



HOLDING THE TALIBAN TO ACCOUNT: STAKEHOLDERS IN AN INCLUSIVE POST- SETTLEMENT AFGHANISTAN

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A central provision of the U.S. – Taliban Deal for Afghanistan signed on February 29, 2020, was an intra-Afghan negotiation in order to establish a post-settlement Afghan Islamic Government.¹ The intra-Afghan negotiations were officially managed by the High Peace Council for National Reconciliation, led by Dr. Abdullah Abdullah, from the Afghan government side.² However, the Taliban leveraged the lack of unity in Kabul to forestall any substantive negotiation with the non-Taliban side until the U.S. forces were fully out of Afghanistan, which allowed the Taliban to capture power completely without any serious negotiations.³

Since the Taliban take-over of Afghanistan in August 2021, various Afghan political factions and a wide array of international actors have called on the Taliban to negotiate with non-Taliban Afghans and eventually establish the “post-settlement Afghan Islamic government” the former insurgents committed to in the U.S.-Taliban agreement.⁴ Thus far, the Taliban have failed to respond to these calls, due largely to their sense of total victory following the U.S. withdrawal and collapse of Afghanistan’s former institutions. While the Taliban are not interested, the international community is also not willing to invest or to utilize their collective leverage to compel the Taliban to negotiate with non-Taliban Afghans. Moreover, since the Taliban take-over, the non-Taliban side has become ever more fragmented as various political groups compete for influence. They still avoid joining forces, while engaging each other in virtual debates and social media clashes.⁵ Deep divisions between and among former power brokers, a new generation of Afghan politicians, and activists who came of age during the Western intervention complicate efforts to form a cohesive non-Taliban side.

As a result, the question many are asking is, who are the non-Taliban political stakeholders today? And how much support and influence do they have among Afghans inside and outside of Afghanistan to participate in an intra-Afghan negotiation with the Taliban if circumstances change, and the Taliban show readiness to negotiate, sometime in the future?

This background paper is an attempt to introduce and outline three key non-Taliban stakeholder groups: social leaders, political leaders, and the armed resistance, who collectively represent the non-Taliban Afghan political stakeholders. These are the groups who could sit opposite the Taliban at the table during a future intra-Afghan negotiation, in the eventuality that it does occur.

1. SOCIAL LEADERS: WOMEN, YOUTH, BUSINESS

Women leaders are among the most important political stakeholders in Afghanistan today. They are also among the most unified, nationalistic, and future oriented groups, yet they have been thoroughly disenfranchised by the Taliban in Afghanistan.⁶ Since August 15, 2021, many of the Taliban’s major policy announcements have negatively impacted Afghan women, increasing restrictions and violating basic rights to education, work, and movement.⁷

Given the Taliban’s ideology and stance on women’s role in society, Afghan women are the most important opposition to the Taliban inside and outside Afghanistan. Moreover, Afghan women have been

¹ “U.S. – Taliban peace deal,” *The Washington Post*, March 14, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/context/u-s-taliban-peace-deal/7aab0f58-dd5c-430d-9557-1b6672d889c3/>.

² “Press Statement: U.S. Welcomes First Meeting of the Afghanistan High Council for National Reconciliation Leadership Committee,” U.S. Department of State, December 5, 2020, <https://2017-2021.state.gov/u-s-welcomes-first-meeting-of-the-afghanistan-high-council-for-national-reconciliation-leadership-committee/>.

³ “Transcript: A Conversation with Thomas West in the Context of Afghanistan One Year Later,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, September 29, 2022, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/conversation-thomas-west-context-afghanistan-one-year-later>.

⁴ “U.S.-Relations With Afghanistan,” U.S. Department of State, August 15, 2022, <https://www.state.gov/u-s-relations-with-afghanistan/>; Akmal Dawi, “Frustrated with the Taliban, US Officials Meet with Anti-Taliban Figures,” *Voice of America*, December 20, 2022, <https://www.voanews.com/a/frustrated-with-the-taliban-us-officials-meet-anti-taliban-figures/6885231.html>.

⁵ Ali Ahmad Safi, “Afghan Opposition Struggles Against Taliban Rule,” *The Diplomat*, May 31, 2023, <https://thediplomat.com/2023/05/afghan-opposition-struggles-against-taliban-rule/>.

