AFGHANS' HOPES AND GRIEVANCES:
An Individual/Community Level Analysis

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Contents

Executive Summary

This paper surveys variables of conflict and their relative importance at group/community and individual level in Afghanistan, with a particular focus on the last two decades (2001-2020). In addition, the paper explores hopes and desires of key social groups from a post-peace settlement political process including the Taliban. Key findings of the paper are as follows:

Sources of grievances: Analysis of group/individual level sources of conflict has its own limitations in providing a comprehensive list. I examine 15 such factors in 7 clusters. While I maintain that all variables discussed in the paper are important, yet with a little deontic judgement and a closer look at the literature, there is an emphasize on the following 5 clusters:

  i.   **Insecurity:** growing violence and conflict, principally driven by bombings and armed attacks from the Taliban and other insurgent groups, have been a consistent source of concern for all residents in the country.

  ii. **Systematic Corruption:** endemic corruption at all levels of bureaucracy has created a perception that ordinary citizens are systematically abused by a small – yet influential – group of 'corrupt people' in the government. This has resulted in the loss of trust in anti-corruption efforts undertaken by the government leadership and has undermined public support for the central government.

  iii. **Centralized Administration:** although a centralized administration is seen by some groups as a catalyst for strengthening the national sovereignty and unification, economic outcomes such as poor service delivery, lack of participation in budgetary decisions, lack of community participation in most development projects, and absence of execution power by provincial authorities have created a centre-periphery tension.

  iv. **Foreign Interference:** as a by-product of the 'war on terror', military operations such as airstrikes and night raids by the US/NATO, often based on the wrong intelligence provided by elements seeking personal or tribal revenge, have resulted in civilian casualties, strong resentments against the central government, and has re-enforced the perception that foreign troops have invaded Afghan's freedom and national sovereignty. This is further elevated by the anti-US/western sentiments shared internationally among the Muslim masses from around the globe.

v. **Perception of Injustice:** the dominant perception is that the reward and punishment mechanisms have failed the ordinary citizen. It is widely held belief that the powerful is above the law, never prosecuted and this perception has eroded the central government's legitimacy. This has incited anger among the people and turned them away, particularly in the periphery.

Key social groups' expectations from the peace process

i. Key concerns by the social groups discussed in the paper are women's anticipation that their constitutional rights are ensured in a post-peace settlement. As it stands, lack of clarity from the Taliban about their attitude toward treatment of women and lack of insistence by the international partners on this subject has left many confused.

ii. In addition, lack of diversity in the Taliban leadership bench (since their inception) haunts other ethnic groups. Ethnic minorities want to see a political transition that encourages diversity, inclusivity, decentralized administrations, and more local autonomy.

iii. Lastly, Taliban have agreed to negotiate with the Afghan government under strict conditions and terms. Although they are continually hesitant about the US/NATO and the Afghan government not holding their end of the bargain, they anticipate all foreign troops to leave Afghanistan to pave the way for the re-establishment of their "Islamic system".

I.   Introduction

There are two overarching paradigms that try to explain the causes of conflict and fragility. One argues that greed, weak state institutions, and opportunities for insurgency create conflict (Collier and Hoffler, 2004; Fearon and Liaitin, 2003; Collier et al., 2009). The other maintains that personal and political grievances, discriminations, repressions, and competition for power are the determining factors (Cederman et al., 2010; Gurr, 1970; 1994; Horowitz, 2000). Unsurprisingly, there is no consensus on the causes of conflict, as events are contingent both on time and locality dimensions. Discussions on sources of grievance and conflict among Afghans explored in this paper will not shy away drawing arguments from both paradigms.

Intra-Afghan peace talks in Doha brings the possibility of a peace settlement, and a new window for the international community to rethink its relationship with Afghanistan, both on their development frameworks/principles and their political engagement. Therefore, understanding factors of fragility, the nature of grievances and subsequently Afghans' desires from a post-peace settlement are crucial in moving forward.

To that end, I will question the traditional assumption that conflict in Afghanistan is purely motivated by poverty, low literacy rates or lack of access to resources. While addressing poverty and other economic outcomes are important, the assumption greatly ignores the group-specific grievances (Cederman et al., 2010) and the imported aspects of the conflict, simplifying it to a civil war (Gall, 2014; Edge et al., 2012). The *State of the Taliban*, a NATO leaked report in 2012, was a strong testimony to that end (BBC, 2012).

