



Masoom Stanekzai
mmstanekzai2020@gmail.com

MAKING PEACE SUSTAINABLE THE STRUGGLE IN AFGHANISTAN



Pace cannot be imposed by external powers or a small elite; it must reflect the aspirations of the people themselves. **Inclusive governance is indispensable in societies fractured by ethnic, religious, or ideological divisions and injustices. Communities must see themselves represented in decision-making—not merely in a symbolic sense but as genuine participants.**



A complex web of historical and contemporary factors shapes the conflict in Afghanistan. For decades, Afghans have endured violence, loss of livelihoods, displacement, and fractured families. Living under the constant shadow of war has left deep societal scars. This cycle of violence has devastated communities, dividing them along political, social, ethnic, and linguistic lines. Although there were brief opportunities for peace, these were often squandered by leaders and elites pursuing power and resources for personal or factional gain.

One key reason the conflict remains intractable is the persistent involvement of regional actors and global powers. Lasting peace is unlikely while these interests are neglected. Exclusion often drives external actors to obstruct agreements, support proxies, or intervene militarily.

This pattern is evident in repeated failures of international accords and regime changes, including Geneva, Peshawar, Bonn, and the 2020 Doha agreements. The exclusion of key



stakeholders—such as the Islamic Republic in the Doha talks—undermined both the credibility and durability of these efforts.

Local initiatives, however, have shown greater promise. The peace agreement with Hezb-i-Islami, led by Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, succeeded without foreign mediation, bringing armed opposition into mainstream politics. Similarly, the 2019 post-election settlement enabling government formation was another example of Afghan-led compromise.

At the grassroots level, traditional practices such as the Jirga, alongside cultural values of forgiveness, created space for reconciliation. The Afghanistan Peace and Reintegration Programme (APRP) established provincial committees to resolve local disputes and support the reintegration of fighters. Yet, policy restrictions on engaging senior Taliban leaders at the time prevented a full integration of top-down and bottom-up approaches, limiting the potential for long-term peace.

Experience from Afghanistan and beyond shows that sustainable peace requires moral courage and commitment. Leaders must be willing to tell their supporters uncomfortable truths, compromise for the greater good, and place public interests above personal or political ambition. In Afghanistan, actors consistently prioritised narrow interests over national reconciliation and fair inclusion, perpetuating failure.

The design of peace processes and agreements must be grounded in a clear understanding of conflict dynamics, cultural values, beliefs, and local grievances. Credible mediators and facilitators are essential for sustaining dialogue and ensuring agreements remain inclusive and enforceable. Both the Geneva and Doha agreements demonstrate how flawed design and weak commitment to implementing these can trigger collapse.

The exclusionary character of the Doha deal, combined with inadequate enforcement, directly contributed to the breakdown of intra-Afghan negotiations before any settlement was reached, the fall of the Republic in 2021, and the onset of renewed crises.

Peace cannot be imposed by external powers or a small elite; it must reflect the aspirations of the people themselves. Inclusive governance is indispensable in societies fractured by ethnic, religious, or ideological divisions and injustices. Communities must see themselves represented in decision-making—not merely in a symbolic sense, but as genuine participants.

At present, the Taliban's monopoly on power reflects past mistakes, excluding women, civil society, and political groups. Their authoritarian rule erodes rights and silences dissent. It suppresses inclusive consultation and participation, enforces harsh restrictions on free expression, and is coupled with a lack of services, jobs, and justice. This disappoints the majority of the population and risks fuelling another cycle of conflict, if current policies continue.

Education is one of the most powerful tools for transforming societies plagued by chronic conflict. Schools and universities provide more than skills; they nurture critical thinking, tolerance, and hope for the future. Yet, in conflict zones, education is often the first casualty. In Afghanistan, women and girls—half of the

In Afghanistan, the road to sustainable peace remains steep, burdened by history and compounded by current realities. Yet, the resilience of its people has been proven time and again. **Afghans have endured decades of war, displacement, and hardship—and still they strive for hope, despite once again facing profound humanitarian and political crises, as well as large-scale forced deportations from neighbouring countries into an uncertain fate.**

population—are denied the right to learn and work. This denial is not only a violation of human rights, but a direct assault on the very foundation of peace.

Without access to education, young people become vulnerable to extremist manipulation, perpetuating cycles of poverty and violence. Economic opportunities are equally crucial. Jobs and livelihoods diminish the appeal of armed groups and give families a tangible reason to invest in a stable future.

Peace in Afghanistan has never been solely a domestic concern. Global and regional powers have repeatedly prolonged the conflict by supplying armed groups with money, weapons, and political support. Sustainable peace demands that these actors act not as rival powers, but as partners for stability. This requires cutting off support for extremist groups, engaging in fair diplomacy, and investing in long-term development, rather than pursuing short-term military gains.



Neighbouring States must recognise that instability in Afghanistan ultimately undermines their own security. Pakistan's support for the Taliban has backfired, with groups such as Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) now threatening its own stability. The lesson is clear: employing extremist proxies for strategic advantage weakens long-term security. Regional stability can only be achieved through dialogue, mutual respect, and collective responsibility.

For more than four decades, Afghanistan has endured an imposed culture of violence, propagated through extremist ideologies and institutions such as radical madrassas. Reversing this requires an equal investment in cultivating a culture of peace. Families, schools, communities, poets, musicians, elders, and religious leaders must all contribute to creating a narrative that unites rather than divides people.

The Afghan diaspora dialogue offers a valuable example. Initiatives such as this, supported by the University of Melbourne's Initiative for Peacebuilding, bring together Afghan men and women to create shared narratives of reconciliation, drawing lessons from other societies that have overcome division. Such cultural and intellectual work is essential to replacing suspicion with unity and building a shared vision for the future.

In Afghanistan, the road to sustainable peace remains steep, burdened by history and compounded by current realities. Yet, the

resilience of its people has been proven time and again. Afghans have endured decades of war, displacement, and hardship—and still they strive for hope, despite once again facing profound humanitarian and political crises, as well as large-scale forced deportations from neighbouring countries into an uncertain fate.

At the same time, international humanitarian support has been reduced to a bare minimum, particularly following the cessation of USAID programmes, leaving returning families in an extremely vulnerable position. The path to lasting peace in Afghanistan must be anchored in a legitimate constitutional end state that protects the rights of all citizens—including women and minorities—and is founded on transparency, accountability, and inclusive governance.

This can be achieved through facilitating a multilayer dialogue. The details of the Multilayer Dialogue and Action framework are explained in my policy brief, *Islam, Inclusive Governance and the Quest for Peace*, published by the Initiative for Peacebuilding at Melbourne University, which can be accessed here:

(https://arts.unimelb.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0005/5349254/Islam,-Inclusive-Governance-and-the-Quest-for-Peace-Policy-Brief.pdf)

Peace begins with the recognition that the fate of one nation is intertwined with that of all. It endures when justice, inclusion, opportunity, moral courage, and solidarity move from aspiration to action. It will flourish when every individual—from the most powerful leader to the most vulnerable person—believes that even the most difficult circumstances can change. That tomorrow can, indeed, be better than today.

Masoom Stanekzai is an honorary fellow at the Asia Institute of Melbourne University and a former chief peace negotiator of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan with the Taliban.

