

In Search of Peace for Afghanistan

Historical Letters of President Najibullah
and Dr. M. Hassan Kakar

A Collection of Essays

Edited by Jawan Shir Rasikh
with a Foreword by Lakhdar Brahimi

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Jawan Shir Rasikh

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Cover illustration—President Najibullah's and M. Hassan Kakar's original letters in Dari (courtesy of Kakar's family).

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To Those Who Have Been Striving for Peace in Afghanistan

FOREWORD

Lakhdar Brahimi

*Former Special Representative of the United Nations Secretary General for Afghanistan,
1996-1997, and 2001-2004*

When the Soviet Union at long last agreed to withdraw its troops from Afghanistan in 1989 but was still supporting its government, President Najibullah had a plan for reconciliation for his country. He explained and defended it in the letters to Professor Hassan Kakar published in this volume. As an Afghan academic, having opposed Soviet military presence in his country from day one, Kakar suggested a fundamentally different plan.

Najibullah's plan made sense as long as Soviet support was available to him. When the Soviet Union ceased to exist, he was in trouble. The United Nation's plan submitted in 1992 by Benon Sevan, the then Special Representative of the United Nations Secretary General, contained elements from Najibullah's plan and ideas from the Mujahedin factions. It resembled the ideas put forward by Kakar. Najibullah accepted it readily. So did the Mujahedin factions and Pakistan at first. The United States and the Soviet Union had seemingly offered their support to Benon Sevan's plan. But the Soviet Union was fast disintegrating and the United States simply lost interest in Afghanistan. When Benon Sevan arrived in Kabul to take Najibullah away to India, as the first step in the implementation of his plan, he found that the Mujahedin had changed their minds and Najibullah had been betrayed by practically all of his supporters: he was not even allowed to reach the airport and leave with Benon Sevan in the middle of that fateful April 1992 night. That was the end of Najibullah's role in Afghanistan's affairs and the beginning of his personal tragedy.

When I suspended my first mission in Afghanistan, in 1997, I warned the Security Council that I was giving up in protest for their lack of interest in Afghanistan and the little support I was receiving from them. I also warned them that they were wrong to neglect Afghanistan in such a manner because it was far away, poor and of no great strategic importance to anyone. That was wrong, I said, because even a conflict in such an unimportant country may well spill over far and wide one of these days. As we know it did, on 11 September, 2001.

When the then United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan called me back immediately after that tragedy, there was, all of a sudden, a huge interest for Afghanistan. It was taken for granted that that would translate into strong and lasting support for the United Nations peace plan. The Bonn Conference was a success largely because of that level of international interest. It served Afghanistan and International Community well. We naturally were fully aware that each major power had come with its own agenda to Bonn and it was the duty of the United Nations to do its best to provide all of the support it could to the people of Afghanistan. And that is what we did as representatives of the United Nation and the international community.

In Bonn, I told the Afghan participants several times that they were not fully representative of the diversity of the people of Afghanistan. I also told them that if we do come up with a good agreement, and then you go back home and reach out to all those who are not represented here, nobody will remember that the participants did not represent all of the people of Afghanistan.

The Taliban were naturally not present in Bonn. They had not been invited and I believe that if they had been, they would have refused to come. Although they were controlling almost 95% of the country on the eve of 9/11, they had been routed by the might of the US War machine. Many were killed; some were detained; others crossed into Pakistan. But, the overwhelming majority were not accounted for; they just melted down back in the midst of their communities. To those who said that it could be very constructive to seek the Taliban out, both the new leadership in Afghanistan as well as the foreign powers represented in the country were unanimous: the Taliban are gone; they have been defeated; they do not exist anymore. And that was that.

I was told not long ago that Taliban leaders were open to and made peace overtures to the new Afghan government of President Hamid Karzai, although it is unclear if the efforts were pursued seriously and through trusted sources. It is clear though that the new Afghan government and its major international allies didn't prioritize peace with the Taliban at the beginning. Be that as it may, we know today that those who, in the early days of the implementation of the Bonn Agreement said the Taliban were not going to disappear and suggested - too timidly perhaps - to seek them out should have been heard. Perhaps the agreement's implementation could have been better - it had mechanisms to make the government more inclusive.

Despite all the work of so many people these past years, the country fell back into war. Lessons to learn from the past are many. The little I picked up during my personal involvement in peace making tells me that there is nowhere an exhaustive list, a check list of sorts, that would offer the perfect road map for resolving a conflict that does not exist. It is now well known that "no two conflicts are alike." The central requirement is, each time, a good, comprehensive understanding of the conflict - and that is easier said

than done. We know always much less than there is to know. There is an almost endless list of questions to answer to try to understand a particular conflict: what is this country, its past, its present? Who are the groups involved and their leaders? Who are the victims? Nor is it possible to stop at what is actually happening inside the country concerned. There invariably is a vitally important regional context and a wider, international context. Even the so-called international community will be different from one place to the other, from one conflict to the next. For Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran and India are more important than the whole of Europe, Africa and Latin America put together. For the Congo, little Burundi is more important than Japan, Indonesia and all of Eastern Europe.

In this connection, again in my personal experience, outsiders seem to find it difficult to resist the temptation of projecting their own likes and dislikes, their own prejudices, perhaps even their fantasies, into the equation. There is a tendency – natural perhaps, but on the whole rather negative – to pass hasty judgments and to rush to conclusions and even solutions that have little to do with the hard realities of the situation.

Contributors to this volume -Afghans and non-Afghans, academics and practitioners - bring an impressive amount of wisdom and experience to the literature on Afghanistan. Let us also take a close look at who is doing the analysis here: some internationals, yes, some veterans of Afghanistan's long wars – but mostly a new generation of Afghans, most of who were born around and or after 1990 when Najibullah and Hassan Kakar corresponded. They include Kakar's son, Kawun Kakar, a lawyer who worked for the United Nations Assistance Mission for Afghanistan after 2001, when I was the Special Representative of the Secretary-General in Kabul. There are so many others, men and women, who have studied in the world's best universities to search again peace for Afghanistan.

When people ask me how to work for peace, I say, there is no substitute to listening to the people. That is the ultimate test of the quality of what one has learned from experts, books, and reports. So I will stop talking and just suggest that we listen to other writers who study the various aspects of war making and peacemaking efforts in Afghanistan.

PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This volume is the result of dedicated, solid, and volunteering work put in by many people and institutions, both from inside and outside Afghanistan.

The project started first with a conversation in Kabul a year ago between Kawun Kakar, Janan Mosazai, Omar Sharifi, and Jawed Ludin, about Najibullah–Kakar letters exchanged in 1990 and the lessons they offer for peace in Afghanistan. The initial idea was to translate the letters from Dari into Pashto and English, and publish them for the public audience. At the end of that discussion, however, it was agreed to expand the initiative and have a wider call for papers based on the letters with the aim of a fresh and critical reflection on past and present of peacemaking efforts concerning Afghanistan. Not much later, Jawan Shir Rasikh was invited to join the conversation, and graciously accepted to lead the entire editing process.

As it is detailed in the introduction to this volume, the response from the contributors was overwhelmingly positive. We are immensely grateful to all of them for they made this volume possible. We also thank the Afghan participants of two pre-publication events held in late summer of 2019 in Kabul at Kakar History Foundation and Heart of Asia Society. Their insights on war and peace makings in Afghanistan were valuable for writing the introduction. We would like to take this opportunity to extend our collective gratitude also to author of the foreword to the volume, the always gracious Lakhdar Brahimi.

The production of such a volume requires extensive specialist and technical assistance that the following persons provided with dedication and patience: Maiwand Abbas, Mostafa Fata, Farhad Farhaad, Fabrizio Foschini, Baburzai Hiwaddust, Husna Jalal, Suleman Khplwak, Thomas Kraemer, Charlotte Maxwell-Jones, Sultan Sanjar Rasikh, Saifullah Sikandary, and Samiullah Zyar. We are grateful to all of them. In addition to the current English volume which is being translated into Pashto and Dari, a connected but separate independent volume with contributions in Dari and Pashto is simultaneously being published, with contributions by ten Afghan scholars and public intellectuals, including former and current members of Afghan Mujahedin and communist parties, civil society, and policy practitioners. We thank Zarin Anzoor and Khalilullah Afzali for overseeing the editing and translation of the Dari-Pashto volume.

