PeaceRep
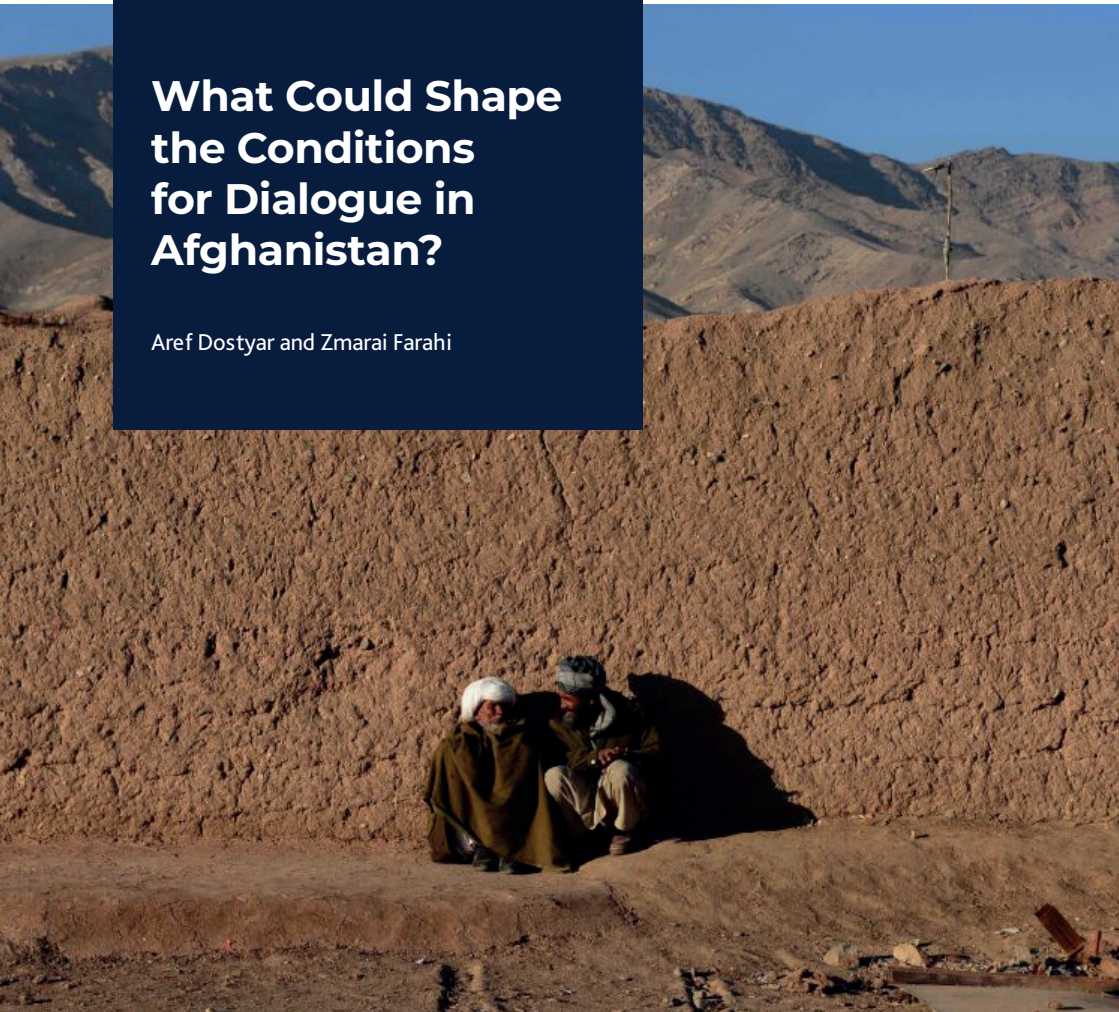## Peace and Conflict Resolution Evidence Platform

What Could Shape the Conditions for Dialogue in Afghanistan?