⁶ Homa Hoodfar and Mona Tajali, “Afghan Women Are Refusing to Remain Silent One Year After the Taliban Take Over,” *Conversation*, August 10, 2022, <https://theconversation.com/afghan-women-are-refusing-to-remain-silent-one-year-after-the-taliban-takeover-188110>; Archana Chaudhary and Eltaf Najafzada, “Many Prominent Afghan Female Leaders Have Fled or Are Now Hiding,” *Bloomberg*, September 13, 2021, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-09-13/many-prominent-afghan-female-leaders-have-fled-or-are-now-hiding>.

⁷ “Taliban Restrictions on Women’s Rights Deepen Afghanistan’s Crisis,” International Crisis Group, February 23, 2023, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-asia/afghanistan/329-taliban-restrictions-womens-rights-deepen-afghanistans-crisis>.

among the only groups to directly confront the Taliban. They have challenged the Taliban through protests in Kabul, Herat, and other provinces, as well as outside Afghanistan.⁸ Women leaders today, consisting of protest leaders, former elected officials, as well as scholars and former government officials, have collectively been the most active group in terms of challenging the Taliban and their narrative, both internally and internationally.⁹ As a result, in any intra-Afghan negotiations, women leaders should be given a prominent role in any non-Taliban Afghan delegation to negotiate with the Taliban.

It is critical for the Taliban to understand that without the approval of Afghan women leaders, no government in Afghanistan will be able to gain the necessary support to be considered legitimate internally and externally. Hence, the international community can only recognize any future Afghan government when it has negotiated and made peace with the Afghan women. Equally important, any future post-settlement Afghan Islamic government needs to allocate a substantial share in power for the Afghan women and the country's future: its youth.

Afghanistan is one of the youngest countries in the world. Over 60 percent of the Afghan population is below 35 years old and, as such, its political leadership should reflect that reality.¹⁰ Afghanistan's youth make up most of the rank and file of the Taliban, as well as the armed and political opposition groups.

The Afghan youth, despite their political differences, are clearly faced with a common destiny. Their remaining adult life could either be spent in conflict, as refugees, or in peace. Afghan youth want peace. As a result, along with Afghan women, Afghan youth are a primary stakeholder of the Afghan political landscape of today and the future.¹¹

Understandably, it is difficult to pinpoint a political entity that could represent the Afghan youth from all spectrums. Afghanistan 1400, a civil-political movement which formed in December 2012, was well-positioned to establish itself as a leading political entity that could organize and represent the Afghan youth's political aspirations.¹² This entity and its prominent members who retain a good standing among the young generation are actively trying to revive the group from the various countries where they find themselves. All political stakeholders, including the Taliban, should include large numbers of young leaders in their delegations to any future intra-Afghan negotiations.

Ensuring the appropriate representation of the new generation of Afghans in any future political set up is a critical measurement of the sustainability of that arrangement. By empowering young leaders and women, Afghan political leaders could provide Afghanistan with an opportunity to make a giant leap towards the future, but any resolution will also require representation from other crucial stakeholders such as leaders of commerce.

Another key stakeholder often overlooked by the international community is the Afghan business community. The business leaders who are scattered across Afghanistan and the world have largely stayed away from politics. However, circumstances have changed. Eventually, the economic reconstruction of Afghanistan, facilitating capital flow, and partnership with the international investors on Afghanistan's mineral resources will fall on the shoulders of the Afghan business leaders. As a result, their views on how to break the deadlock of the recognition and legitimacy of the Afghan government would carry significant weight with all stakeholders. Naturally, there are differences of views among these leaders on the way forward, but they all agree that a stable and legitimate Afghan government is good for business.

⁸ "In Spontaneous Protests, Afghan Women Urge World Not to Recognize the Taliban," *Radio Liberty*, April 29, 2023, <https://www.rferl.org/a/afghanistan-women-protest-taliban-un/32385014.html>; Ali Latifi, "Herat Women Protest Against Taliban Over Right to Work," *Aljazeera*, September 2, 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/9/2/women-in-herat-protest-outside-governors>.