We would like to extend our gratitude to several persons who also shared generously their time, expertise, and resources. Our thanks go to Ahmad Farid Tookhy whose inputs helped shape importantly the volume in the beginning. We also thank

Bashir Bakhshi, Faisal Chaudhary, Manizha Hakimi, Gran Hewad, Idrees Ilham, Abaceen Nasimi, Saman Nasser, Latif Salem, and Waheed Wafa for their generous time, either reading some version of the introduction to this volume, and or sharing their thoughtful views about it. Our gratitude also goes to Partha Chakrabartty for his superb copyediting of the essays. In a spirit of reflection, we thank Khwaga Kakar, Kawun's sister and the daughter of Dr. Hassan Kakar, for her personal and professional efforts, commitment, and labor to ensure that all goes well and efficiently with the publication of the volume, including its cover design. Last but not least, we are indebted to the Royal Government of Norway for their generous funding support for publication of this volume. In particular, we are grateful to Per Albert Ilsaas, the Norwegian Special Representative for Afghanistan, and Abdul Suboh Faizy, Senior Advisor to the Royal Norwegian Embassy in Kabul for their support.

We hope this volume proves a worthwhile contribution to the reflections, conversations, and debates on the current peace process concerning Afghanistan, and one to which, every Afghan woman and man looks at with utmost desire and hope for peace in their country, which we also believe is both more imperative and within reach now more than at any point over the past forty years.

Kawun Kakar, Jawed Ludin, Janan Mosazai, and Jawan Shir Rasikh

Kabul and Toronto, February 2021

PREFATORY NOTE

The contributors to this volume have used a variety of transliteration styles and spelling conventions in English from Arabic script based languages, such as Dari and Pashto. To make it easier for non-specialist readers, the editor has decided to standardize as necessary the use of non-Latin terms, such as 'Hasan' or 'Hassan' and or 'Najib,' 'Najibullah,' 'Najeeb,' or 'Najeebullah.' Diacritics have not been changed from individual essays when they were used. Common words, such as 'mujahedin,' are not italicized and translated. All translation and transliteration in the introduction to the volume are by Jawan Shir Rasikh and Kawun Kakar unless noted otherwise.

INTRODUCTION

Jawan Shir Rasikh, Kawun Kakar, and Janan Mosazai

‘If wars abound, so do peace efforts.’¹

The origin of this collection of essays lies in the discovery in 2019 of three letters of Afghanistan President Najibullah (1949–1996) and historian Mohammad Hassan Kakar (1929–2017).² The letters were exchanged in 1990, two years after the signing of the Geneva Accords of 1988, affirming the withdrawal of the Soviet forces from Afghanistan after ten years of conflict since the invasion of the country in 1979.³ In the correspondence, Najibullah and Kakar share a variety of views about the nature of ‘war and peace makings’⁴ in their country and the future of post-Soviet Afghanistan, in the context of Najibullah’s National Reconciliation Policy (NRP), and geopolitics of the then internationalized conflict in Afghanistan despite the Soviet withdrawal from the country a year earlier.⁵

¹ Kakar, *Soviet Invasion*, (1995), 106.

² The letters were found in early 2019 by Suleman Khplwak, a staff member of Kakar History Foundation, when the works, correspondence, and other historical materials of Kakar were being cataloged after being moved to Kabul from Concord, California, where he passed away in 2017. For more information on the Foundation, see www.kakarfoundation.com. For the original manuscript version of the letters in Dari (the Afghan Persian), see Appendix A to this volume; for their English translation, see Appendix B. Najibullah’s letters and Kakar’s letter are hereafter cited as NL and KL. All quotations from the letters in this introduction are based on the manuscript copy.

³ More later on the Geneva Accords and Soviet withdrawal.

⁴ In this introduction, ‘war and peace makings’ is used in plural as a heuristic for elucidating the simultaneity of war and peace in Afghanistan, meaning that while various types of wars (e.g., Soviet war, Mujahedin wars, Taliban wars, and ‘war on terror’) have been waged in Afghanistan during the past forty-plus years, there have been also a number of attempts to bring peace to the country, though unsuccessful yet.

⁵ The existing literature on war and peace makings in Afghanistan is taxing and in many languages. As of this writing (February 2021), a simple Google search in English, such as “wars in Afghanistan,” results in more than one million hits, while “peace in Afghanistan” results in close to three million hits; there are currently hundreds of active governmental, public, and private agencies, organizations, and programs dealing, often overlappingly, with matters of war and peace makings concerning Afghanistan both inside and outside the country. Only those works directly relied upon are cited.

Najibullah and Kakar exchanged a number of broad and specific ideas, including their collective recognition and emphasis on the possibility of making a lasting peace which “is in reality firstly the responsibility of every individual Afghan,” flaws of the NRP, the need for creation of an inclusive and self-determining governing national framework, and the future of millions of Afghan refugees and internally displaced persons. In addition to focusing on the domestic aspects of war and peace makings in Afghanistan, they recognize and emphasize the nature of foreign military and political interventions in Afghanistan, especially then by the Soviet Union and Pakistan (both countries “half” of the problem in Afghanistan as Kakar describes it), as impediments to peace.⁶ They both appreciate and emphasize that any resolution to the conflict in Afghanistan was also, as Kakar summarizes it, “in the end, in reality, beyond the power of Afghans, depended [rather] upon the foreign powers (*qudrat’ha-yi khariji*).”⁷ Moreover, while both Najibullah and Kakar agree that it was impossible to resolve the conflict in Afghanistan without foreign powers ceasing their interventions in the internal affairs of Afghans (*mauzu’at dakhili afghanha*), they concur that the Afghan people “could not wait for foreigners” to bring peace to their country, and that “it would also be a useless vanity not to seek the necessary assistance [to end] our national and human catastrophe,” which has become “nowadays a tragedy, to the extent that it appears irresolvable.”⁸

The three letters, two from Najibullah and one from Kakar, are together a total of forty pages in their original manuscript version. The first letter, which initiates this “dialogue” (*bahs*) as Najibullah calls his correspondence with Kakar, is dated Dalw 1368 (February 1990), and is five pages, while the second letter a “reply” as Kakar characterizes his letter to Najibullah, is dated June 12, 1990 (Jawza 22, 1369), and is twenty-nine pages. The third letter from Najibullah is six pages, and is dated Saratan 30, 1369 (July 21, 1990).⁹ However, after the second letter written as a response to Kakar in which Najibullah shows keen interest in the various ideas of the former, the correspondence thereafter ceases for reasons unknown.¹⁰

⁶ KL, 12-14.

⁷ KL, 4.

⁸ KL, 2.

⁹ To keep the calendric integrity of the letters, the mixed date system, namely the Afghan Hejri Shamsi and Gregorian calendars that Najibullah and Kakar use in their letters, has been followed. While it is now a standard practice in Afghan state internal and external legal and political affairs as well as across much of the Afghan society and public culture (e.g., local media) to use simultaneously a mixture of Islamic and Afghan Hejri Shamsi and Gregorian calendars, this was hardly the case in Afghanistan before the Soviet invasion of the country.

¹⁰ Kakar himself translated in 1990 into English Najibullah’s first original letter and his reply letter. Kakar’s translations of these two letters into English included to this volume were edited for corrections by Kawun Kakar and Jawan Shir Rasikh based on the original Dari manuscript copy of the letters also included to this volume. Najibullah’s second letter was translated into English by Ambassador Janan Mosazai.

While the current foreign forces cannot remain forever in Afghanistan, the Afghan sides of the conflict themselves have not only failed to move forward from their currently start-to-stop talks to start to prioritize peace over war, such as making ceasefire, in the battered and traumatized Afghan society, but also the current ruling elites are still deeply divided along their factional, class, and political-ideological lines about what kind of post-American Afghanistan they want.⁴⁷ Nevertheless, while this is a make-or-break question of the current intra-Afghan talks that the Afghan parties to the current war and peace making processes will ultimately need to answer, as of now as this volume goes to press, neither Afghan government and Taliban as local parties, nor the American-led international forces as a global party to the war, have reached an 'agreement' to result in peace to Afghanistan after forty plus years of internationalized conflict in the country.

It is therefore unknown what a formal American disengagement from Afghanistan exactly will mean in the short or long-term to the country. The long-term ecological-human and political consequences to Afghanistan from the global war on terror fought in the country on a much greater scale, and, so far, twice the number of years that the Soviets fought in Afghanistan, cannot be known as of yet. As far as a lasting peace in Afghanistan is concerned, however, neither invasions of Afghanistan nor withdrawals from it by global powers have been historically as such about Afghanistan and or about resulting in peace in the country. As a matter of fact, the US political and military leaders have insisted that they have been fighting in Afghanistan for their own 'national interests,' not Afghanistan's even if they say that they would like to see the country in peace. To put it in big historical perspective, at least since the nineteenth century, when Afghanistan gradually came into existence as an independent modern geographical-political entity, the country has been periodically under various global economic and military pressures, interventions, occupations, and withdrawals, for national and global concerns of the invading global powers. The British empire, for instance, in the nineteenth century invaded, occupied, and then withdrew from Afghanistan twice in the name of defending its crown colony of India in the so-called Great Game against the then Russian empire, resulting both times in devastation of Afghan society itself, even if Afghans 'won' the two imperial colonial wars against the British Indian armies.⁴⁸

Similar to the British Indian colonial interventions, the Soviet invasion of and withdrawal from Afghanistan led to periods of internationalized conflict, political

⁴⁷ For an introduction to the state of disunity among current Afghan elites, see Hassan and Wardak, "A house divided," (2020).