Aref Dostyar and Zmarai Farahi

Afghanistan Research Network

This series highlights the work and analysis of the Afghanistan Research Network (ARN), a project convened by LSE / PeaceRep, and the Civic Engagement Project (CEP). The network brings together over 20 Afghan researchers (and several non-Afghans) with diverse expertise and backgrounds investigating a range of issues. This project aims to support Afghan researchers who were recently forced to leave Afghanistan; to ensure expert and analytical provision; inform contextually-appropriate international policies and practices on Afghanistan; and to deepen understanding of evolving political, security, and economic dynamics.

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Key Takeaways

▶ Instead of limiting political engagement to narrow pathways provided by the Taliban's current rule, start actively tending to core challenges and engage wider, diverse constituencies that will remain important for Afghanistan's future prospects.

▶ Harness supportive narratives that promote engagement rather than limiting possibilities and encouraging political apathy.

▶ Launch a multi-layered and decentralized visioning process that expands creative imagination, deepens understanding between groups, and builds functional coalitions that can shape Afghanistan's age-old conflicts.

Introduction

Global crises have distracted the West away from Afghanistan. The countries surrounding it remain patient toward the Taliban, who have no incentives to negotiate. The local rival groups inside and outside Afghanistan are weighing their options against a regime that suppresses dissent. Are there ways to use dialogues to advance meaningful political objectives in this context, even when conventional wisdom suggests that the conditions are not "ripe?"

In this paper, we address this question through three interconnected recommendations, which are intended to be broad in scope and substantial in impact, yet immediately actionable to nearly all who have something at stake in Afghanistan's future.

First, shift the core metaphors of engagement from "ripeness" to "cultivation." That is, rather than limiting political engagement to the narrow pathways provided by the Taliban's current rule, start actively tending to core challenges, including the many layers of complexity and division, that shape the deeper, long-term dynamics of the country.

Second, rather than perpetuating narratives that limit the perceived scope of possibilities and encourage political apathy, amplify narratives that support productive engagement.

Finally, launch a multi-layered and decentralized visioning process that expands creative imagination, lays the groundwork for deeper understanding between groups, and, over time, builds functional coalitions capable of positively shaping the underlying dynamics of Afghanistan's age-old conflicts.

We think of these as beginnings for building a productive approach to political engagement in Afghanistan. To understand each of these issues, let us start with the big picture of why the core metaphor guiding both policy and practice in Afghanistan is an important point of leverage.

The Mindset: Cultivation Versus Ripeness

Dominant thinking dictates that no meaningful dialogue is possible among Afghans until the conflict between the Taliban and armed opposition groups is ripe. Ripeness theory basically posits that two sides of a violent conflict must a) reach a "mutually hurting stalemate," and b) see a "way out" that is better than the stalemate (Zartman, 2013). It stresses that timing, not necessarily good ideas, is the most important factor for effective intervention in addressing a given conflict.

This theory does not quite fit the Afghanistan context. It assumes a binary approach to parties of the conflict and that if these two come to an agreement, then life can change for everyone.

Afghanistan is much more complicated. There are multiple groups and numerous layers to the conflict. As such, it is highly unlikely that Afghanistan will ever reach a state in which conflicts can be boiled down to a simple polarity between groups of equal power.

To pursue ripeness then, is to pursue it perpetually. Indeed, we have been missing such a moment for more than forty years now. This alone must cause us to call this approach into question. Waiting further for the conditions for dialogue to ripen promotes inaction in the present and only prolongs the suffering of the people on the ground. Even worse, it implies that a maturation point for dialogue is predicated on the escalation of violence inflicted by opposition groups.

If this metaphor is helpful to this context at all, it is only so at the larger level—there is "societal ripeness" (Brett, 2023). Exhausted by long years of misery, the people of Afghanistan want an end to the conflict.

So, instead of waiting for a given fruit to ripen, we have to take on the more difficult task of cultivating it.