⁹ Latifi, "Herat Women Protest Against Taliban Over Right to Work,"; Wahida Amiri, "Women, Protest and Power – confronting the Taliban," Amnesty International, March 7, 2023, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/campaigns/2023/03/women-protest-and-power-confronting-the-taliban/>.

¹⁰ "Population Pyramid – Afghanistan 2022," PopulationPyramid.Net, accessed November 1, 2023, <https://www.populationpyramid.net/afghanistan/2022/>; "Young People," UNFPA, accessed November 1, 2023, <https://afghanistan.unfpa.org/en/node/15227>.

¹¹ Abdul Basit Amal, "The Taliban Are Stuck in the Past – But Afghan Youth Can Create a Better Future," United States Institute of Peace, August 11, 2022, <https://www.usip.org/blog/2022/08/taliban-are-stuck-past-afghan-youth-can-create-better-future>.

¹² Emma Graham-Harrison, "Young Afghans Form New Political Movement With Hopes for the Future," *The Guardian*, December 12, 2012, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/dec/12/afghanistan-new-political-party>; Rael Reid, "Afghanistan 1400: The Dawn and Decline of a Political Movement," Afghanistan Analyst Network, March 24, 2021, <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/reports/rights-freedom/afghanistan-1400-the-dawn-and-decline-of-a-political-movement/>.

Most of the Afghan business leaders are already members of and working through Afghanistan Chamber of Commerce and Investment (ACCI) to tackle their collective challenges and seek investment and market opportunities.¹³ ACCI is led by Khan Jan Alokozay, who is still based in Kabul. Alokozay and the ACCI are strategically positioned to influence all the stakeholders including the Taliban to build compromise in order to seek an acceptable, sustainable solution on the way forward for Afghanistan. In this way, the ACCI can drive the conditions for stability necessary to achieve their business interests.

Moreover, there is also a prominent Afghan businessman turned to politics - Ahmad Shah Durrani - who is based in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and his political group, who are scattered across Afghanistan and around the world. This group, along with other prominent business leaders, has the potential to play a mediating role between all the non-Taliban Afghans, and eventually with the Taliban, to help guide an intra-Afghan negotiation towards successful conclusion. To initiate such a negotiation and ensure its durability, however, will require legitimization and input from pre-existing political leaders and institutions.

2. POLITICAL LEADERS

The three most relevant, influential personalities in the Afghan political scene remain the two former presidents, Hamid Karzai and Mohammad Ashraf Ghani, and their only prominent rival (as well as some-times partner in government) Dr. Abdullah Abdullah. Despite facing restriction on his travels abroad, Hamid Karzai is still in Kabul and continues to meet with Afghan and international community members. Dr. Abdullah does not appear to have restrictions on his travels abroad, resides in Kabul, and continues to engage the Taliban, foreign dignitaries, and a wide array of Afghans. From the trio, the exception is former president Ashraf Ghani, who after fleeing Kabul on August 15, 2021, has ended up living in the UAE, and has been minimally engaging and speaking on Afghanistan.¹⁴

Together, the three of them represent a wide swath of Afghan society who voted for them in previous presidential elections. While it is hard to say if the same electorate would still support or vote for them again, based on their past credentials in the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan during the last two decades, the three personalities should be considered the most senior non-Taliban state leaders of Afghanistan today.

There is an argument among some Afghans and allies that former president Ashraf Ghani's escape from Kabul in August 2021 discredits him and voids his contributions to any future discussions about Afghanistan.¹⁵ However, a future Afghan government emerging from intra-Afghan negotiations would still need internal as well as external legitimacy, which could be reinforced by an official ceremony that includes power transfer. If Ghani is able, then he presumably should be present at that ceremony to perform the power transfer as the last elected head of state.

Moreover, the collective involvement, buy-in, and – eventually – approval, of these former leaders is critically important to facilitate any intra-Afghan negotiations, which could lead to establishing an inclusive, post-settlement Afghan Government. The backing of these personalities would be essential to ensure domestic legitimacy, and it will assist with obtaining regional and international recognition of any future Afghan government. Based on their past credentials, and their potential to play a positive role in the future of Afghanistan, especially during negotiations, and to legitimize the transition of power for any future Afghan government, they need to have seats at the negotiating table with the Taliban.

¹³ "About Us," Afghanistan Chamber of Commerce and Investment, accessed November 1, 2023, <https://acci.org.af/en/about-us.html>.

