).

Until the takeover by the Taliban on September 6, 2021, Panjshir had never fallen to external armed assaults. Until recently, the province had been relatively stable from a security point of view, though very poor.

In recent years and with increasing intensity, Kapisa and Kabul provinces had witnessed fighting between armed opposition groups (AOGs) and the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF).

Kabul province borders Parwan and Kapisa to the northeast, Laghman to the east, Nangarhar to the southeast, Logar to the south, and Wardak to the southwest. The province has 15 districts, including Kabul city, the national capital. The total population of Kabul province is estimated at around 5.4 million, with the vast majority, around 4.6 million, living in Kabul city.

Kabul city has a diverse set of neighborhoods, ranging from the wealthy to the poor, including many displaced families living in extreme poverty. The province attracts large numbers of refugees and internally displaced persons who live in informal settlements in and around Kabul city (CSO, 2018).

Kabul province has the largest share of the population, estimated at around 16% of the national total (Warden, 2019). The primary language used in Kabul is Dari through a significant segment of the population speaks Pashto while smaller segments speak other languages such as Uzbek and Turkmen.

Throughout 2020 and the first half of 2021, insurgent activity and fighting increased in Kabul province, including areas previously reported as safe (OCHA, February 2020; OCHA, July 2020).

While Kabul has been a prime target of attacks, including on civilians, this number has decreased drastically since the agreement between the Taliban and the United States on February 29, 2020. There were, however, two major attacks since the signing of the agreement.

One attack was in May 2020 on a hospital's maternity ward with assailants killing new mothers, infants, and heavily pregnant mothers. The second attack took place a year later, in May 2021, at a girls' school. The Taliban denied involvement in both attacks.

The February 29 agreement has had little or no impact on widespread criminal activity in Kabul. In addition to dealing in drugs, organized criminal gangs frequently carry out robberies, carjackings, and muggings. Fear of becoming victims of these activities prevents many from venturing out after dark (Arab News, January 11, 2020).

Bordering Kabul province to the north, **Kapisa** province borders Parwan to the west, Laghman to the east, and Panjshir to the north. Its capital, Mahmud-i Raqi, is located some 75 km from Kabul city. The population of Kapisa is estimated at around 497,000. Around 68,000 people live in Mahmud-i Raqi, the provincial capital, with the rest living in less densely populated rural districts.

During the few years preceding the complete takeover of the country by the Taliban on August 16, 2021, Kapisa was progressively being affected by increased armed conflict between the Taliban, other AOGs, and the government security forces. The persistent conflict directly affected economic activity and the local population's livelihoods (Ali, 2015).

North of Kapisa, **Panjshir** province borders Baghlan to the west, Parwan to the southwest, Laghman, and Nuristan to the southeast, Badakhshan to the northeast, and Takhar to the north. The provincial capital of Bazarak is 150 km northeast of Kabul.

Almost all of the province is mountainous or semi-mountainous. Panjshir Valley is remote and hard to access. During the first Taliban government between 1996 and 2001, Panjshir was the only province that resisted the Taliban, who ruled the rest of the country except for a few isolated pockets in the north and northeast.

Panjshir has a population of 169,926 living in eight districts. Bazarak, the provincial center, is home to around 22,000. Because of its isolation and being home to the late Ahmad Shah Masoud as a critical national figure, there is a robust and cohesive sense of identity among Panjshiris in and outside Panjshir province (Shah, 2018).

Over the years, the Taliban had expressed their wish to one day control Panjshir due to its strategic importance (Roggio, 2019). The Taliban appear to have realized their wish on September 6, 2021, when multiple sources announced that they had entered Panjshir valley, taken over the provincial capital, Bazarak, and raised the Taliban flag from prominent buildings in the provincial center (BBC, September 7, 2021).

Kabul Region Peace Forum: An Overview

Sixty participants, consisting of 24 women and 36 men, attended the local forum for peace held in Kabul city on August 2, 2021. Among those present were members of local civil society, elders, influential women, local elites, representatives of youth organizations, and local government representatives.



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As with other local peace forums held previously, the participants were divided into groups, with each group being tasked to identify the main

drivers of conflict in their communities. The groups were also tasked to propose ways to address these drivers of conflict to create conditions for sustainable peace.

Conclusions from group discussions were then presented to a panel of two male and two female experts. The panelists consisted of one representative of the Directorate of Women's Affairs from Panjshir province, an advisor to the High Council of Women, a former journalist currently working at Kabul Municipality, and a representative of the State Ministry of Peace.