⁴⁸ For the British Indian colonial intervention in Afghanistan and imperial-colonial impoverishment of the Afghan society argument in the nineteenth century historiography of Afghanistan and the importance to understand alternatively from the conventional narrative the various modern imperial interventions in Afghanistan and their effects on the Afghan society, see, for example, Hanifi, *Connecting Histories*, (2011). For a review of this argument, see Rasikh, "Connecting Histories," (2020).

a year earlier after ten years of fighting without resulting in any peace in Afghan society and in 2021 as the United States-led NATO military forces are debating their expected withdrawal from the country after twenty years of 'war on terror' without ending either the 'terror' nor the 'terrorists' in the country, it is also time for those who are in search of peace not just to make the blunders of previous peace making processes, but also not to end the current globalized conflict in the country by starting new internationalized civil wars. As Najibullah and Kakar recognized and debated in their peace letters to each other thirty years ago, what is ultimately needed in the search for peace for Afghanistan is an inclusive, sustainable, and comprehensive peace agreement in which *establishing a lasting peace in Afghanistan* must be the first and last condition, as well as the first and last priority in any reconciliation and peacemaking efforts concerning the current national-regional-global war in the country, especially so in the currently pandemic-infected world in which no one could be immune not just from a natural disease that no one can see, but also from a human disease, namely war, without regards to where it occurs, where it not.

PART ONE

The Najibullah-Kakar Correspondence in
Perspectives

President Najibullah's Correspondence with Dr. M. Hassan Kakar: A Historian's Perspective

Timothy Nunan

Abstract

When Kawun Kakar, the Director of Kakar History Foundation (KHF), approached me to contribute to this project, I was immediately interested. The correspondence between President Najibullah (1947–1996) and Dr. M. Hassan Kakar (1929–2017) during a decisive turning point in the history of Afghanistan offered new documentary insight into how Najibullah and Kakar envisioned the future of their country. And while historians are often uncomfortable with drawing direct lessons from the past to apply to the present, the correspondence between Najibullah and Kakar offers a chance to set current dilemmas of intra-Afghan peace talks in historical relief. In what follows, I place the correspondence between Najibullah and Kakar in its international context, before concluding with a historian's view of possible parallels and disjunctions between 1990 and the Afghans' situation thirty years later.

Crisis in the early 1960s, Cold War tensions limited UN peacekeeping missions to the Suez Canal. Granted, peacekeeping enjoyed a second life in the late 1980s. The United Nations Peacekeeping Forces won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1988, and the end of the Cold War made it possible for the United Nations to assume greater responsibilities in conflict zones around the world. Cambodia—where the United Nations took over the administration of the entire country for a year—perhaps became the closest parallel to Kakar's vision for Afghanistan. Yet even that case highlights the complexities inherent in the “internationalization” of states that suffer from civil war. In Cambodia, the ultraleftist Khmer Rouge (“Red Khmer”) party had terrorized the country from 1975 to 1979, only to be expelled from power by Vietnam, which invaded the country and installed its own Cambodian client regime. The Khmer Rouge's own militias fled to Thailand, while the Vietnamese-backed Cambodians ruled the country from 1979 to 1989. When the United Nations took responsibility for Cambodia, it disarmed militias associated with the Vietnamese occupation regime but not the Khmer Rouge, and it failed to apprehend a single Khmer Rouge leader. While the Cambodian experiment in internationalization yielded elections, it also led to the Khmer Rouge rejecting their results and conducting guerrilla warfare for years. It is impossible to state whether Najibullah or mujahideen leaders like Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, the head of Hezb-i-Islami, would have accepted elections conducted under the auspices of the United Nations, but the course of events in 1990–1992 provides few grounds for optimism.

Najibullah's Response and Diplomatic Efforts

Najibullah's reply to Kakar did not substantively rebut the latter's concerns, but it does provide some insight into the former's thinking about the future of Afghanistan.⁷ Najibullah asserted that his proposed “leadership council” would assume full control over day-to-day governance, presumably including ministries such as defense and the KhAD. Returning to his idea of Afghanistan having a permanent status as a neutral, demilitarized country, Najibullah drew the parallel between his idea and the status of Switzerland, Finland, and Austria. Yet this parallel remained unelaborated. As Najibullah himself was aware, Afghanistan sat on the fault lines of multiple conflicts (USA–USSR, India–Pakistan, Iran–Saudi Arabia) that made any such vision of “neutralization” exceedingly complex. On this, as well as on the matter of Kakar's suggestion of the United Nations as an international monitoring force for Afghanistan, Najibullah deferred to the notion that Afghans themselves would have to decide on this, whether in the framework of the “leadership council” or through a postelection parliament.

⁷ Najibullah, Letter to Hassan Kakar (30 Saratan 1369 / 21 July 1990).

Reflections on the Difficult Transition to Peace

Barnett R. Rubin

Abstract

Afghanistan has had several attempts at peacemaking in the past, but transition to peace has been challenging. After the Soviet Union's withdrawal, United Nations envoy Benon Sevan devised a plan aiming at a peaceful transition of power through months of shuttle diplomacy. Afghans, too, were seeking ways to avoid the bloodshed in the face of the potential collapse of the government as the Soviet aid to Kabul was decreasing and the Mujahideen factions were closing in. Among them was Professor Hassan Kakar, an Afghan historian, who exchanged letters with President Najibullah on the issue of transition as early as three months after the fall of the Berlin Wall. In April 1992, due to internal and external pressures, President Najibullah resigned, which, according to Sevan's plan, would have allowed an interim government to oversee a transition, but it did not. Instead, the government collapsed, leading to civil war among militia and Mujahideen factions backed by foreign powers. This essay briefly comments on the events that led to the collapse of the 1990s peace process and the fall of Najibullah's government. Some events from the 1990s haunt the 2021 peace process, and this essay hopes to draw some lessons.

“Members of any significant family will relate stories of how their fathers or grandfathers or relations suffered at his hands. The period still arouses strong passions and is yet to become history.”

—Hassan Kakar, *Government and Society in Afghanistan*

On July 21, 1990, President Najibullah had a premonition. In a letter, dated June 12, 1990, Afghan historian Hassan Kakar had argued that the peace process that Najibullah had proposed in his February 1990 letter to Kakar unfairly advantaged the government he led as compared to groups like the Mujahideen who were at war against it. Najibullah's plan would leave his government in power until the conclusion of a national conference that would choose a transitional administration. Even after the formation of a transitional government, Kakar argued, "courts and the multi-pronged military forces, especially KhAD [the intelligence and secret police agency], which are made up of your loyal supporters, . . . the strongest pillars of the Kabul government," would still be in place "dominated by the KGB, with its past history of killing Afghans and favoring Soviets." Mindful of his agreement to abide by the statement in Najibullah's first letter, that "I don't think now is the time to talk about the faults and responsibilities of this side or the other," Kakar did not mention that Najibullah had been the founding director of KhAD. Kakar did, however, continue to use that name, declining to acknowledge Najibullah's attempt to break with that past in January 1986, when he renamed the agency as a step toward "national reconciliation."

In an epilogue to his 1995 book, *Afghanistan: The Soviet Invasion and the Afghan Response, 1979–1982*, Kakar wrote that KhAD "though now called WAD (*Wizarat-i Aminiyat-i Dawlati*, Ministry of State Security), was dominated by the same Parchamis, who still called themselves 'khadists, the true sons of comrade Dzerzhinsky,' the bloodthirsty prophet of the leftist revolutionaries."

Najibullah could never fully overcome the memories of Afghans who lived through the early 1980s, when KhAD under his leadership directed a reign of terror and torture against real and suspected opponents. In 1989, in a taxi in Washington, D.C., where no one could monitor our conversation, Yuri Gankovsky, the head of the Near Eastern Department of the Institute of Oriental Studies of the Soviet Academy of Sciences and the USSR's leading specialist on Afghanistan, told me, "It is impossible for someone like Najibullah to remain in Afghanistan, because he is covered in blood from head to toe." Without mentioning names, Kakar reminded Najibullah of the repression of the early 1980s: "This plus the unprecedented destruction of the country brought about a total lack of [public] trust in Kabul government and a complete divorce of the latter from the people." Kakar recommended that before convening the peace conference, Najibullah's government should abolish KhAD and "submit power" to "an interim government . . . made up of neutral professional people" under the supervision of the United Nations. To that proposal, Najibullah answered in a letter dated July 21, 1990, that "the continuation of our government until the formation of the [transitional] government is a necessity that is affirmed by the dangerous consequences of the emergence of a political and military vacuum."