Cultivation theory, as proposed by John Paul Lederach, views change in an expansive timeframe (Lederach, 2008, p. 36-44). It points to the present realities but cautions against being hostage to them. Cultivation acknowledges winter time. It also knows the season will pass. Furthermore, the theory awakens us to the fact that winter returns. This approach recommends nurturing the conditions necessary for peace with a bigger picture in mind, in such a way they can bring fruit to bear and protect those conditions against future threats.

Unlike the expectation of ripeness theory that events evolve in a progressive manner alone, the reality of the situation is more dynamic in Afghanistan. Developments are like a series of circles on a linear line (Lederach, 2008, p. 39). From within a circle, sometimes life looks like going upward or forward and at other times downward or backward. Afghanistan is on a downward spiral inside one of those circles. There seems to be no space for meaningful action at the moment. It is important to step outside of a given circle, however, to see the extended image, to take action to move the overall circles forward. In this view, we can neither be naively wishful nor overly pessimistic about the future, but we see, once again, that our creative agency is just as important at this moment as it has ever been.

Seeing the Deeper Context

The Taliban currently have actual power. They control geography, government institutions, state revenue, and an army. The rebel regime remains unwilling to discuss mechanisms that would power-share with other groups. Because of this, nearly all political agendas dealing with the country revolve around the question: "What is to be done with the Taliban?"

This approach, however, is a symptom of a narrow understanding of how conflict dynamics tend to evolve over time and cause us to adopt strategies that fail to address the underlying instabilities in the country. We operate as if the immediate power structures and their interests were the only factors that meaningfully determine the future of a country.

Even though the Taliban is a key actor, it is not one of only two parties. There are multiple actor groups—political parties, armed groups, civil society, and more—with deep divisions and distinct political agendas, all of whom play critical roles in the future of Afghanistan. Even now, sporadic violence between the Taliban and other armed groups has the potential to spread. When the surrounding countries grow low on patience, it is realistic to expect them to develop contingency plans, seeing local armed groups as more attractive allies. Failure to broaden the policy and engagement to include these groups, and the many other diverse stakeholders, sets the country up for decades of violence, regardless of what happens with the Taliban.

In this context, the question "what is to be done with the Taliban?" needs to be broadened to "what is to be done with Afghanistan?" We propose a shift in policy from a Taliban-only to an Afghanistan-inclusive one to create space for meaningful action. Cultivation theory does not ignore the fact that the Taliban currently has functional control and no will to negotiate. It takes a step back, however, inviting us to design around the fact that many conflict dynamics in Afghanistan long precede the Taliban, and in all likelihood will outlive their rule, and that if conflict is ever to end, we will have to actively transform those dynamics.

An expansive approach will not make the Taliban disappear. Instead, it allows us to view all parts of the system and to shift energy to areas where the problem can be presently addressed. This approach toward the country will not provide a shortcut solution to the conflict. However, it may provide a departure point toward strategies that, in the long run, can generate deeper and more productive pathways forward.

In this broader approach, a dialogue process is open to the Taliban but does not wait for them to move if the group is not willing to participate. We don't use the word dialogue here to mean only linear formal processes toward reaching a settlement between parties. We use it to describe any medium that employs language to facilitate connection and convergence toward solutions that work for all involved. Dialogue in this sense, in the evolving context of Afghanistan, could pursue a two-pronged objective: enhance understanding on key contentious issues among multiple stakeholders currently excluded from power, and create conditions that are conducive to a more inclusive political process.

Based on this mindset, let us look at some factors that could shape the deeper conditions for dialogue in Afghanistan and bring the country closer to peace, even in the midst of a moment of "backward" movement.

Create Narratives for Productive Engagement

The way Afghans and the international community think about the situation in Afghanistan has a significant influence on what actions are taken (or not taken). Since the collapse of the Afghan government, several misleading narratives about the conflict in Afghanistan have emerged in public discourse. These narratives delay change because they promote political apathy. We will list some of them below, and then suggest more productive alternatives.