Participants had the opportunity to reflect and comment on other working groups' presentations and pose questions to the panel members. The intra-Afghan peace process, which had commenced in September 2020, was a recurring theme in all group discussions, group presentations, panelists' responses, and questions from the audience members during the open discussion. Views on peace and the drivers of local conflict identified by the participants are summarized below.

Expectations About Peace

Participants expressed a high degree of pessimism concerning the negotiations between the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and the Taliban.

In the advent of peace, a widely shared expectation was an end to the active conflict. Many expected improved security conditions and stability would likely result in improvements in the economic situation by creating confidence among potential investors, increasing trade, and continued job creation in the public sector, particularly in education and public health.

Less conflict would also result in less internal displacement and thus reduce the pressure on urban infrastructure and services to provide for an increasing number of displaced people taking refuge in urban centers.



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A widely shared sentiment was that the Taliban's presence in the government would mean a more effective implementation of the law and less administrative corruption.

The participants unanimously expected that a government partly or entirely run by the Taliban would undermine the rights of minorities and present high risks of fostering divisions between different segments of the population. Women would be particularly at risk of being removed from the social, political, and economic spheres and becoming more vulnerable to domestic violence.

We have struggled [and] fought for equal rights so that women and men would have the same rights to speak and give their opinion.... It did not come easy, but with hundreds of fights, suffering, and sacrifice. Moreover, today, look at where we are heading. We are going back to the burqa, back to ignorance and stoning, and back to the situation, we experienced 25 years ago. – Female panelist 1.

Another source of concern under a Taliban-dominated government was access to information and fears surrounding threats to freedom of expression for ordinary citizens and the media. Participants also worried that education would be restricted in terms of content and access, particularly for girls and women.

Rights-based civil society actors and organizations would risk losing their legal right to function "because of ideological incompatibilities" with Taliban rules and institutions.

Some participants expected that, far from stabilizing, security would continue to deteriorate regardless of a political settlement through the intra-Afghan peace process. These participants were particularly alarmed by the perspective of increased inter-communal strife fueled by divisions between confessional and ethno-linguistic groups.

Another primary concern was conflict trauma and the institutionalization of violence to resolve various forms of conflict. There was, and would continue to be, a high risk of escalating violence with local powerholders and criminal gangs likely taking advantage of a political transition to seek personal revenge or profit.

Some thought it would be highly improbable that the Taliban fighters would easily give up their weapons or be willing or able to reintegrate into civil life.

Most participants viewed the Constitution of 2004 as a safeguard against a drift towards inter-communal and confessional strife and institutionalized discrimination of women and minorities.

Local Drivers of Conflict

The four most prominent drivers of local conflict identified by participants from the Kabul region forum for peace were:

- Weak economy
- Drug economy
- Inter-communal strife, and
- Lack of the rule of law.

Weak Economy

High rates of unemployment and under-employment have resulted in widespread poverty in both urban and rural settings. The inability of most families to secure livelihoods was notably seen as a cause of young men joining AOGs.



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Addressing widespread poverty would require investment in productive and sustainable economic activity by national and international entities and adequate infrastructure to support it.

Productive, ongoing economic activity in urban centers would need to be strengthened and expanded through broader use of technology, increased access to markets, and increased quality.

Similarly, there is an unmet need for improvements in agricultural production through upgrading irrigation systems, mechanization, quality control, and packaging.

Despite the many challenges facing the mining sector, formal mining should be increased, and proceeds used to improve nearby communities' livelihoods and public services.

All the above efforts would need resolve and will at the highest governmental and international levels.

Drug Economy

Besides the long-standing tradition of production and trade of opium and heroin, the emergence of the synthetic drugs industry in rural communities has become a significant source of concern in more recent years (Mansfield, 2020).

Drug production in all forms would only be curbed, according to one participant, if there were comparable income alternatives. The challenge of how to introduce comparable and sustainable rural livelihoods that could replace drug production remains.

The only viable alternative to poppy cultivation so far has been the introduction of saffron in Herat province since the early 2000s and later in other provinces (male participant, civil society).