Reviewing recent developments, I scrutinize the *a priori* assumptions behind the notion of using aid to win the 'hearts and minds' of Afghans. Evidence from Afghanistan shows that aid as a counterinsurgency tool had no effect on the insurgents, while its impact in government-controlled areas was also minimal (Sexton, 2016). In addition, both national and international evidence indicates that low literacy rate or lack of access to resources are mere catalysts that exacerbate the factors listed as sources of discontent (Collier et al., 2003). The report by Mercy Corps (2015) highlighting motivations for joining insurgency, argues that billions of dollars are wasted in vocational trainings and civic engagements trying to dampen the appeal for terrorism. The report lists the perception of injustice, corruption, discrimination, and abuse by the armed forces as drivers of insurgency.

The existing literature, mostly drawing from qualitative and empirical assessments, has mapped the sources of grievances in Afghanistan at a macro level. I believe there is important and a gap in analysing individual-level and group-specific factors of fragility. In this paper, I tackle this by disaggregating the sources of grievances for various social groups, focusing primarily on factors most relevant for the last two decades. To do so, I rely on existing literature. Finally, the paper reflects the desires and hopes of various social key groups in Afghanistan by reviewing

perception surveys about the peace process undertaken by various agencies and institutions. All this is an endeavour to help better formulate future development frameworks and policy debates.

Sources of fragility and desires for peace discussed in this paper directly or indirectly encompasses the following communities and groups in Afghanistan: civil societies/NGOs, women, youth, Afghan government, Taliban sympathizers, poor households, clergymen, ethnic/tribal minorities, religious minorities, Taliban, war veterans/ex-combatants, among others. However, I discuss three key social groups (women, ethnic minorities, and the Taliban) explicitly in Section C, as they are considered the direct recipients of any future peace deal. It is important to remember that all sources of grievances discussed here does not lead to conflict or armed rebellion against the government.

I understand the limitations of such a secondary data analysis; a systematic attempt to map individual/community level conflict variables and identify their relative importance require broad cross section interviews, surveys, and discussions. Such endeavour is beyond the scope of the current study.

II.   Nature of individual/community-level grievances

I divide the group level factors of fragility and desires for peace in Afghanistan into seven clusters. It is important to note that this categorization is not a reflection of the order of importance.

a. Insecurity and Fragile coalition government

Suicide attacks and explosions: Taliban and other insurgent groups have constantly bombed and attacked cities, villages, committed atrocities for the past two decades, and continue to do so. This is a major source of concern for every Afghan as they are tired of two decades of bombings and suicide attacks and feel unsafe not knowing whether they will return home or see their loved ones at the end of the day. Reports have shown that civilians, children, women, the media, peaceful protestors as well as government officials and security forces have been indiscriminately targeted (OHCHR & UNAMA, 2019). A quote from a Kabul University teacher sums up the priority of Afghans: "Democracy is second to the needs for people, people need security…." (Coburn, 2009).

Most infamous of these include attack on German embassy (The Guardian, 2017), attack on Counterpart International (CNN, 2019), Intercontinental Hotel (BBC, 2018) and Serena Hotel (BBC, 2014). Further coordinated attacks on Shia and Sikh shrines forced the Sikhs to mass migrate to India and left Shias bewildered to take up arms again (BBC 2020; New York Times, 2020). Recently, famous pro-government Imams were also assassinated inside their mosques in Kabul (Aljazeera, 2020). All these incidents and the memory of living under the Taliban regime (1995-2001) have eroded trust on anything they claim, particularly for women. General scepticism

continues as violence levels are rising while the Doha peace talks are moving slow. All those who lost or continue to lose members of their family find it difficult to see Taliban as a peaceful group.

Nonetheless, 'bombing fatigue' of the past 15 years has created some appetite for peace even among the direct victims. A recent survey of peace perceptions show that Afghans want to see an end to the current conflict even if it requires compromise (IWPS, 2020). It is noteworthy, that in the creation of this appetite for peace, the role of US advocacy has also been effective.

It is important to note that the negotiating parties (international partners, the Afghan government and especially the Taliban) provide some level of guarantee that any post-peace settlement process will preserve citizens' fundamental rights achieved in the last 20 years, including freedom of press, speech, and movement, equality before the law, and women's rights.