Eminent Contemporaries: The Current Relevance of the Najibullah-Kakar Correspondence

Scott Smith

Abstract

The exchange of letters between President Najibullah and Professor Kakar comes to us from another century, but in many ways remains highly contemporary. The president and the historian discuss themes such as Afghanistan's relationship with the rest of the world, the structure of a potential peace process, and the future of an Afghanistan where its many diverse communities can live together. The author argues that despite the many changes that have occurred since this epistolary exchange, there are continuities that could inform the peace process that has just begun between representatives of the Afghan republic and the Taliban movement. In examining the historical circumstances at the time of the exchange of letters, the author notes how abruptly a change in historical circumstances removed the possibility of a negotiated peace, throwing the country back into several more decades of conflict in which Afghans have yet to find what Najibullah described as "sensible and realistic tools for a just political solution."

Another thought experiment is to imagine what would have happened if Kakar and others who had been invited had gone to Kabul and met with Najib. These letters hint at the rich discussion that might have taken place. “Afghans,” Kakar wrote to Najibullah, “as a dynamic people with their own mores, traditions, and a very rich culture, are good at politics and show great skill in the solution of internal issues.”

At this writing we are at the threshold of another moment when there is the possibility of a political solution to the conflict. It is one that will require the suspension of distrust and the ability for deadly enemies to face each other. Many of the figures just listed, as well as a new generation raised in the post-2001 republican order, will need to negotiate with the Taliban, the executors of Najibullah. This “skill in the solution of internal issues” will be required.

Both Najibullah and Kakar wrote of how Afghans were tired of war, but in the three decades since there has only been war. “I have no doubt,” Najibullah wrote, “that in the not too distant future we will get our hands on sensible and realistic tools for a just political solution.” The sublimated emotions in this exchange of letters have only been amplified, deepened, and coarsened in the decades since they were written. But between the first and last draft of the writing of this particular essay, talks have convened in Doha between representatives of the Afghan republic and the Taliban movement. For the first time since 1979, the principal Afghan parties to the conflict face each other across a table to discuss how to end the violence and live together. Let us hope that the issues tentatively raised in these letters can finally be resolved.

A Historical Perspective on Forty Years of Conflict in Afghanistan

Barmak Pazhwak

Abstract

After four decades of devastating conflict, the signing of the United States–Taliban agreement on February 29, 2020, marked the beginning of the latest intensive effort to end the war in Afghanistan.¹ This milestone in quest for peace and stability in Afghanistan entails both opportunity and danger with serious consequences for the Afghan people and the broader region. Despite all the odds, and oddly enough, the Taliban movement has increased its political leverage and legitimacy after the agreement, further sidelining the Afghan government and other Afghan political groups. The post-agreement period, implementation, and starting intra-Afghan talks are already proving to be treacherous and uncertain. Furthermore, the broader implications of US troop withdrawal and deep differences between the Afghan government, a fragmented Afghan polity, and a more assertive Taliban insurgency are seldom discussed or made clear. However, Afghan history in the past few decades evokes historical themes, issues, and debates that are relevant and significant to finding a just, organic, and sustainable resolution to forty years of exhausting conflict in Afghanistan. Studying and drawing lessons from exchanges and ideas for reconciliation offered by prominent Afghan scholars in the 1980s and 1990s could help in identifying and mitigating obstacles and distrust that are

¹ U.S. State Department, “Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan,” U.S. Government, 29 February 2020, <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Agreement-For-Bringing-Peace-to-Afghanistan-02.29.20.pdf>.

citizens' rights and the supremacy of laws are enshrined in secular constitutions with separation of religion and state firmly established!

Shades of Conflict

The conflict in Afghanistan has never been about religion. Religious belief and zeal were among the many values that drove Afghans to fight against the Communists, and perhaps is a driving factor for the rank and file of the Taliban in the current fight. Historically and today, the driving factors for Afghan resistance and insurgency have been an invasion of sovereignty, violations of their rights and human dignity, disrespect for their religion, use of brutal and of kinetic force, predatory government, and lack of justice and accountability.

Afghans can resolve internal issues as a “dynamic people.” They possess the traditional mores and skills required to resolve their disputes, even with the Taliban. And most of the Taliban are Afghans who are willing and able to live in their country with full dignity and honor, if left alone. In the decades of war, many wrongs have been committed by those with guns protected by patronage networks and official government power. As the blurring of lines between Islam and politics proved very dangerous during the war with the Russians and poses dangers nowadays, the mixing of democracy and democratic values with predatory warlords who exploited the system has been a fatal mistake. Similarly, inclusive good governance and justice cannot be promoted by compromised, corrupt and incompetent leaders propped up by foreign powers.

These are issues that need to be addressed in any real peace negotiation that aims to settle the conflict in Afghanistan. Afghans are not fighting because they are a nation of warriors, nor because the country is a “graveyard of empires.” The war is neither between Afghan ethnic groups nor a war that Pashtuns are fighting against non-Pashtuns for domination, as the Pakistan lobby in Washington often claims. They are at war because their basic human rights and dignity are violated by foreign powers and their proxies. They are at war because their diversity is not seen as a stimulus for common good but as a source for division and political gains. They are at war because brutal warlords and corrupt technocrats, acting on behest of foreign meddlers, are imposed upon them. They are at war because of the “good enough for Afghans” mentality and assumptions. As any other nation does, the Afghans, too, have their linguistic and ethnic diversities. Yet there are more shared common cultural values and similarities in the towns and villages of Afghanistan than the perceived divisions and fissures. When talking about the people and topography of Afghanistan in his historical book, “Afghanistan,” Dupree provides an interesting description of the county and its people:

Afghanistan Peace Process: What Can Be Learned From Past Efforts?

Belquis Ahmadi and Makhfi Azizi

Abstract

A peaceful resolution of the ongoing war in Afghanistan has been a subject of discussion on and off since the mid-1980s. Past attempts in reaching a political settlement between the government and the warring factions have not produced a durable solution. The root causes of conflict—the role of the regional and international state and non-state actors, and challenges in state building—remain as sources of intense political controversy. A road map to peace was originally initiated by the UN in 1983 to bring an end to the war, and was instrumentalized by former President Najibullah. Since then, new players have come to the scene, old foes have become more vocal, and Afghanistan is the center of attention in the war against terrorism. After the signing of an agreement between the United States and the Taliban on February 29, 2020, there is hope for a peaceful resolution of the Afghan conflict. The US–Taliban agreement has paved the way for direct talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban, but there is no guarantee that the intra-Afghan negotiations will be successful. The conflict in Afghanistan has both regional and international dimensions, which require assurances and commitment by the non-Afghan actors that are involved in the country's conflict. Even though Najibullah's, and past attempts by the UN, have failed to end the war in the country, there are valuable lessons that can be learned from the past.

Another lesson that can be learned is that signing peace agreements without firm commitment by the signing parties and monitoring by a credible neutral international body or bodies serves no purpose. Unfortunately, there are several examples from the past peace deals among Afghan leaders and the Afghan government and international actors, which have not lasted long due to a lack of enforcement mechanisms. Under Najibullah's National Reconciliation Policy of 1986, despite amnesty and cash being offered to local mujahideen commanders, the policy failed to secure political settlement.

The 1992 Peshawar Accord, that created the Afghan Interim Government, headed by Sibghatullah Mojaddedi, also failed to reconcile the mujahideen groups. After taking oath in the holy shrine of Mecca and signing the Islamabad Accord in 1993, that resulted in a power sharing arrangement between Burhanuddin Rabbani and Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, the two leaders not only failed to honor the agreement, but also further intensified the fighting. In 1995, the Nangarhar Shura facilitated the Mahipar Agreement, where the mujahideen leaders agreed to a political settlement, which was another failed attempt.

For the current peace process to result in a sustainable peace, the international community must provide a mechanism of monitoring. It must provide funding for the development of the economy, and security. Moreover, the troop withdrawal must be based on a reliable exit strategy that will promote lasting peace. In order to achieve a lasting peace, women and minorities, ethnic and religious, must be treated as equal citizens and that their rights and freedoms must be guaranteed. The Afghan leaders must put their differences aside and work together to forge a just and sustainable peace.