The War Is Over

This statement defines the Afghanistan conflict in the context of the U.S.'s direct military intervention since 2001 or the Taliban's resurgence soon after. The conflict in Afghanistan, however, is not confined to U.S. military presence in—or departure from—the country. The conflict has domestic roots, historically exploited and complexified by regional and global actors for their own objectives. It is always harmful to a country in its present condition to be defined by foreign governments' interests and involvement.

The U.S. was, indeed, a major actor in this already ongoing conflict for a long time. Its intervention probably further prolonged the existing animosities between internal groups; provided and, in its departure, left behind weaponry and ammunition; created new sides to the conflict; and increased local grievances. Not only is the conflict not over since the U.S.'s departure, it has taken more complicated shapes and contributed to the multitude of victims from suicide attacks and night raids.

Just like the conflict did not start with foreigners' entry to Afghanistan, it also did not end when they exited. *The conflict dynamics are continuously evolving.*

There Is No Alternative to the Taliban

This statement is often connected to the fear that Daesh (ISIS-K) could take over the country. This fear is not credible as Daesh has neither roots in Afghanistan nor the capacity to overtake the country. The fact that a foreign terrorist group is seen as the next most viable regime in Afghanistan, though, shows that there is a vision deficit for the country. This makes sense because the strongest cohering force that made a positive vision possible, the Afghan government, is still fragmented.

Lack of vision, however, does not mean lack of possibility. Afghanistan does not have to remain in a fear-trap of bad alternatives. Instead of promoting the idea that nothing else is possible, a more productive narrative would be: *it is time to start envisioning inclusive alternatives together*.

The Taliban Are Undefeatable

Among many other factors, the Taliban sustained a military campaign that proved capable of taking over the country, therefore it is important to be realistic. To declare them undefeatable, however, is to embolden their regime and strengthen their already hardline positions. Instead, Afghanistan's conflict highs and lows teach us that no power is invincible. History should be enough to demonstrate neither holding territory, heavy weaponry, or even powerful foreign militaries can protect ruling parties from defeat or displacement.

The Taliban, in any case, are very far from having a stable hold over the country. Armed opposition groups, such as the Afghanistan Freedom Front and the National Resistance Front, have engaged in numerous fights with Taliban fighters. Public demonstrations, particularly by women, against the regime have continued despite suppression. People have been fleeing Afghanistan for fear of persecution, economic collapse, and social restrictions, such as girls' school closures. In reality, the Taliban do not have broad public support. Focusing on this narrative instead exposes the underlying weaknesses of the rebel regime's control.

Opposition Means Escalated Violence

Both Afghans and the international community fear the potential of fully-fledged armed conflict between the Taliban and other armed groups. This fear is grounded, since the underlying causes for such conflict are present, but it is dangerous and inaccurate to assume that escalated violence is the only pathway toward meaningful change in the country. Certainly, the Afghan majority opposes this oppressive regime. However, the masses did not stop the Taliban from entering the cities in 2021, perhaps because they did not want violent confrontation. This can change, but the local population has so far registered their preference for a peaceful settlement in their nonviolent actions. *The Afghan society favors neither the Taliban's brutal rule nor another episode of widespread violence.*

A recent study of twenty-four rebel victories since the end of the Cold War shows that the most effective tool to prevent recurrence of violence is through negotiations (Sharif and Joshi, 2022). A well-intentioned dialogue process is still a legitimate means to achieve this objective. Instead of pointing only toward escalated conflict, public discourse could help start to fertilize the ground for productive dialogue.

Public statements, media interviews, international conferences, diplomatic engagements, Op-Eds, and policy briefs are some of the means to amplify more helpful narratives. Simultaneously, those who have a role in policy and public discourse must also internalize these more productive narratives themselves, in order to cultivate the political ambition to realistically begin the arduous task of preparing the soil for dialogue.