¹⁴ "Afghanistan's Former President Ashraf Ghani on U.S. withdrawal and Taliban Take Over," *PBS Newshour*, August 25, 2022, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/afghanistans-former-president-ashraf-ghani-on-the-u-s-withdrawal-and-taliban-takeover>; Sharif Hassan, "Former Afghan President Says he Fled Nation to Save Kabul," *The New York Times*, December 30, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/30/world/asia/ashraf-ghani-bbc-interview.html>. ernment, European Commission, accessed March 9, 2023, https://climate.ec.europa.eu/eu-action/eu-emissions-trading-system-eu-ets_en.

¹⁵ Ali M. Latifi, "Unpatriotic: Afghans Slam President Ghani's Swift Departure," *Aljazeera*, August 15, 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/8/15/a-disgrace-people-in-afghanistan-slam-ghanis-swift-departure>; Samuel Chamberlain, "GOP Reps Ask for Probe of Reckless and Cowardly Ex-Afghan Leader," *New York Post*, August 24, 2021, <https://nypost.com/2021/08/24/gop-reps-ask-for-probe-of-reckless-and-cowardly-ex-afghan-leader/>; Charles R. Davis, "Afghanistan's Last President, Ashraf Ghani, Rejects Comparison to Ukraine's Zelensky Says He's Live an Honorable Life," *Business Insider*, August 23, 2022, <https://www.businessinsider.com/afghanistan-ashraf-ghani-rejects-blame-game-comparison-to-zelensky-2022-8>.

The High Council for National Resistance consists of leaders of the three prominent political parties, along with a few other smaller parties, factions, and personalities, who have been involved in Afghan politics. These are the paramount power brokers who dominated the Afghan political scene for decades.¹⁶ The three political parties are Jamiat-e-Islami led by former foreign minister Salahuddin Rabbani, Junbish-e-Milli Islami led by former vice president Marshall Abdul Rashid Dostum, and Hezb-e-Wahdat Islami Mardom led by former vice president Haji Mohammad Mohaqiq. All three are now based in Turkey. The council also includes former governor of Herat Ismail Khan, who resides in Iran, former vice president Mohammad Younus Qanuni, who is based in the United Kingdom, and former governor of Balkh Atta Mohammad Noor, among others.

These leaders and their political parties actively participated in the Jihad against the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan. Some of them were involved in the Afghan Civil War, and later they were part of the Northern Alliance resistance against the first takeover of the Taliban between 1996-2001. As a result, they also played a key role in toppling the Taliban with the help of U.S. Special Forces in 2001 and held power in the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan between 2001-2021.

These leaders still draw support from their ethnic constituencies and the majority membership of their political parties are essentially from their own ethnic groups.¹⁷ The High Council for National Resistance does not lead any armed resistance against the Taliban. Instead, they collectively approved and support the ongoing armed resistance by NRF led by Ahmad Massoud who is a member of the Council.¹⁸

While it is difficult to establish the High Council's level of influence in Afghanistan today, considering the traditional nature of the Afghan society, as well as its recent history of civil war based on ethnicity, it is important to make sure any future Afghan government is inclusive of all ethnic groups. Involving the leaders of the High Council for National Resistance and securing their approval of a post-settlement Afghan Islamic government, would be critical for the optics (and reality) of inclusivity, and as a result boost the internal legitimacy of any future government.

There are former governor of Bamiyan Habiba Sarabi, former members of parliament Shukria Barakzai, Fawzia Koofi, and Naheed Ahmadi Farid, and the former minister of public health, Dr. Suraya Dalil, who can collectively build consensus among various women's groups for them to have a unified position in the intra-Afghan negotiations with the Taliban.

There are also several additional political leaders, who may play important and constructive roles. Hezb-e-Islami Gulbuddin Hekmatyar and prominent former member of Parliament Ramazan Bashardost reside in Kabul and could play a supporting role in the efforts from inside Afghanistan, led by Abdullah Abdullah and Hamid Karzai, to work with the moderate elements of the Taliban to move towards negotiating with other Afghans.