Peacebuilding and Reconciliation: Lessons from the Najibullah–Kakar Correspondence

Shaida M. Abdali

Abstract

Afghanistan is on the brink of opening a new chapter in its history after nineteen years since the fall of the Taliban regime in 2001. Despite major achievements since 2001, Afghanistan's progress has been haunted by continued war and violence in the country with over 150,000 deaths of both military personnel and civilians,¹ including more than 3,000 coalition troops who were there as part of their peacekeeping mission. All this misery and destruction was caused due to various internal and external factors. However, one major factor seems to have been the exclusion of the Afghan Taliban from the political scene in the post-Bonn political setup in Afghanistan. After nineteen years of a military campaign against the Taliban, there is now a consensus at the national, regional, and global levels that the conflict in Afghanistan cannot be resolved through military means alone. Therefore, the world community, along with the Afghan government, has recently entered into negotiations with the Taliban. As a result, the US and the Taliban have signed a peace agreement in February 2020 in Doha, which promises a full withdrawal of foreign troops, paving the way for Intra-Afghan dialogue. The opening ceremony of Intra-Afghan dialogue on September 12, 2020, in Doha, was a historic occasion, one which might become a launching pad for this new chapter in Afghanistan. However, the dialogue process is perceived to be a long and complicated one,

¹ "Afghan Civilians," Costs of War, Watson Institute, page updated January 2020, <https://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/costs/human/civilians/afghan>.

as Afghanistan has already gone through some bitter experiences in the name of peace and national reconciliation in the past. For that reason, any future peace settlement needs to be conducted in view of past experiences and efforts, and must guard against falling back into the same dark era of the 1990s with dire consequences for Afghanistan, the region, and the world. Hence, in-depth research into and analysis of the past and the current situations is conducted here to find out what lessons could be learned, and how to negotiate a successful political settlement in Afghanistan now.

“National Reconciliation” is a term (*ashti-ye melli*) that has been used for decades now as a way out for the Afghan crisis, whose key cause lies in external interference and aggression. The process has become more relevant during particular phases of crisis. Despite various mechanisms and structures used in these periods, the process has not fulfilled its objectives. The process must have so far lacked in terms of sufficient and appropriate steps to reach its objectives. Examining different case studies might help in drawing lessons to apply for all future courses of action. In the present context, it is best to consider how the National Reconciliation Plan of Dr. Najibullah, the former president of Afghanistan (r. 1988–1992), was laid out on the eve of the Soviet troop withdrawal from Afghanistan in 1987. In order to draw lessons from the past, various documents and sources are examined.

This focuses on the three letters exchanged between Najibullah and Hassan Kakar in 1990 in the context of national reconciliation. These letters are crucial to examine in view of the current political and security situation in Afghanistan. The aim is to apply lessons learned in the aftermath of the exchanges between the former Afghan President Najibullah and Hassan Kakar in 1990. This study conducts a comprehensive examination of views and proposals raised in letters related to the national reconciliation process, aimed at ending the conflict in Afghanistan. Moreover, the study attempts to compare and contrast the demands/conditions of the Afghan Mujahideen in the 1990s to the demands and conditions of the Taliban to President Ghani’s government in the present. Finally, the study offers certain recommendations for consideration while the Intra-Afghan peace dialogue takes place in Doha, Qatar.

Mohammad Najibullah was born in 1947 in the city of Gardez, Afghanistan. He was a medical doctor by profession. He led the Afghan Intelligence Agency (a.k.a. “KhAD”) from 1980 to 1985 before he became the Afghan President in 1987. Mohammad Hassan Kakar was born in 1929 and was a renowned historian. He obtained a PhD in history from the University of London. Having obtained several academic achievements

The Specter of Overture: Comparing 1986–1992 to the Present Intra-Afghan Peace Talks

Masih Khybari

Abstract

With the letters between President Najibullah and Dr. Hassan Kakar¹ in 1991 serving as a backdrop, this article reflects on the conception, strategy, and execution of the National Reconciliation Policy 1986–1992 (or Mosaleha-ye Melli or Ashti-ye-Melli) and provides a comparative historical analysis with the current intra-Afghan peace talks.

“An ancient land, Afghanistan has a long and eventful history.
Its neighbors have influenced its history as it has theirs.”
—Hassan Kakar, *The Soviet Invasion and the Afghan Response*

¹ Professor Hassan Kakar (1928–2017) was one of Afghanistan’s most renowned contemporary historians with a reputation of being a careful and perceptive reader of primary sources. He is known to be one of the finest and most tireless chroniclers of Afghan history and political developments. His works are based on solid empirical history, letting the sources speak for themselves. A prolific writer, his works cover a wide range of historical, social, political, and cultural themes and are considered as authoritative references.

1990, 2021, And Fleeting Opportunities

Johnny Walsh

Abstract

Hassan Kakar and then-President Najibullah wrote at a moment of rare opportunity for peace in Afghanistan: the war seemed to have run its course, the international situation seemed to favor peace, and dramatic progress seemed possible. The ambitious proposals Kakar and Najibullah offer in their correspondence, though few were ultimately tested, suggest the possibilities of the moment. Another such moment exists in 2021, with a historic opportunity for peace in Afghanistan exceeding even that in Najibullah's final years. The challenge today is to avoid missing the opportunity as Najibullah and his mujahideen rivals did, with disastrous results for each. Peace this time will mean finding compromises to many of the same issues Kakar and Najibullah consider in their correspondence, notably the role of third-party mediation, the nature of a political transition to ease longtime rivals into a mutually acceptable governing arrangement, and the challenges of reforming or merging security forces. Unfortunately, the reasons for failure in 1990 are also present today. As in 1990, most leaders evince maximalist negotiating stances; the government shows little urgency despite growing uncertainty about its international support: and the insurgents have, for years, adamantly resisted direct talks with the government (a position to which the Taliban might well revert). To avoid another failure, the parties and their international allies must settle in for a long negotiation, with painful compromises necessary from all. If they collectively fail, we may look back on the diplomatic swirl of 2021 with the same wistfulness that one reads the letters of 1990—when the Afghan conflict seemed so near its natural conclusion, and yet had decades more to go.

Ingredients of Peacemaking in Afghanistan: Lessons from Najibullah's National Reconciliation Policy

Nasir Andisha

Abstract

Over the past two years, negotiations for a political settlement with the Taliban have been at the center of the discourse regarding the future of Afghanistan. In 2010, the United States and a few allied countries tried unsuccessfully to establish a framework for negotiation. However, the most recent round of talks spearheaded by Zalmay Khalilzad, the US Department of State's Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation, proved to be the most serious attempt to end the decades-long conflict. After eighteen months of secret negotiations and shuttle diplomacy, the talks culminated in a framework agreement signed between the US and Taliban representatives in Doha, Qatar on February 29, 2020. The agreement seeks to prepare for a significant drawdown of the remaining foreign troops in Afghanistan, and the launch of direct intra-Afghan peace negotiations. A gradual troops reduction is underway and direct talks between the delegations of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and the Taliban movement began on September 12. The prevailing sentiment is that, once again, Afghanistan is at a critical juncture where, despite myriad domestic and external challenges, a narrow window of opportunity for achieving sustainable peace is emerging. In the contemporary history of Afghanistan, the closest parallel that can be drawn to the current political and security environment goes back to the situation surrounding the last years of President Najibullah's tenure and his attempt at achieving a negotiated settlement through what was called the National Reconciliation Policy (NRP).

Most of the recent analyses consider the resemblances between the two episodes, such as the dynamics of foreign troop withdrawals, intensity and spread of conflict, chaotic internal power politics and personal traits, and the political psychology of the leading players. In contrast, there has been hardly any study of the NRP's substance and its potential relevance to future peace negotiations. Drawing on the contents of recently-released letters exchanged between President Najibullah and Professor Hassan Kakar in February–June 1990,¹ as well as published materials and personal memoirs, this article focuses on the NRP's substantive policy dimensions in two areas: first, the domestic political structure; and second, in readjusting Afghanistan's foreign policy. These reform initiatives were the central ingredients of the NRP aimed at achieving national unity and transitioning from an externally dependent ideological state into a self-confident and self-reliant nation-state. There are lessons to be learned from both the initiative and its failure.

The process leading to a political settlement is often lengthy, complex, and multifaceted. Depending on the context, a constellation of factors must come together to produce a viable peace agreement and an enforcement mechanism. There is no perfect formula or peace recipe; however, according to the existing literature, the components for achieving a viable peace agreement can be classified under two broad categories:

1. Circumstances and “ripe” timing of a peace process: this includes a perception of a mutually hurting stalemate, a desire among belligerents to seek a way out of conflict,² a degree of consensus among external stakeholders, and conducive personal traits and political psychology of the leading players. Ripe moments appear naturally or are induced deliberately by conflicting parties or their external supporters. They often transpire when a conflict reaches a point of inflection, and a mutually hurting military stalemate develops. Alternatively, an abrupt but inconclusive defeat of one of the belligerents, or a significant major foreign intervention into or withdrawal out of the conflict zone can also create a ripe moment for peacemaking.