But given the current political dynamics, where must this preparation begin?

Launch a Visioning Process

In a public forum on Afghanistan at the Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies, a former senior Afghan diplomat said, "We Afghans know what we don't want…We don't want a regime that looks like the Taliban. And that is a good starting point to work together and define what we want." (Kroc Institute, 2022)

To expand this statement, we believe that local populations and stakeholders, who oppose the current status quo, need the opportunity to paint a clear image of the Afghanistan they wish to see in the future, to start fertilizing the ground for the formation of a coalition of actors capable of building practical alternatives that work for all. To meet this need, we propose the initiation of many simultaneous group-visioning processes to articulate the many positive futures—short-, medium-, and long-term.

Not Bargaining, Opening Possibilities

To be clear, we are not advocating for bringing major parties together to negotiate a single path forward. As mentioned before, there is no significant room for negotiating with the Taliban or engaging any process with a "bargaining" mindset. At this stage, it is only likely to reduce perceived possibilities, increase tunnel vision, and emphasize immediate grievances rather than address Afghanistan's underlying challenges.

We must, instead, support processes that can reweave an atmosphere of collaboration and political will among the dozens of groups that make up the Afghan people, and that can, over time, start producing practical results that aim toward the formation of robust political coalitions. Instead of bargaining against one another over our future, we propose rebuilding the social infrastructure and creative imagination necessary to support a wider range of possibilities. The first step to this is collective visioning.

Visioning, in this context, refers to a process that aims to clarify what a given group wants, how they intend to get there, and how other groups, especially opponents, fit into their plan. Some might hear visioning and think of daydreaming. Experience from other contexts teaches otherwise. Northern Ireland's visioning process in the 1980s and 1990s can serve as one inspiration for Afghanistan (Acheson, 2021, p. 299-309). At a time when there seemed to be little hope for progress, visioning helped bring clarity of purpose, changed mindsets, opened unexpected possibilities, forged new alliances, and eventually provided practical venues for constructive dialogue.

We propose, not abstract and wishful thinking, but a process in which stakeholders come together to articulate concrete visions for the future, develop realistic plans to get there, and take the next practical steps to enact those plans.

Open to All Current and Emergent Stakeholders

Many well-established organizations, such as political parties, are already capable of making meaningful contributions in this domain. While they may already vocalize their stances regarding immediate political issues, they rarely go so far as to articulate, both practically and concretely, the future they wish to be part of. We encourage these groups, therefore, not only to draft their positive vision for Afghanistan, but to demonstrate their skill and understanding of the broader context by addressing the other parties and emergent groups' priorities in that vision.

Pursuing a vision that excludes any group's core needs means extending a legacy of suppression or conflict. We invite these established groups, instead, to use their experience to expand our imagination about how we, the people of Afghanistan, can co-exist with our deep differences.

The insights that can come from the careful discernment of these existing political entities will be invaluable. They won't, however, be sufficient. In addition to the groups who have traditionally had political agency, the current atmosphere of rapid change and social and political reorganization demands giving voice to emerging stakeholder groups at all levels and layers of Afghan society; some of whom are slowly developing a formal presence, some of whom currently may not even have basic levels of organization among themselves.

The inclusion of emergent groups may seem like an unnecessary effort, since they look insignificant when compared to decades-old political parties and current holders of power. Insofar as these groups and individuals have a pulse on the real developing needs, values, and perspectives of parts of the Afghan population, their insight will be essential to building a reality-based vision and practical path forward.

Past approaches to work with and empower only a select few, such as leaders of major political parties, under the name of "realpolitik" have failed. As made clear before, our approach does not exclude old stakeholders or political parties, but it does place them in their appropriate context, as valuable voices among many. This diversity of perspectives will force all stakeholders to deal productively with the real levels of complexity that underlie Afghanistan's conflict dynamics and will not allow for overly simplistic or Taliban-centric narratives to prevail.