Weak coalition governments: In Afghanistan, the presidential elections of 2014 and 2019 were contested and marred with administrative chaos, manipulations, and corruption. The political standoffs were protracted, bitter and polarizing for Afghans, which culminated in a power-sharing agreement. This has set a bad precedence that elections do not determine the outcome but political and contest do. The first 100-days of the coalition governments of 2014 and 2019 were exhausted in "who gets what" (Adili, 2020). These political standoffs had a knock-on effect on all aspects of Afghan lives; uncertainty and declining economic activity (Biruni, 2020), increasing urban crime rate, and rising prices due to fall of Afghani against US dollar, all led to further public distrust. Both donors and ordinary Afghans are "frustrated" and "fed up" of these political rifts (State Department, 2020; Cookman, 2020). To move forward, if the intra-Afghan negotiations in Doha result in accepting elections as the basis of legitimacy for the post-peace settlement political process, fundamental electoral reforms are needed to avoid bitter past experiences. Campaign funding regulations and the independence and impartiality of the election commissions are among the key issues if trust is going to be restored.

b. Perceived threats to religion, sovereignty, and dignity of Afghans

Perceived threats to religion: This can be defined loosely as perception of danger to religious institutions, values, and religious identity. Religion is intertwined in all aspects of Afghan lives; historical evidence confirms that a regime alleged to undermine religious integrity will lose its legitimacy. The policies of Amanullah Khan (1919-1929) generated tensions because it was perceived to have threatened people's religious values, and failure of People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) regimes (1978-1992) stands another clear example. A panel survey of Afghans conclude that progressive reforms are viewed as "imposing foreign values on the people of Afghanistan" (Morrison and Boomershine, 2002).

Unpalatable policies are perceived as direct attack on honour codes such as "*Ghairat, Namoos* and *Ezat*" (approximately translated as "pride or honour"), which prompt resistance against those imposing them (Morrison and Boomershine, 2002). This continues to be the case and future

reforms must be gradual, piecemeal and bottom-up with an idea that "local problems need and have local solutions".

Sexual harassment: Psychological and social safety for women plays a critical role in their progress and facilitate taking advantage of the opportunities in the best possible way. Following the fall of the Taliban regime (1995-2001) during which female work and education was prohibited, the new governments (with the support of international partners) guaranteed rights that was unparalleled in Afghanistan's history. Positive discriminatory policies were adopted in every layer of public engagement to level the playing fields for women who had been deprived of their rights for at least a decade.

More work is needed to make the environment (public life as well as workplace) safer for women. Studies show that sexual harassment against women in public and in workplaces, including educational institutions, is rampant. Although reporting is very low due to social stigmatization, a survey found that 42.6 percent of women in Kandahar experienced sexual violence versus 17.2 percent nationally (Nijhowne and Oates, 2008; Luccaro and Gaston, 2013). UNAMA observed that most sexual assault, rape, sexual violence and forced prostitutions are not penalized (UNAMA, 2012). A former Advisor to President Ashraf Ghani sparked nationwide dismay and anger when he spoke about widespread sexual harassment of females in the government in return for high-level public positions (Aljazeera, 2019). However, no investigation or public inquiry was made into these allegations.

These challenges coupled with lack of clarity on what a post-peace government that brings Taliban onboard will entail for women's rights to work and education leave big question marks. Clear public communication is needed to ensure people's concerns are addressed, especially the female generation that has grown up in the last two decades.

In the debate over "modernity versus traditions", positive discrimination and women empowerment programs have also had a downside due to contextual social sensitivities especially in rural Afghanistan (Rostami-Povey and Poya, 2013; Chow, 2016). There has been a consistent push by the international partners on gender equality without much regard for contextual factors in certain aspects. While these may be less of a concern for city centres and Kabul specifically, rural Afghanistan largely remains conservative and less educated. Currently, in rural parts of the country, democracy is the slang equivalent of "throwing away one's scarf or wearing inappropriate clothes". The positive discrimination policies in some cases have antagonized the very social fabric of the Afghan society and have been considered as a direct attack on Afghans' "dignity" (Bahman, 2008).

This paper does not question the validity of pursuing objectives such as striving for gender equality. It rather points out the consequences of a problematic approach that ensued among the less educated Afghans, which ultimately serves as a source of grievance. This was further exploited by the Taliban and other insurgent groups purely as a mobilization strategy, echoing their claim that "foreign values are undermining Afghan Islamic culture". To move forward,

there is a need to adopt a hybrid model to bridge the formal and informal justice systems and social norms to ensure the country is at peace with itself and its neighbours (Dobbins et al., 2007).