¹ President Najibullah wrote a series of letters to opposition figures and Afghan intellectuals in the diaspora soliciting support for his National Reconciliation Policy. Between February and June 1990, three letters were exchanged between Najibullah and Professor Hassan Kakar, a very well-known US-based Afghan historian. These letters were recently translated and released by the Kakar family through the Kakar History Foundation.

² William Zartman, “The Timing of Peace Initiatives: Hurting Stalemates and Ripe Moments,” in *Contemporary Peacemaking: Conflict, Violence and Peace Processes*, ed. J. Darby and R. Mac Ginty (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 19–29.

PART TWO

State-Society Relations in War and Peace Making Contexts

Democracy by Decree? Najibullah's Controlled Multiparty System

Thomas Ruttig

Abstract

The policy of national reconciliation, designed under Soviet auspices to prepare Afghanistan for the withdrawal of the Soviet occupation forces in 1989, included measures for a reconstruction of the political system and an inclusion of the regime's enemies, the mujahideen. Being a one-party state at that point, the Soviets and President Najibullah (r. 1987–92) decided to "increase political pluralism," that is, allowing other political forces than the ruling People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) to become legally active in the country. At the same time, Najibullah intended to salvage as much control as possible for himself and his party. This was a policy copying the model that, at the time, existed in several Soviet-allied Eastern European countries. This approach could be described as enacting a limited and controlled pluralism, including a multiparty system and elections. The policy failed, as Najibullah allowed other political forces too little room to maneuver, and the major mujahideen groups refused to join hands with him and his party at all. Despite its failure, this experiment has some lessons for current Afghanistan and new "reconciliation" attempts, the major one being that power sharing must be real to be accepted by those outside that system thus far. Whether power sharing is beneficial for a majority of Afghans needs to be answered by Afghans themselves, in light of the given political situation. That Afghanistan is currently far from being a thriving democracy will make it more difficult for a democratic decision-making process to succeed in enacting any political solution to the forty years of wars.

Revisiting Reconciliation as State-Building in Afghanistan

Dipali Mukhopadhyay

Abstract

Few scholars have captured the complexities of Afghanistan's internal politics as a function of its geopolitical liminality as thoughtfully as Hassan Kakar. It is of little surprise, then, that President Najibullah sought Kakar's advice on how to navigate his regime's way through one of the thorniest chapters in Afghan history after the Soviet withdrawal. In 1990, the president found himself at the helm of a government whose foundation was exceptionally brittle and whose future looked increasingly dim. Kakar acknowledged the disproportionate impact international agendas and actions continued to have on events inside Afghanistan, but urged the president and his countrymen not to give up on seeking solutions of their own. Kakar tied the projects of political accommodation and self-determination together, describing the persistence of Soviet involvement in Afghan affairs—and the consequent interference by other countries like Pakistan—as a key barrier to both. He argued, moreover, that the privileging of the current regime over the opposition would prove a nonstarter, as it would undermine the very notion of self-determination. Implicit in his prescription for an inclusive and expansive political project was Kakar's understanding of the relationship between warmaking and state-making, and the degree to which marginalized opposition leaders would fight for what they believed they deserved if they were not given a seat at the table. As it embarks on talks with the Taliban, in certain ways, the Ghani government of 2021 faces a less daunting task than that of the Najibullah government. Afghanistan's international partners will continue to impose their own agendas

Imagining the Historical Nation: Afghanistan as a Dialogical Project of Nation-Making

Omar Sharifi

Abstract

The correspondence between Dr. Najibullah and Prof. Hassan Kakar regarding peace in Afghanistan in 1990 highlights a historical moment in a long and arduous journey of crafting national attachment between a government and its people in Afghanistan. Such exchanges are rare, if nonexistent, in the long history of conflict and state-building in Afghanistan. We have little evidence of such exchanges in the premodern and in most of the modern history of Afghanistan where the only commitment governments made in return for extracting resources was to maintain order. Nor did traditional dynastic rulers see a natural connection between themselves and the people they ruled, not even their own ethnic group. Only after declaring independence in 1919 did Durrani monarchs feel the need to convert this dynastic legitimacy into a nationalist legitimacy in which they and the people of Afghanistan were declared to be bound together in some intrinsic fashion. But the project of constructing a common national identity in a country that was home to so many different ethnic and linguistic groups, and where regional identities had far deeper roots than an Afghan nation state, was no simple task. It remained a work in progress as the country approached its centenary. Hassan Kakar's letters to the President Najibullah, the last president of the Communist regime in Afghanistan, represents the efforts of a scholar and an intellectual to address the social, political, and cultural complexities of Afghan society and the historical evolution of the Afghan state in the midst of a bloody ideological

Post-Conflict Development: Charting a New Agenda

Moh. Sayed Madadi

Abstract

Conflicts have complicated evolutionary trajectories. While their cessation could be made possible by reaching political settlements, to resolve them in the long run would require building infrastructures capable of sustaining a peaceful sociopolitical equilibrium. In Afghanistan, while the country's history of grappling with active violent conflict dates back to little more than four decades ago, the function of violent power as the foundational piece in any equilibrium is much older. The most recent evolution in the conflict that began by active international involvement since 2001 is understandably the most complicated episode in that decades-long trajectory. While the ongoing peace process aimed at reaching a political settlement with the Taliban has the potential to halt the bloodshed, mitigating fragility and building resilience for the longer future would demand much more. In particular, it would need the reestablishment of state authority as possessing a legitimate monopoly over violence; the expansion of a wide and diverse economic base, not just to provide jobs, but also to strengthen a middle-class imperative to the survival of any democratic society; and the diversification and decentralization of public debate in order to offer nonviolent paths for contributing to public discourse and influencing political power.

The mujahideen's capture of state authority, or whatever remained of it by the time they did capture it, could best be characterized as the disintegration of state authority in the face of a countrywide public uprising—both urban and rural.

At the core of the existence of a central state authority since 1880 has been a public perception of the affiliation of that authority with two distinct but interconnected services as the embodiment of the state's legitimacy and power, namely security and justice. My 92-year-old grandfather recounts his memories of King Zahir Shah's reign (1933–1973) through anecdotal stories in which, in rare cases of complaints, a soldier would march solo from the district center and summon the entire village to the district chief's office for interrogation. The simplicity and safety with which people could travel is a major component of public perception of the strength of state power. This is a point reiteratively mentioned by foreign expatriates and adventurist travelers as part of their fond memories of the country's better days.⁴ With the minimum presence of state agencies outside Kabul and the main city hubs, it is questionable how credibly it could protect all its citizens and provide justice. The perception, however, exists nonetheless, which could be linked to a wide slew of socioeconomic and political factors, including the relationship between local non-state actors and the state authority, in which the former acted partly as state agents, as well as the widespread subsistence agrarian economy that did not leave a lot of resources for economic activity, controlling which could incentivize the use of violence.⁵ Alas, the perception of legitimate state authority has been closely affiliated with the absence of political violence.

The current episode of the conflict has also been mainly focused on security and justice. When the Taliban rose to power in the face of mujahideen infighting dividing the country into little chiefdoms, they claimed to bring security and a justice system inspired by the true teachings of Islam.⁶ No one expected them to invest in education, healthcare, or economic development. Nor did they claim to do so. Expectedly, during their rule, the only components of state function that they focused on in order to behave as a legitimate authority was to provide swift justice through draconian means, marked primarily by public executions and amputation without due process, which resulted in security and safety for the limited populations that had remained in the city centers. Schools and health clinics were widely under-resourced, and the public bureaucracy remained dysfunctional. The few educational and health centers that did remain open were mainly funded by international humanitarian organizations such as CARE International and the International Committee of the Red Cross.⁷

⁴ Podelco, "Afghanistan as It Once Was."

⁵ Barfield, *Afghanistan*.

⁶ Barfield.

⁷ International Committee of the Red Cross, "Fact Sheet."