Former national security advisors Dr. Rangin Dadfar Spanta and Mohammad Hanif Atmar, could serve as a useful interlocutors to encourage the regional and international diplomatic community to play constructive roles. Meanwhile former chiefs of intelligence Rahmatullah Nabil, and Mohammad Massoud Andarabi could serve as intermediaries with former military leadership, uniformed and civilians, as well as the High Council for National Resistance, and other armed resistance groups (see below), to encourage them to choose peaceful settlement of their disputes with the Taliban.

Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF) leaders are another key stakeholder of the Afghan political landscape. Many of the leaders of the ANDSF, both those who reside inside Afghanistan

¹⁶ Saqalain Eqbal, "Ankara Gathering of Political Figures Forms the Supreme Council of National Resistance for the Salvation of Afghanistan," *The Khaama Press News Agency*, May 19, 2022, <https://www.khaama.com/ankara-gathering-of-political-figures-forms-the-supreme-council-of-national-resistance-for-the-salvation-of-afghanistan68391/>; Lynne O'Donnell, "Afghanistan's Warlords Prepare their Comeback," *Foreign Policy*, June 14, 2022, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/06/14/afghanistan-warlords-taliban-authority-comeback/>; Prakesh Dutta, "Dateline Afghanistan: Meet the Warlords Even the Taliban Fear," *India Today*, September 3, 2021, <https://www.indiatoday.in/world/story/meet-afghanistan-warlords-even-the-taliban-fear-1848691-2021-09-03>.

¹⁷ "Afghanistan: Political Parties and Insurgent Groups 2001-2013," Australian Government Migration Review Tribunal, March 7, 2013, https://www.ecoi.net/en/file/local/1131715/1226_1369733768_ppig2.pdf.

¹⁸ Dawi, "Frustrated with the Taliban, US Officials Meet with Anti-Taliban Figures."

and those abroad, still enjoy the respect of segments of Afghan society.¹⁹ Their professionalism, national orientation, and their collective commitment to stay out of politics was respected by Afghans from all walks of life, including those with different and even opposing political orientations.²⁰

There are criticisms from some Afghans, as well from some in the United States and its NATO allies, levied against the ANDSF for their unwillingness to fight and their large-scale surrender to the Taliban in the months leading to August 2021.²¹ In retrospect, this criticism does not stand for several reasons.²² The broader context of the U.S.-Taliban agreement, the abrupt and uncoordinated U.S. forces withdrawal, the absence of a practical mechanism for financial and ammunition support for the ANDSF from the United States and allies, and a divided political leadership unwilling to lead, were all factors that offset the ANDSF's resistance dissolving in 2021.²³

Moreover, the ANDSF leaders are well-positioned to organize and rebuild the capabilities of the Afghan defense sector quickly, which could serve as an enforcement guarantor to any outcome from the intra-Afghan negotiations in place of an international United Nations (UN) Peacekeeping role or other foreign mechanism due to Afghan sensitivities.²⁴ Similarly, they could ensure that Afghanistan's commitments to the international community, especially on counter-terrorism, counter-narcotics, and other security concerns, are fulfilled on behalf of a future post-settlement Afghan Islamic government.

The ANDSF made tremendous sacrifices in the twenty-year war, and as such they should have a prominent seat at the table in any future intra-Afghan negotiations with the Taliban. In addition to their presence, any negotiation also needs to account for those still fighting – the current armed resistance to the Taliban.

3. ARMED RESISTANCE

Since the takeover of power by the Taliban in Aug. 2021, there has been sporadic armed resistance against the Taliban in pockets of Afghanistan, especially in the Northern, Eastern, and Southern regions.²⁵ While various armed groups have released launching videos and statements to fight against the Taliban, only two have been able to establish themselves as having any real fighting capability; the Afghanistan Freedom Front (AFF) led by General Yasin Zia, former chief of general staff of the Afghan National Army, and the National Resistance Front (NRF) led by Ahmad Massoud, the son of late Ahmad Shah Massoud, whose group is also backed by former vice president of Afghanistan Amrullah Saleh.²⁶

It is unclear how many fighters, and what types of weapons, logistics, and financial support these groups have, but from time to time there are reports of sporadic attacks against the Taliban, which are being

¹⁹ “No member of Former Afghan Security Forces Harmed by Taliban, Claims Group’s Deputy PM,” *Afghanistan International*, March 23, 2023, <https://www.afintl.com/en/202303232112>.