Ideological factor (suffering from a deficit of legitimacy): Low literacy rates and bad economic situation prevents the masses from understanding the technical discussions on what kind of Islamic government they want for Afghanistan; Islamic Republic or Emirate? Afghanistan faced a similar dilemma in formulating the post-Bonn process constitution (2003-2004). Surveys from around the country, asking what type of government they wanted in Afghanistan, have shown that respondents unanimously said an "Islamic" government (Mansur, 2006). Back in 2003 and 2004, this was translated as "centralized presidential system". The devil is in the details; what does "Islamic" mean is a challenge that is reflected in the Doha-peace talks even today. Several reasons turn the table in favour of Taliban; corruption, injustices, rising inequality, and long and obsolete bureaucratic processes have given the average Afghan a bad impression of the "Islamic Republic". Coupled with the claim that 'democracy is incompatible with Islam', these reasons further strengthen the adverse perception among the public that they constitute 'foreign values' and are 'forced on them'. This is a major source of concern for civil societies, activists and pro-equality groups that have emerged in the last two decades.

Another factor in losing the ideological battle to the Taliban is lack of understanding of the democratic values and principles by the leadership exposed by governments in Kabul in the past two decades. There is little understanding or trust in democratic institutions. In fact, the top-down implementation has not been effective and has created an "isomorphic mimicry" in Afghanistan (Pritchett and Weijer, 2011; Homes and Krastve, 2019).

War on terror: Night raids, bombings and searches carried out by the United States forces between 2007 to 2014 were very upsetting for Afghans. The fact is that these raids and war on terror were already frowned upon, but the public did not know much about the details. When former president Hamid Karzai's relationship with the US administration deteriorated in the post-2009 elections, he publicly accused the US of invading Afghan dignity and asked to stop "bombing Afghans" (Partlow and Whitlock, 2011; Shanker et al., 2010). This contributed massively to anti-US/NATO sentiments and re-ignited the debate that Afghanistan is not an "independent state".

c. *Systematic endemic corruption*

Political collusion: If one speaks to an Afghan who has ever engaged with a government office, complaints about corruption is a reoccurring theme. That said, national or international

perception surveys indicate high level of corruption in Afghanistan (CPI, 2019; WGI, 2019).[1] There are several reasons for the rampant administrative corruption: lack of transparency in public officials' hiring process, job insecurity and general uncertainty about sustainability of the government. To get a government job, one must know "someone" (i.e. political appointments) or bribe the hiring committee or a broker, and this is common knowledge in Afghanistan. The lack of transparency impedes merit-based appointments and accountability of public clerks.

Another stark example is the case of Acting Ministers who expect a ratification vote from the Parliament; they replace existing public officials with individuals associated with the Members of Parliament (MPs) to get a 'yes' vote (Bjelica and Sorush, 2018). This has become a norm for the last 15 years. Such practices create a downward spiralling issue of job insecurity, where officials and to-be-officials feel dispensable. Psychologically, such allocation of public offices ultimately forces the official to place their personal gain above that of the public and the law. All these render accountability and procedural justice; lowers quality and efficiency of public service delivery. These political collusions in pursuit of personal gains has turned popular support away from the government.

Service delivery: Effective service delivery may bolster state's legitimacy only if resources and services are distributed equally. The debate on modalities of service delivery (centralized or decentralized) in Afghanistan mostly focuses on state-building (Bizhan, 2017; Bizhan et al., 2016). However, the discussion ignores administrative corruption and bribery that accompanies all public service delivery modalities currently in practice. This is a great source of grievance for citizens (especially business owners) who interact with public offices repeatedly. Public-private interactions occur in places such as taxpayers' offices (i.e. STO, MTO and LTO), license granting offices, public logistics and contract departments, customs offices, law enforcement offices (i.e. police checkpoints that exist across the country) and other similar public offices. Most of these public offices are deeply involved in complex hierarchies of corruption (Mehran, 2013; UNODC & HOOAC, 2012; Bjelica, 2019). A survey of adult Afghans found that corruption was a top concern in 2009 and second biggest challenge after security in 2012 (HOOAC & UNODC, 2012). Accessing any of these offices inherently entail bribery. If not complied, citizens are aggravated to wait for weeks and months to get their requests processed. This in turn affects the quality of development projects, aid absorptive capacity and fair competition principles which the procurement law states. Any future development framework must put fighting corruption a top

