

Offering Peace

Framing the Kabul Conference of February 28, 2018

A Consensus for Peace

Afghan stakeholders from across society, in consultation with the government and the High Peace Council (HPC), have reached a consensus on the desire for peace. Women have been active in public discussions to safeguard their constitutionally guaranteed rights. Representatives of the Ulama, civil society, community leaders, entrepreneurs, farmers and laborers, professionals, political parties, students and teachers, and other social groups have highlighted the need for peace from their distinct perspectives.

Afghans have a sense of urgency, stemming from four decades of suffering and more recently, unrestricted warfare on citizens. The horrific acts of terror in Kabul on May 31, 2017 and January 27, 2018 are part of a string of violence carried out against our citizens. The Government of National Unity is responding to this consensus and urgency by developing a vision of peace, and a process and program to realize it. Our vision is guided by Allah's commandment: "The good and the evil deed are not equal. Repel by that which is better; then behold he, the one between whom and thee there is enmity shall be as if it were a loyal, protecting friend" (Holy Quran 41:34). We will set common national goals through a peace process which aim to overcome recent divisions and internal conflicts: building an effective state, an inclusive society, a dynamic economy and a tolerant and democratic culture based on our Islamic beliefs and values.

Realization of this vision requires compassion, conviction, and courage in dealing with the Taliban. We must have the compassion to understand the perspective of the combatant. We must have the conviction to act on Allah's commandment to seek common ground, both as Afghans and Muslims. We must have the courage to listen to grievances, analyze the root causes and drivers of conflict, and hear a diversity of proposals for reconciliation. The Kabul Process conference will transform our agreement on a just and lasting peace into a feasible process, resulting in a credible outcome.

Context

Patterns have emerged recently in the course of the war which have increased the probability of peace. First, Afghans are revolted by the expansion in scale and scope of the unrestricted war playing out in our daily lives; thus, we acknowledge the need for comprehensive reform in order to confront our inherited problems of conflict, criminality, and corruption. The intra-Afghan process of reconciliation with Hizb-I-Islami served as a successful example of how peace-making is possible. Second, the forthcoming parliamentary elections in 2018 and the presidential elections in 2019 are crucial to further solidifying the Afghan people's trust in democratic processes as a means to establishing a mandate to govern. Third, internationally, the emphasis is on ending the war through a political process with the Taliban. Fourth, at the regional level, we are successfully demonstrating to our neighbors the economic and peaceful advantages of a stable Afghanistan. Fifth, the global Islamic community is coming together in an intense dialogue to counter the use of interpretations of religious texts as justification of unrestricted war. The Taliban show awareness of these contextual shifts and seem to be engaged in a debate on the implications of acts of violence for their future.

Our Peace Offer to the Taliban

The Government of National Unity seeks a genuine and lasting peace with the reconcilable Taliban. We believe in the common equality of all Afghans and our right to live in peace and dignity, including those Taliban who are willing to denounce violence. We are making this offer without preconditions in order to lead to a peace agreement in which: 1) constitutional rights and obligations of all citizens (especially women) are ensured, 2) the constitution is accepted, or amendments proposed through the constitutional provision, 3) defense and security forces and civil service function according to law, 4) and no armed groups with ties to transnational terrorist networks and transnational criminal organizations, or with state/non-state actors seeking influence in Afghanistan, are allowed.

We suggest the following building blocks for peace-making:

1. A political process: ceasefire, recognition as political party, transitional confidence-building arrangements, and inclusive, credible, free and fair elections;
2. A legal framework: constitutional review, justice and resolution of grievances, enabling laws or decrees, prisoner release and removal from sanctions lists;
3. Reorganization of the state: rule of law and reform, balanced spatial development, reintegration of refugees and internally displaced populations;
4. Security: for the population, as well as for reconcilables who are reintegrating;
5. Economic/social development: inclusive and sustained growth, equitable access to land and public assets, fighting corruption, national job creation programs, reintegration of refugees, and ex-combatants;
6. International community support and partnership: diplomatic financial support, status of foreign fighters and removal from sanctions;
7. Implementation modalities, specifying urgent, short and medium-term benchmarks and monitoring and verification mechanisms and arrangements.

The Taliban are expected to give input to the peace-making process, the goal of which is to draw the Taliban, as an organization, to peace talks. The government does not pre-judge as to who will opt for peace, as the process will result in self-identification of those rejecting peace as irreconcilables.

The Government of National Unity would agree to the opening of a Taliban office, issuance of passports and freedom of travel, helping to remove sanctions, arranging media access, and relocating families. The HPC, supported by a professional government support team, will nominate a negotiation team, including women and civil society members. Kabul is the preferred venue, but other options include Muslim countries not engaged in the conflict, a UN facility, or a third party country.

Suggestions for International Support

International support for Afghanistan has been generous since 2001, for which we express gratitude. As existing commitments are regulated through well-delineated mechanisms, we suggest international support in the following areas for peace and stability:

1. Coordinated international diplomatic support for the peace offer to the Taliban;

2. A regional initiative to align various efforts by countries or regional organizations with the Kabul Process and support the peace offer to the Taliban;
3. An intense dialogue led by the global Islamic community to counter the use of interpretations of religious texts as justification of unrestricted war;
4. A concerted global effort to persuade Pakistan of the advantages of a stable Afghanistan, to engage in a comprehensive state to state dialogue with Afghanistan and to support the peace offer to the Taliban;
5. To support the implementation of the peace agreement, especially the reintegration of refugees and ex-combatants;
6. To support peace-building initiatives in Afghanistan through supporting transit, trade, and investment, the reform and anti-corruption strategy of the government, and the forthcoming 2018 parliamentary and 2019 presidential elections.

We firmly believe that a stable Pakistan connected through Afghanistan to Central Asia is in our national interest. We renew our offer of a comprehensive dialogue with Pakistan, including a plan for the return of Afghan refugees in Pakistan within a period of 18-24 months. TAPI's progress is one example of a positive development in the region, which exemplifies how regions are the key units of development. We are ready to organize the state-to-state discussion with Pakistan on APAPS or a revised document.

Conclusion

Peace-making is a process which moves from desirability, to feasibility and then to credibility. We look forward to announcements on follow up and suggestions for better alignment and coordination with the Afghan-led Kabul process. Hard as reaching consensus on seeking peace is, peace-making and peace building require relentless attention.

To act on the lessons learned from past peace agreements means focusing on the implementation of peace agreements through peace-building and reform, and identifying and managing risks before they can threaten the peace-making process. Transparency, is, therefore key to effective communication. By necessity, peace agreements have to be negotiated by small teams. Approval of peace agreements, however, requires a clearly delineated process of consultation in a multi-stakeholder Afghan society. Women, who fear loss of their rights and gains, must be particularly engaged and kept informed.

Implementation is the heart of peace building. Important issues include: reintegration of refugees and ex-combatants; regional support; and security, economic and social development reforms. Transparency and efficiency is again key to building and maintain trust through a process of communication and consultation.

By owning our problems, knowing our strengths, and believing in the prospects of our country as a land bridge and Asian roundabout, we have been able to make a genuine peace offer to the Taliban and renewed our call to engage with Pakistan. We trust in Allah's command that "if the enemy is inclined toward peace, make peace with them, and trust in Allah. Truly He is the All-Hearing, the All-Knowing" (Holy Quran: 8:61).