²⁰ “ANDSF; Pride of our Nation,” *Kabul Times*, February 5, 2019, <https://thekabultimes.com/andsf-pride-of-our-nation/>; “Afghans Hail Heroic Effort of Country’s Security Forces,” *Afghanistan Asia News*, December 28, 2016, https://afghanistan.asia-news.com/en_GB/articles/cnmi_st/features/2016/12/28/feature-01.

²¹ Haley Britzky, “Biden Says Buck Stops with Me After Blaming Afghan Military For Country’s Downfall,” *Task and Purpose*, August 17, 2021, <https://taskandpurpose.com/news/afghanistan-biden-address-blame/>; Christina L. Arabia, “The Collapse of the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces: Implications for U.S. Security Assistance and Cooperation,” Congressional Research Service, August 23, 2021, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IN/IN11728>.

²² Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, “SIGAR Interim Report: Collapse of the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces: An Assessment of the Factors That Led to Its Demise,” May 2022, <https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/evaluations/SIGAR-22-22-IP.pdf>; Anthony H. Cordesman, “The Reasons for the Collapse of Afghan Forces,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, August 17, 2021, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/reasons-collapse-afghan-forces>.

²³ Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, “Why The Afghan Security Forces Collapsed,” February 2023, <https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/evaluations/SIGAR-23-16-IP.pdf>.

²⁴ Kevin Baker, “The Old Cliché About Afghanistan that Won’t Die,” *POLITICO*, August 28, 2021, <https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2021/08/28/afghanistan-graveyard-britain-us-russia-506990>;

²⁵ Khalid Mafton, “Do the Taliban Face Potent Armed Resistance in Afghanistan,” *Voice of America*, August 14, 2022, <https://www.voanews.com/a/do-the-taliban-face-potent-armed-resistance-in-afghanistan-/6700348.html>; Lynne O’Donnell, “Afghan Resistance Leaders See No Option But War,” *Foreign Policy*, September 29, 2022, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/09/29/afghanistan-taliban-resistance-terrorism-jihad/>; Franz J. Marty, “Viva La Resistance in Afghanistan,” Swiss Institute for Global Affairs, April 7, 2022, <https://www.globalaffairs.ch/2022/04/07/vive-la-r%C3%A9sistance-in-afghanistan/>.

²⁶ Marty, “Viva La Resistance in Afghanistan.”

claimed by the two fronts.²⁷ Unlike in the 1990s, the Taliban have now been able to establish and further their relationships with India and Iran, who were the two key supporters of the Northern Alliance resistance led by Ahmad Shah Massoud in the 1990s. Moreover, the United States and its allies have publicly declared that they are not supporting armed resistance against the Taliban. Today, Tajikistan is the only country in the neighborhood that is facilitating the presence of some of the NRF leaders, and even Tajikistan is involved in back-channel negotiations with the Taliban, which could further restrict the maneuverability of the NRF leaders.²⁸

Hence, with no real support from the region or from the international community, the future of the resistance appears to be bleak. But given their existing capabilities to cause damage to the Taliban, as well as their will to continue to seek support from countries around the world and to recruit Afghans to challenge the Taliban by armed resistance, their buy-in is essential to bring about a comprehensive and lasting peace in Afghanistan.

CONCLUSION

The Taliban, despite their internal differences stemming from the presence of various competing networks, factions, and personalities, is still a coherent political-military group whose members appear to remain loyal to their pledge of allegiance to their leader, Haibatullah Akhundzada. They have a political office in Doha, and they can easily dispatch their assigned delegates without any internal fuss anywhere to negotiate with other Afghans.²⁹ But this is not true for the non-Taliban Afghan political stakeholders, who are far from unity, and far from being ready to have a broadly representative negotiating delegation.

The U.S.-Taliban deal remains a viable document. As a result, in the absence of any other political roadmap to address the current Afghan crisis, all of the domestic, regional, and international stakeholders need to hold the Taliban accountable to it and utilize all means necessary at their disposal to bring the Taliban and the non-Taliban Afghans back to the intra-Afghan negotiating table. There are two pathways readily available to do this: economic and political.