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[1] Afghanistan is ranked 6.731 in 2019 in the Control of Corruption by the World Bank among all countries in the world. A score of 100 corresponds to highest rank and 0 to the lowest (WGI, 2019). In Transparency International's corruption perception index (CPI), Afghanistan has consistently scored low (CPI, 2019).

priority on its agenda and impose strict punishment and reward mechanism to eradicate administrative corruption.

d. *Perceived ethnic and tribal rivalry*

Protracted hostility and playing identity politics turn identity from an organizing principle toward provocation of violence and further divisions. Psychologists argue that "in divided societies, group identity become the primary source of individual self-worth and positive self-evaluation" (Tajfel, 2010; Horowitz, 2000). Evidence shows that over 60 percent of civil wars and conflicts since 1964 have been fought along ethnic lines and ethnic groups are more likely to have grievances against the state and each other (Denny and Walter, 2014). Afghanistan is no exception.

Ethnic dynamics: Ethnic struggles to balance the equation of political power in Afghanistan started in the aftermath of the disposition of regimes as early as in 1970s (Giustozzi and Ibrahimi, 2012; Mansur, 2009). Evidence from several surveys note that inter-ethnic rivalries are important source of public discontent. A report in 2020 from the Afghan Institute for Strategic Studies (AISS) writes that "smaller ethnic groups have been the victim of social discrimination and political exclusion" and "identity politics has led to the domination of particular ethnic groups in the name of the state, fragile ethnic coalition, …. as a result, to further social divisions in the country" (Ibrahimi, 2020). In addition, the Survey of the Afghan People, the longest perception survey in Afghanistan implemented by Asia Foundation points in the same direction that smaller ethnic groups lack confidence in the system and believe that the country is going in the wrong direction (Akseer et al., 2019). The survey explains that strong support for social equality and lack of confidence by the smaller ethnic groups is an indication of a popular force against a current social system that both privileges and discriminates citizens based on ethnic lines.

The 'winning hearts and minds' approach adopted by the US in Afghanistan was not effective. It contributed and caused further rifts among different communities (or more specifically tribal areas). Fishstein and Wilder (2012) found that local tribal dynamics was a significant contributor to the conflict, which was then labelled "Taliban vs Government". For example, in Helmand a study of Tribal Analysis of Quetta Shura in 2009 finds that the political and economic power including patronage and development resources were in the hands of Zirak tribes (including Poplzai, Barakzai, Achakzai and Alikozai) who were closer to those in power in Kabul, while other small tribes like Panjpai were neglected (Tribal Analysis Centre, 2009). This was a major contributor to the conflict in this province which also harvests the highest level of narcotics. Similar stories exist across the country (Wissing, 2012). Critics of approach suggest that future development frameworks should not be politically or geographically biased and must pursue sound economic objectives.

Other elite-level grievances that have been (in)famous along ethnic lines are the debate over introduction of the provincial-quota in the national entrance exam ("Concours exam") for public

higher education institutions (justified by the argument that the number of admissions should reflect equal distribution across ethnic groups), and the conflict over "Afghan" identity in the electronic national ID cards among others (Amini, 2018). For an average household in remote districts, these issues are less of a concern, thus I classify them as 'elite-level' grievances. One camp argues that systematic attempts are made by elements in the government to assimilate other identities and advance state narratives. While the other camp argues that Afghanistan needs a unified and national identity like other nation-states in the region. These differences and grievances have divided most urban dwellers along ethnic identities.

e. *Political exclusion and centralized administration*

Pursuit of the idea that Afghanistan needs a "strong centralized government" (since early 20th century and renewed in the post-2001) has resulted in a centre-periphery rivalry. Over the decades, the central government has exhausted its political capital in "neutralizing" local power holders and autonomous regions (Saleh, 2015). The reasons for a centralized system can be summarized in two points.