On a practical level, many of these emergent groups will need support to enter the visioning process: coordination to convene a group of 3 -15 people for regular meetings over sustained periods, and facilitation and structural provisions to develop and refine visioning documents, perhaps even platforms for sharing those documents between peer groups.

Design to Increase Connection, Understanding, and Possibility

Each of these visioning processes, whether by emergent groups or established parties, must be framed as opportunities to gain mutual understanding and discover new connections and possibilities. The value of visioning documents, whether published or confidential, is in their ability to provoke constructive thinking about old and new questions, not to claim control over the future. They don't seek to propose new legal mandates, but give space for mindsets to evolve as various parties discover and develop common ground.

Initially some groups will be in comfortable dialogue with each other, and others not. The beauty of a visioning document is that it does not require groups to be ready to convene around a physical table. Those who already share much in common may be ready to exchange visioning documents directly or even allow their visioning processes to overlap, but those who are at odds with each other don't have to directly exchange documents via a third party, such as the United Nations, a think tank, a university, or other group seen as credible and trustworthy. Our goal is not to create pressure for groups to convene in physical spaces with each other but for them to engage as they are able on the topics that are most important to them.

Such an arrangement may, at first glance, appear too indirect or disjointed, and incapable of influencing macro-political dynamics. We argue, however, that the decentralization, pace, and variety of these visioning processes are exactly what give strength to the approach. The larger purpose of the exercise is not to create linear and predictable plans for the future, but to voice new explicit venues for the many Afghan communities to encounter one another, and at times find resonance. Instead of being a single process prone to failure, it is a robust multiplicity of processes that cannot be disturbed by a single stubborn actor, and yet that can still cohere into a whole—a dialogue across new possibilities.

It is true that, realistically, most of the visions produced will not be realized. Over time, however, as new relationships form and new ideas are developed, with concrete steps taken, these groups will start to practically rebuild positive narratives and political will. Eventually, some of the ideas set forth will gain traction, and small collaborations toward a positive vision will provide a basis for coalition.

Conclusion

The Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan in 2021 did not lead other rival groups to resign. In fact, actors across the political, civil society, and armed spectrum have maintained and even increased their activism inside and outside the country. This reminds us that, although the Taliban currently hold political power, they are still only one party among a large diversity of actors—some well-established, and others still emerging—all of whom hold their own histories, perspectives, and hopes for the future.

A wider view of current events in Afghanistan points to the need to evolve short-sighted, defeatist, Taliban-centric narratives to views that not only hold the broader context of violence and diversity of actors, who are in some way involved, but that also makes space for more active engagement in that context. In other words, it is necessarily critical that we recognize that, even in the midst of moving "backward", to start cultivating the underlying conditions for a future that works for all Afghans.

This naturally points to the need to support both long-established and emergent stakeholders in forming new dialogue with each other, specifically toward building a vision for what each group wants for their country. Over time, this can help to cultivate the network of relationships, trust, and political imagination necessary to shape a coalition capable of enacting their vision for an inclusive and constructive society.

Although any group can immediately implement the recommendations in this paper, the strength of the approach lies with more engagement. To facilitate such an engagement, think tanks, universities, or international organizations with a stake in Afghanistan could support bringing together small groups for dialogue and visioning exercises. There is also a need to identify and invite emerging actors into such processes, and to create venues to access these vision exchanges.

The evolving dynamics of the situation in Afghanistan remain complex and require continuous, creative, and iterative steps toward resolution. The more minds that take those steps, the more possibilities we create for distinct pathways to convergence. Instead of hoping for the conditions for dialogue to ripen in Afghanistan, we must cultivate viable pathways toward a future that works for all Afghans.

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PeaceRep: The Peace and Conflict Resolution Evidence Platform is a research consortium based at Edinburgh Law School. Our research is rethinking peace and transition processes in the light of changing conflict dynamics, changing demands of inclusion, and changes in patterns of global intervention in conflict and peace/mediation/transition management processes.

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