PART THREE

Global and Regional Contexts, Actors, and Factors

Some New Thoughts on Pakistan's Role in War and Peacemaking in Afghanistan

Afrasiab Khattak

Abstract

After its founding in 1947, Pakistan's relations with neighboring Afghanistan have seen four distinct phases. Although relations were tense during the first three decades due to bilateral differences and their affiliation with opposing camps in the Cold War, both broadly respected each other's sovereignty and relations were based on deterrence and were open to achieving lasting stability. Even pressures exerted on each other in the early 1970s were calibrated and aimed at gaining bargaining chips for negotiation. But Islamabad's policy toward Kabul changed radically and acquired a new quality altogether after it became a frontline Western ally in the war against Soviet occupation of Afghanistan in 1980s. Since then the Pakistani military establishment has pushed for establishing hegemony over Afghanistan under the garb of "strategic depth" by supporting armed proxies and subverting peace processes in the country. Pakistan, right from its inception, as a comparatively underdeveloped country had an army that was too big for its resources, but the problem was aggravated after the disintegration of the country in 1971. Following the example of Prussia after the Napoleonic wars, it was also looking for expansion. The concept of "strategic depth," ostensibly coined for militarily countering the big eastern neighbor India, is actually meant to hegemonize a smaller neighbor. Mujahideen created in the 1980s failed to effectively deliver the objectives of this Pakistani policy. It necessitated the creation of Project Taliban. Talibanization is the strategy to deconstruct / weaken Afghan / Pashtun historic national identity. The Taliban is the new instrument for achieving this "strategic depth." This approach has not changed in practice even after paradigm shifts in global and regional politics after the end of the Cold War, notwithstanding the loud denials in mere words.

The internationalization of the politico-military conflict in Afghanistan in 1980s was the climax of the Cold War spurred by great power competition and incessant interference by near and far neighbors. This was in remarkable contrast to Nepal, another country that emerged as a buffer state in South Asia. Beginning in the 1990s, bouts of sociopolitical instability in Nepal were allowed to play out internally taking the country from a conservative monarchy to one ruled by the most radical communist party that eventually turned into a multiparty democracy. Certainly, a different geostrategic location and neighborhood apart from the internal sociohistorical dynamics made all the difference between the two.

By sending the Red Army to Afghanistan in December 1979, the erstwhile Soviet Union overtly and irreversibly escalated the conflict, providing an opportunity to the United States-led Western powers, who had already launched a covert operation to overthrow the leftist regime in Afghanistan, and to “Vietnamize” the conflict there. Bleeding and defeating the Soviet Union was the main objective of the war launched by Western powers and their allies in Muslim countries such as Pakistan, in the name of jihad. But regional players like Pakistan and Iran had their own “national agendas” within the framework of the grand Western strategy. This is what made the return of peace to Afghanistan so difficult even after the withdrawal of the Soviet forces in February 1989. It was not the only reason, but it was definitely one of the most important reasons which has not been fully recognized and analyzed because the winning side was not ready to take responsibility for the death and destruction created by this strategy.

This essay will make a humble effort to look at the inception and evolution of Pakistan’s Afghan policy, which remains more or less constant despite paradigm shifts in global politics and considerable variations in regional geopolitics during the past four decades. Normalizing instability in Afghanistan has been both the purpose and justification of this policy, ultimately aimed at establishing hegemony over Afghanistan. So, an objective analysis of the policy is very relevant for understanding the factors behind instability and chaos in Afghanistan after the withdrawal of the Red Army in 1989.

Understanding Pakistan’s Afghan Policy

From 1947 to 2020, the Pak–Afghan relationship has passed through four main stages. The first stage, that started in 1947 after the creation of Pakistan, continued till 1971. The relationship between the two countries was complicated by three important factors right after the creation of Pakistan. One, Kabul had strong reservations regarding the Durand Line imposed on Afghanistan in 1893 by the British empire after occupying

The Najibullah–Kakar Correspondence: Historical Parallels and Divergence

Radha Kumar

Abstract

This article discusses the proposals outlined by the 1990 Najibullah–Kakar correspondence in the context of peace-building lessons to be learned or unlearned thirty years later. It focuses on the challenges for Afghan peacemaking given the geopolitics of South Asia and its impact on domestic politics in Afghanistan, and asks what the prospects are of regional support for an Afghan peace agreement.

Afghanistan's Quest for Peace: What to Learn from the Past?

Farkhondeh Akbari and Timor Sharan

Abstract

Afghanistan is once again on a quest to achieve sustainable peace. President Najibullah's correspondence with Hassan Kakar thirty years ago is a telling frame through which we can examine the challenges then, and reveal lessons for a peace settlement with the Taliban. By drawing on Najibullah's National Reconciliation Policy and the peace settlement in Cambodia in 1991, we reflect on key lessons from the historical past relevant to Afghanistan today. The three key lessons that emerge are: the importance of consensus among international actors on peace in Afghanistan as to their geopolitical interest; the ripeness of local actors for peace—when stalemate or continuation of the conflict is mutually painful; a strong guarantor to ensure the implementation of the peace agreement and the commitment to peace. The challenges of the past, and the three lessons, provide a comprehensive and detailed way of identifying the important indicators and factors in the current peace process.

A review of the letters exchanged between President Najibullah and Hassan Kakar on peace and reconciliation efforts in Afghanistan provides an interesting historical insight into the complex dynamics and challenges involved in achieving peace in Afghanistan. Thirty years after the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan and Najibullah's "peace plan," known as the National Reconciliation Policy (NRP), Afghanistan is still on a quest to achieve sustainable peace—something proving to be as complicated and challenging as before. The importance of the letters lies in the personal and delicate notes of urgency from the regime to broaden its political bases to strengthen its bargaining position against the mujahideen tanzims in future peace talks, and to ensure its survival once the Soviets left. Internal factional fighting between Khalq (people) and Parcham (banner) had already significantly weakened the party and the regime was fast losing ground to resurgent mujahideen tanzims. The *current* peace efforts must be understood in terms of the continuity of conflict and the failure to reach a sustainable political settlement by addressing the root causes of four decades of war and violence. By drawing on critical historical lessons from Najibullah's National Reconciliation Policy and examples from the successful peace settlement in Cambodia, we reflect on and draw lessons from the historical past for the ongoing "peace process" with the Taliban.

In the first section, we reflect on the Soviets' exit plan, and Najibullah's National Reconciliation Policy and its consequences. The second section highlights three critical lessons from the failure of the Soviet exit and Najibullah's reconciliation policy: first, the importance of geopolitics and an international and regional consensus on peace; second, "ripeness for resolution" and asymmetry of power; and finally, the role of an effective guarantor. Throughout these sections, we reflect on the case of the Cambodian peace settlement in revealing technical insights for Afghanistan. In the concluding section, the paper draws on lessons from Najibullah's NRP, and Cambodia, in order to shed light on the ongoing peace settlement efforts with the Taliban.

Background on NRP: Consequences and Outcomes

Najibullah's national reconciliation policy must be understood in the context of the broader Soviet military exit strategy. By early 1984, four years into one of the bloodiest wars since Vietnam, the Soviet leadership realized that their troops were trapped in a quagmire facing an increasingly stronger insurgency and an unreliable Afghan partner that was consumed with internal party infighting and rivalry.¹ In November 1986, the

¹ On 27 December 1979, using provisions of the Soviet–Afghan Treaty of 1978 as their justification, the Soviet Union began a ten-year military intervention. It staged a coup against Hafizullah Amin and installed Babrak Karmal as the new president. The *Khalq* faction of the PDPA had removed, imprisoned, or eliminated their opponents and had executed thousands of Afghans. According to

What will Peace Look Like in Afghanistan?

Ben Acheson

Abstract

This essay reflects on “what will peace look like in Afghanistan?” To do so, it looks at how various rival parties and other stakeholders in Northern Ireland were able to create a “visioning process” in order to “articulate what a peaceful society will look like, including the steps and goals to achieve it”. How this process was conducted in the Irish context – led by a range of paramilitary parties – is discussed in the essay, with reference to the documents and positions that resulted from the initiative. The argument is that such a process could aid Afghanistan’s quest for peace, given that peace in the Afghan context remains “an abstract, intangible concept” and because contending parties do not yet share a vision of what a situation of peace would look like. The author makes clear that “no solution from Northern Ireland will directly transfer to Afghanistan” but there are still lessons to be learned – the need for visioning is one of them.

“We are all part of the problem but how many are prepared to be part of the settlement? It costs nothing to think about it.”

—Northern Irish Paramilitary Representatives, UPRG, “Common Sense”

Sit back, close your eyes, and imagine a country ravaged by a multidecade war. Every person has been touched by tragedy. They are tired, as are many combatants. Hope has come in the form of opposing combatants meeting each other, after a long period of one side refusing to talk. Multiple ceasefires—often during holiday periods—have been welcomed. But hope is undercut because there is still no end in sight. An unprecedented deal between two belligerent parties has not ended violence. Bickering politicians are as divided as ever. International and regional states talk of peace but still sponsor actors on each side. The killing continues.