First, the western educated Afghan technocrats returned from the US and the EU did not realize the changes in the social structures that had taken place in Afghanistan since the 1970s (Byrd, 2016). Their nostalgic argument was that a strong central government will restore the lost glory of the "Afghan state". Second, the international community found it administratively more convenient to work with a single centralized authority – perhaps unknowingly building up on the centralized socialist model left behind from Afghanistan's communist era. While this approach seems plausible at first, but Bizhan argues that it has undermined the ability to effectively identify and finance local priorities, build local capacity and increase local participation in the long run (Bizhan, 2017). Historical events show that revolutions and rebellions in Afghanistan have always initiated from the periphery where majority is conservative. In addition, eliminating local power brokers had two additional side-effects; it created distrust and frustration among the loyalists. Second, it created a power-vacuum in the absence of traditional structure that increased instability because the government did not have a viable alternative (Saleh, 2015).

International evidence shows that a durable political settlement requires inclusion and involvement of all relevant factors, and power-sharing can ease fragility such as in Yemen and Lebanon (Besley et al., 2018). Development outcomes in a centralized political system where 'the winner takes it all' in a divided and multi-ethnic society/country compare less favourable to those in a decentralized political system. In a decentralized system there exists higher level of local autonomy and thus more winners. Evidence from Nepal, Indonesia, Guatemala, and Sudan show that political exclusion leads to ethnic rebellion and regional grievances, while in the case of Cote d'Ivoire it led to an armed conflict (Stewart and Brown, 2009). Decentralization can reduce conflict and improve quality of governance; examples include Ethiopia after Eritrean independence,

Indonesia after Suharto's fall, Uganda after the civil war of the 1980s, Rwanda after 1994, and Cambodia during the 1990s (Bardhan, 2002; Bardhan and Mookherjee, 2000). However, there are risks too, if devolution is not done correctly given the contextual constraints and conditions, it may lead to higher pressures and elite capture.

Experience from Afghanistan under the Afghanistan National Development Strategy (ANDS) suggests that development programs performed well when local communities and sub-national entities had a major role in the decision-making (Barakat, 2006). Programs such as National Solidarity Program owed their success to a decentralized design, high local input, and community participation. Allowing for local autonomies build capacity and establish an extensive network of communities instead of a top-down approach. This approach also reduces the distance and tension between Kabul and the periphery. To move forward, a decentralized administrative and spending system with a defined upward accountability mechanism, community policing and participation can result in less dissatisfaction and less resentments, because ownership and responsibility is devolved to communities and local entities.

Another example of political exclusion was the resentments that ensued the Disarming, Demobilizing and Reintegrating (DDR) program. The project targeted ex-combatants and active insurgents in Afghanistan between 2003-2005. The program was effective in disarming and demobilizing the ex-combatants, but failed to effectively reintegrate them (Poulton et al., 2007). An ex-post evaluation of the program found that those who joined the program felt ignored and forgotten after they had laid down their weapons (Derksen, 2015). The antagonism was further strengthened when the government rushed in introducing new administrative reforms and requirements both in public and private sectors. For instance, requiring a bachelor's or a master's degree automatically excluded large portions of those ex-combatants and war veterans who considered themselves 'saviours' of the country during the Russian invasion and subsequently resisting against the Taliban. This coupled with lack of economic opportunities and the ever-increasing distance between Kabul-centred polities, led to regional resentments and loss of trust, forcing some of them to join the Taliban (Hartzell, 2011).

f. Foreign interference

The modern Afghan historical memory is filled with resistance against foreign interference and the official education system reinforces this idea; Anglo-Afghan wars (1839-1842; 1878-1880 and 1919), and Soviet-Afghan war (1979-1989). The prevailing perception among Afghans is that 'Afghanistan is the graveyard of Empires' (Barfield, 2010; Jones, 2010).

The presence of US in Afghanistan, whether they were fighting the Taliban or involved in civilian reconstruction projects was never seen easy. The prevailing thought at the back of most Afghan minds is that the US forces are "occupiers" (Eide, 2011). This stems predominantly from a historical perception of resisting "foreigners". Naturally, such mindset coupled with low literacy rate, particularly low levels of religious awareness, gave Taliban and other insurgent groups a

popular mobilization strategy. Interrogations and interviews with the Taliban indicate that military aggression by foreign forces and "resisting invading infidel forces" that threaten their values and culture are among their top five motivations (Waldman, 2010).

In addition to the above, the US-NATO led forces committed mistakes that caused massive civilian causalities during their engagement in Afghanistan that also pushed people to side with the insurgents. These include the need to exert dominance in certain circumstances, bombings/attacks/arrests/night raids based on wrong intelligence or pure lack of knowledge about local dynamics. Taliban as the opposition to the war since 2001 have always branded it as "occupation" of Afghanistan by "foreign troops". Foreign troops leaving Afghanistan has been their single unwavering demand that was eventually granted to them in the US-Taliban Doha-agreement after almost 19 years (State Department, 2020).