For the economic path, the U.S. and other international stakeholders could utilize the Taliban's repeatedly stated position that they are keen on economic recovery and development of Afghanistan. In this scenario, the Taliban need to be convinced that a political solution driven by intra-Afghan negotiation resulting in an inclusive legitimate government is the only pathway that could lead to lifting of sanctions, removal of their leadership from blacklists, and allowing trade, investments, and aid to flow. Long term, this course would also permit economic recovery packages from friends of Afghanistan.

On the political path, the UN-led initiative in May 2023 to bring together special envoys in Doha to discuss the situation in Afghanistan was a good start to building regional and international consensus on the path forward for Afghanistan.³⁰ Such gatherings will need to involve representatives from key non-Taliban Afghans outlined above, to create the necessary pressure and momentum to bring the Taliban at the negotiating table with other Afghans. The UN needs to ensure the Taliban understand, that if they fail to negotiate with other Afghans, then by spearheading the international community's

²⁷ Masood Farivar, "Afghan Fighting Season Ushers in New Anti-Taliban Group," *Voice of America*, April 28, 2022, <https://www.voanews.com/al-afghan-fighting-season-ushers-in-new-anti-taliban-groups/6542148.html>; "Afghanistan's Security Challenges Under the Taliban," International Crisis Group, August 12, 2022, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-asia/afghanistan/afghanistans-security-challenges-under-taliban>; Christopher Solomon, "The Anti-Taliban Resistance: A Battle for Afghanistan's Future," *The New Arab*, September 27, 2022, <https://www.newarab.com/analysis/anti-taliban-resistance-and-afghanistans-future>.

²⁸ Tom Wheeldon, "Afghan Opposition Very Weak Despite Mounting Anger Against Taliban," *France 24*, August 15, 2022, <https://www.france24.com/en/asia-pacific/20220815-afghan-opposition-very-weak-despite-mounting-public-anger-against-taliban>; "Tajikistan: Taliban Take Control of Consulate," *eurasianet*, March 27, 2023, <https://eurasianet.org/tajikistan-taliban-take-control-of-consulate>; Mumin Ahmadi, Sirojiddin Tolibov, and Nigorai Fazliddin, "Tajikistan Concerned by Provocative Taliban Watchtower on Border," *Radio Liberty*, July 12, 2022, <https://www.rferl.org/a/tajikistan-border-afghanistan-taliban/31939669.html>.

²⁹ "Doha Office Serves as Link Between Kabul – International Community: Wardak," *ToloNews*, March 20, 2022, <https://tolonews.com/afghanistan-177192>; Ava Batrawy, "Qatar Emerges as Key Player in Afghanistan After US Pullout," *Associated Press*, August 30, 2021, <https://apnews.com/article/middle-east-afghanistan-qatar-6c1e9e4ef1a9f0c3d19eac20b9321339>.

³⁰ Osama Bin Javaid, "UN Holds Crucial Afghanistan Talks in Qatar without Taliban," *Aljazeera*, May 1, 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/5/1/un-holds-crucial-afghanistan-talks-in-qatar-without-taliban>; Lujain Jo, "UN Summit in Qatar on Afghanistan Ends, Another Planned," *Associated Press*, May 2, 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/qatar-afghanistan-un-summit-a8cad5ac674f66b21236437160a668c3>

collective resolve the UN could resort to imposing further sanctions on individual Taliban leaders and could even explore options with member states to detain Taliban leaders, who are on the blacklists of the United States and other countries. As a last resort, the UN could signal a possibility of forming, and even recognizing a government in exile led by non-Taliban Afghans, that would be the beginning of the Taliban's eventual downfall. Serious signaling on these likely steps by the international community would ensure the Taliban abide by the Doha agreement and announce their willingness to negotiate with other Afghans.

As a next step, the international community and the United States could tap into the potential of these key non-Taliban Afghan stakeholders, which if engaged and deployed collectively, could bring about the domestic, regional, and international momentum necessary to not only bring the Taliban to the negotiating table, but also make sure the negotiations lead to an acceptable outcome. An outcome that could allow Afghanistan to have a legitimate government internally, which could respect human rights, especially women's rights, and allow women and girls back to schools and work, and one which could be recognized internationally, gaining much-needed reconstruction assistance, and equally important, could serve as a reliable security partner for the international community.

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