Others observed that addressing threats posed by the drugs economy would require community buy-in, including through the engagement of local authorities and religious leaders, in addition to institutional efforts in anti-narcotics. Mosques would have to play a more central role in engaging poppy growers and convincing them to switch to alternative crops such as saffron. According to one panelist,

Mosques are not simply a place where people pray. In mosques, people solve their problems, resolve their conflicts, and discuss cultural issues. It is where most people get their information. If the media say drugs are harmful, it will have much less effect than if religious leaders tell people that drugs are haram. -Male panelist 1

Participants also called for sustained efforts to inform the public about drug use's health risks, including synthetic drugs. Some suggested that anti-narcotics awareness needed to be part of the education curriculum.

Inter-Communal Strife

A key source of concern regarding the escalation of the conflict was related to divisions between different confessional and ethno-linguistic communities.

In Kabul, targeted attacks against Shi'a communities in recent years have raised fears that members of these communities are likely to fall victim to discriminatory measures and practices under a government that excludes religious and ethnic

minorities. A sectarian government is likely to increase the rifts between communities and compound the pre-existing divisions, providing incentives for local leaders to prioritize their own ethnic and confessional groups over others.

Many participants felt that more could and should be done to raise awareness and increase mutual respect among diverse groups in different communities. A combination of public awareness and institutional measures would be needed to ensure that legal provisions for anti-discrimination were enforced and that legal and other resources were equally available to all inhabitants of a given administrative unit.

The participants highlighted education as an essential instrument of fighting ethnic and confessional prejudices and reinforcing civic education focused on fostering national unity.

Lack of Rule of Law

Systematic non-compliance with the law was underlined as a significant source of conflict in different communities, particularly when the very authorities in charge of enforcing the law were breaking it.



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Widespread nepotism and corruption within the justice system have created a judiciary strongly affiliated with the interests of influential individuals, which adversely affects citizens' confidence in government institutions in general.

To many ordinary citizens, the powerful, abusive, and corrupt government officials have become a self-serving elite with no interest in serving the needs of the public or fulfilling their public mandates.

Addressing this systemic absence of the rule of law would require a complete overhaul of the justice system. The overhaul should ensure the independence of the formal justice system and

encourage public mobilization through citizens' groups to raise awareness among citizens about their rights and how to pursue them.

Conclusions

In retrospect – and given the takeover of Kabul by the Taliban on August 15, 2021 – it is perhaps not surprising that there was a high degree of resignation and pessimism during the Kabul peace forum held on August 2, 2021, concerning the outcomes of the intra-Afghan peace negotiation process.

As with other peace forums, the general expectation was that reducing conflict would result in less hardship and internal displacement. Many also felt that a government with a significant presence of the Taliban would result in more effective implementation of the law and less administrative corruption.

There are concerns that a Taliban-controlled government would continue to undermine the rights of women and minorities and present high risks of fostering divisions between different segments of the population. In a broader sense, it already took steps to weaken civil society and created numerous obstacles for rights-based organizations. The ethnic and religious biases of the Taliban carries the risk of contributing to an escalation in inter-communal strife. Concern was raised already at the time of the forum about the re-integration of Taliban fighters if parties would reach a peace deal. Conflicts involving former fighters and other armed actors could be mitigated in violent ways and as a continuation of using arms to resolve differences.

Many expect that Afghanistan will continue to suffer from high unemployment and under-employment, related poverty and food insecurity, and general disenchantment of the majority population, with over 60% being under 25 years of age.

These features are likely to feed into inter-community strife resulting from competition to access the minimal resources and opportunities, encourage illegitimate sources of livelihood such as drugs production and trafficking, and the resultant weakening of stability, civility the rule of law.

Addressing widespread poverty would require investment by national and international authorities in productive and sustainable economic activity by national and international entities alike and adequate infrastructure to support it.

As with most shocks, the change in the political landscape of Afghanistan with the Taliban in power will present numerous challenges and new opportunities.

Policymaking for peace – to end armed conflict, overcome the narcotics industry, and remove opportunities for insurgency – needs to be based on lessons learned over the last 20 years and an analysis of actors, factors, and mechanisms that sustain the conflict. An important lesson is that the war on drugs in the reconstruction of Afghanistan since 2001 has failed. The fact that the Taliban have returned to power after 20 years of international security forces in Afghanistan also points to a significant setback in the war against violent extremism. Finally, any effort by the international community to assist Afghanistan in overcoming its many social and economic challenges will be subject to the politics of coming to terms with the Taliban as the new rulers of Afghanistan.

Acknowledgement

Front cover photograph taken by Mohammad Aref Karimi

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