Personal and tribal rivalries that gathered wrong/biased intelligence and ultimately led to bombing of non-insurgent non-Taliban affiliated groups, caused major rifts, and change of allegiance among rural Afghans who previously opposed the Taliban (Amnesty International, 2009). This reinforced the Taliban's claim that NATO forces are "invaders" and not accountable in whatever they do. For example, the German Higher Court rejected compensation claims by Kunduz airstrike victims (Der Spiegel, 2016; Ruttig, 2013).

g. The 'powerful' goes unpunished (Perception of justice)

Rule of law: Ensuring that justice is served, and rule of law is maintained construe the cornerstone of a legitimate and functional government (Besley et al., 2018). In Afghanistan, the dominant perception is that the reward and punishment mechanisms have failed the ordinary citizens. It is widely held that the powerful is above the law, never prosecuted and this perception has eroded the central government's legitimacy. This has incited anger in the public and turned them away from the government, particularly in the periphery.

A quick review of the Friday sermons in Kabul mosques and probably a universal phenomenon around the country reveals their disdain in government's inability to bring perpetrators to justice. Government failure to bring justice has forced people to look for alternatives; these include taking revenge through personal means, creating local *shura*'s to resolve disputes, and going to the Taliban. For instance, Taliban verdicts are quick, on the spot, and people do not have to pay bribes to access them (New York Times, 2015; DW, 2015). On the contrary, Afghan courts and prosecution agencies are corrupt, painstakingly bureaucratic, and the Supreme Court of Afghanistan has been silent on the most important issues, even when the survival of the government itself was at stake (for instance, their silence on the last two presidential election crisis). People anticipate that the law is implemented and the principle of equality before the law is practiced.

Presidential powers: Recently a select committee of Wolesi Jirga (lower house) members accused the President of Afghanistan on breaching several constitution provisions. These include creation of new budgetary units, establishment of independent commissions/authorities, and transfer of power from lawfully legitimate institutions such as ministries to unelected and unaccountable bodies (Ansar, 2020). There is a perception that the President and whomever he supports is above the law. This arises from the centralized political system and constitutional powers granted to the President (Shahrani, 2018).

For example, government ministers who had popular support from the President, who also had corruption charges filed against them, none of them have been prosecuted. Any future settlement must reform and establish an independent judiciary system as one of the pillars of the Islamic Republic and a key component of the 'checks and balances' equation to make sure justice is served.

Armed militia groups: Presence of armed militia groups irrespective of their allegiance as pro- or anti-government have had a negative effect on the psyche of average Afghan household. The militia groups survive on political patronage often provided by key political figures in Kabul (Dereksen, 2017). This inhibits the legal process and the law enforcement. The government has been entangled with the creation of militia groups under different names (Local Police, Public Uprising Forces "*Khezesh e Mardomi"* or "*Harbaki"*, etc.) as well as to counter Taliban in rural parts of Afghanistan, but so far none of the projects has been effective. For instance, Nezamuddin Qaisari in Faryab - one of the key leaders of Public Uprising Forces in anti-Taliban campaigns in the North - was empowered and supported by the government. Later government special forces arrested him, then once again he was released with no public trial or justification (TOLO News, 2020a). Cases like this has frustrated people when the Government does not take responsibility for its failures and mistakes. These local militia projects have imbalanced local power dynamics, encouraged warlordism, crime and, in some cases, incentivized rival groups to develop anti-government sentiments or even join insurgency.

III. Sustainable political settlement; Key Afghan social groups expectations

In the previous section, specific points about anticipations and ways to move forward were discussed where relevant. However, to highlight the importance of specific expectations vis-à-vis the future of peace talks, I surmise the discussion here to four key social groups' dilemma and reactions with regards to the peace talks, focusing on their expectations of a durable political transition. It is safe to claim that there is a unanimous agreement among all Afghans that they want the war and violence to end (Qazi, 2020; TOLO News, 2020b; State Department, 2020). It is noteworthy the optimism is fading because Taliban have continually increased their attacks across Afghanistan to gain territory - perhaps with the incentive to gain better leverage in the negotiating table. Narrowing down the Afghan narratives to four key social groups is an oversimplification. There are several stakeholders in Afghanistan, particularly political parties

with complicated covert and overt motivations. This makes it difficult to ascertain their position too.

a. Women

The lack of clarity from the Taliban on their position and attitude toward women rights in a post-peace settlement government is worrying for women. The immediate concerns include equality before the law, the right to education, work anywhere they choose both in public and private sectors, ability to drive, ability to travel alone and express themselves in the media. The right to move around the city without being stopped by the 'virtue and vice' police (Akhgar, 2019). Taliban have managed to camouflage this under a tautology that they want an "Islamic government". Under Taliban's "Islamic" regime (1996-2001) almost all the rights mentioned above were denied to women. Women in Afghanistan want to know what's the Taliban's position on these concerns.

There is paramount evidence that Taliban have not changed ideologically. The snapshot of the House Hearing on US Policy in Afghanistan about the Doha-deal and answers from Zalmay Khalilzad, Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation, found similar conclusion (C-SPAN, 2020). Habiba Sarabi, a female member of the Afghan government negotiating team, told a local weekly "Nimrokh" that Taliban "did not say hi to me when we encountered them with Naderi in the hallway, they ignored my presence, and turned their back on me, while greeting Naderi (a male colleague) …" (Ahmadi, 2020). These have raised alarms and scepticism whether the US and international partners have turned a blind eye to these values, once used to justify their intervention in Afghanistan.

b. Ethnic minorities

There are major ethnic concerns with regards to the centrality of the political power within the Taliban structure. Given their Council in Kandahar during their rule (1996-2001) and subsequently the Quetta Shura in post-2001, Taliban leadership bench does not stretch beyond the Pashtuns (Hamid, 2020; Seddique, 2014). This raises questions about Taliban's political treatment of other ethnic groups in a post-peace settlement. As discussed under political exclusion, as a major source of conflict, ethnic groups in Afghanistan demand a decentralized political system that allows regional autonomy and is based on an inclusion modality. A centralized approach has failed to live up to expectations with the post-2001 political process, and lessons should be learned from this experience.

c. Taliban

Taliban's objectives and anticipations have remained consistent throughout their encounter with their opposition. For instance, Matt Waldman interviewees about their objectives and

anticipations in 2010 state that they would only start negotiating if foreign troops completely withdrew from Afghanistan (Waldman, 2010). This was granted in Doha US-Taliban agreement. Mohammad Naeem, Taliban's spokesperson in Doha in an extensive interview with TOLO News laid down their anticipations: i.e., complete implementation of the US-Taliban agreement. This includes systematic withdrawal of foreign troops from Afghanistan and the release of the prisoners from Afghan government prisons. Their subsequent anticipation is a policy non-interference from the US-NATO in internal affairs of Afghanistan post-peace settlement. They anticipate the future government will be Islamic government with Taliban at the nexus of power. They also signal that they will adopt friendly relations with neighbouring countries and the US on economic cooperation (TOLO News, 2020b).

IV. Conclusion

The study provides an extended secondary analysis of grievances and hopes voicing different communities and groups in Afghanistan. The focus of the timeframe of the discussion is the last two decades starting 2001. The study also reflected on the hopes and demands of different communities from a post-peace settlement political establishment. To reiterate those explicitly in no order of importance, to bolster legitimacy and a successful post-peace settlement, the parties involved (the Taliban, the Afghan government, and the international partners) should:

➤ Show tangible evidence that violence will reduce, and people will feel safe 'when they sleep at night' or when they leave home each morning. People want to see evidence that insurgent groups are sincere and committed to reduce violence and end the war.

➤ Preserve constitutional rights of the citizens including freedom of speech, movement, equality before the law as equal citizens, right to work and education for both men and women. This requires continued support from the international partners.

➤ Ensure that the political process is free of corruption. The system adopts functional reward and punishment measures to eradicate bribery and administrative corruption. This will restore trust in public sector and will improve public service delivery.

➤ Afghan government must avoid paradoxical policies and hostilities to all its neighbours and maintains an 'actual' neutral position, particularly in the case of Pakistan.

➤ Continue to receive external financial support from international partners. Both Taliban and the Afghan government understand and agree that any post-peace settlement process will need support to continue and maintain the development in Afghanistan. This has been pointed out in the Doha-agreement between the Taliban and the US as well. Learning

from past experiences, the current development framework needs to be re-examined; a decentralized, economic-objective based approach should replace previous modalities.

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