This sounds similar to the current Afghan reality. But it is actually a snapshot of Northern Ireland in the late 1980s.

Ten years from then, Northern Ireland transitioned from a sad stalemate to a comprehensive peace deal—the 1998 Good Friday Agreement—which ended thirty years of continuous conflict. The bombs ended and the bullets stopped flying. Northern Ireland embarked on a better path. Belfast, the capital city, was redeveloped from a walled-off and stagnant city into a tourist hotspot. Business bloomed. International sports events like the 2019 Open Championship—golf’s premier world tournament—returned to a country once regarded as one of the world’s most dangerous. Even Hollywood stars arrived to use the stunning natural scenery—the hit series *Game of Thrones* was filmed in areas that were off-limits not many years earlier.

Of course there were challenges. Collapse looked likely at multiple points. Spoilers still exist and neither side trusts the other fully. A political settlement could not eradicate centuries of historical grievances and deep distrust overnight. There is not yet reconciliation in Northern Ireland.

But there is peace.¹

Northern Ireland now knows what peace looks like, although this does not make it a blueprint for Afghanistan. Every conflict and every peace process is unique. This can make parties to conflict resolute in the uniqueness of their situation and reluctant to listen to outsider views. They develop a “deafness.”

But lessons from other peace processes are always relevant, especially as examples of how other people have been in similar stalemates but found a way out. Even if there are no shareable successes, there can be mistakes to avoid. Lesson-sharing can trigger thought and inspire ideas.

¹ Further information is available in various books, including Power, *Building Peace in Northern Ireland*.

The Mindset of Peace Negotiations in Afghanistan

Aref Dostyar

Abstract

This essay discusses the impact of the lenses which the sides of the conflict in Afghanistan use to view the peace process on the conduct and outcome of the ongoing peace negotiations. The essay contends that these lenses, which the author refers to as mindsets, impact the courses of actions of the actors (such as negotiators, decision makers, and decision influencers) of the process, which in turn shape the outcome of these negotiations. The author holds that two mindsets have been applied before—namely the compromise and defensive mindsets—and they have not achieved the desired outcome: peace. The essay introduces a transformative mindset as a more effective mindset in the context of the Afghanistan Peace Negotiations.

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SCOTT S. SMITH is a Senior Expert on Afghanistan at the United States Institute for Peace. Mr. Smith has worked on Afghanistan for almost 25 years. Mr. Smith is the author of *Afghanistan's Troubled Transition: Peacekeeping, Politics, and the 2004 Presidential Election* (Lynne Rienner, 2011), co-editor of *Getting it Right in Afghanistan* (USIP Press, 2013), and the author of numerous articles on Afghanistan. He was an adjunct professor at Columbia University's School of International and Public Affairs between 2011 and 2013 and has taught undergraduate courses at Boston University's Washington D.C. campus on democratization (2014–15) and conflict resolution (2019).

JOHNNY WALSH is a senior expert at the United States Institute of Peace, focusing on the Afghanistan peace process. Mr. Walsh previously spent 10 years as a diplomat with the US Department of State in missions, such as Afghanistan. He is also an accomplished musician who joined with Afghan-American virtuoso Qais Essar to compose an opera entitled *Tear a Root from the Earth*, which uses Afghan and American folk music to chronicle the two countries' history together.

APPENDIX A

Najibullah-Kakar Original Letters in Dari

نظر خود را با ارتباط به تجویز شما به ترتیب ذیل تقدیم می‌کنیم.

در مقدمه نامه که همین زین موضوع رز موضوعات سه‌گانه را تشکیل می‌دهد، بر وقایح دردناک وطن رز دیدگاه خاص نظر اندرزی شده است. لازم نیست رزم درباره آن در اینجا بحث کنم. بنابراین در اینجا موقتاً یا تا هنوز مطمئن که می‌گوئید: «تعود می‌کنم اکنون موقع آن باشد که روی تکنولوژی‌های این یا آن طرف حرف بزنیم.» ولی بیخود هم حرف هینقدر یادآورم که گنجینه‌ای که تجارب نشان داده که سابق در حل موضوعات ازگی می‌تواند اثرات فراوان دارد و این تأثیرات وقتی زیاد و شدید باشد که بعد موضوع مورد نظر زیادتر، پیچیده‌تر و دردناک‌تر شده باشد.

تکلیفاتی که در این افغان امروزه این حالت تراجمی را دارد، یکدیگر را ظاهر شکل‌دهنده می‌باشد. موضوعات تجاری برای لایحه‌نمایان که قدرت‌های خارجی، بویژه آمریکا و در موضوعات درونی افغان؛ مدارفله‌محوره، و هنوز هم می‌تایند و در اثر این مدارفله و تعادلت برحق افغان‌ها که حق طبیعی‌شان است، خود در وطن‌شان در معرض خطر است و راجع شده اند. چنانچه تاکنون، طوری که شما هم بیان مختصراً اشاره کرده‌اید، بیشتر از پنج میلیون‌شان در وطن‌های دیگران، و در حدود دو میلیون‌شان در داخل خاک خود مهاجر شده‌اند. بین ۱۲ تا ۱۵ میلیون‌شان در جهات جنگ‌گشته شده‌اند؛ شاید در حدود یک میلیون

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نهایت دلگرم کنند، است که شما و عدّه، زیادی از شخصیت های برآزنده، افغان در اروپا و امریکا قاطعانه از یک حل عادلانه، سیاسی و صلح آمیز جانبداری میکنید. اصولی را که شما برای تحقق امر صلح برشمرده اید، بادیدگاه، مادرزمینه تضاد و بیابان ماهوی ندارد و روی وسایل و شیوه ها نیز همواره میتوان به موافقت رسید. این قدرت های بزرگ میتوانند در چگونگی انکشاف پروسه، صلح نقش و تأثیر داشته باشند، امریست مسلم. ولی این نقش بهیچوجه نباید حاکمیت ملی ما را متاثر سازد و در نهایت باید خود افغانها سرنوشت در لخواه خود را رقم بزنند.

در مورد رعایت کامل رژیم حقوق بین المللی نه تنها در سرحدات مشترک افغان- شوروی، بلکه در سرحدات افغانستان با سایر کشورهای همسایه نیز کاملاً موافقت داریم. ولی باید به اطمینان اظهار داشت که تخمین آقای مارك فریمن - خبرنگار لاس آنجلس تا به امروز تعداد کارکنان سفارت اتحاد شوروی و سایر اتباع شوروی در افغانستان کاملاً اغراق آمیز بود، و از واقعیت خیلی بد و راست. بی باوری به استعداد و توانایی افغانها، این اندیشه، نادرست رانزد برخی ها بوجود آورد، که گویا پیروزیها و دستاوردهای مابدون مساعدت و همکاری کارشناسان شوروی محال بود، است. حال آنکه مجموع سیستم مشاوریت از دولت افغانستان بسرچید، شده و خارجیان آگده، تر از مارك فریمن به این امرانسان دارند.

در مورد این امر که پاکستان اخلاقاً مجبور خواهد شد سیاست های خود را تعدیل کند، میخواهم شریک امیدواری شما باشم. ولی تجربه، ایام بعد از عودت قوای اتحاد شوروی درین زمینه ناراحت کنند، است. چنانکه میدانید پاکستان از ساله، افغانستان بحیث وسیله بی جهت عطف توجه از بحرانهای داخلی آن کشور استفاد، کرده، است.

باشما کاملاً موافقت دارم که موجودیت قوای اتحاد شوروی در افغانستان تأثیرات ناگوار را بر اعتبار و محبوبیت دولت بجاگذاشت که باعث آن اکنسون

APPENDIX B

Najibullah-Kakar Letters in English Translation

it will finally solve the Afghan issue. Before a devastated Afghanistan becomes more devastated and before the already complicated issue becomes more complicated. Common sense says we should go with this proposal.

Involving the U.N. more and more in the process of creating a government is significant because the U.N, through its very nature, has no special intention for Afghanistan. Interested countries, especially Afghanistan' s neighbors, can be assured that no Afghan faction will be used against them. This will decrease international sensitivity and that of the neighboring countries as much as possible and create conditions for stability for the government. In addition, the U.N. will get an opportunity to take a major part in the next important Afghan issue which is the reconstruction of the country, an effort that will require money to be raised from other countries for the return of more than 5 million Afghan refugees to their homeland. The more the U.N gets involved, the more the sensitivity of involved countries will be reduced. This will be to the good of Afghanistan.

3. If the involved parties, foreign and internal, are ready and determined, the procedures for creating a national government will not be a problem. If the internal sides give priority to the interest of the country and its people or that of their own, then it is possible that the current crisis can be solved. The leaders of the involved parties and in fact every prominent Afghan has a great responsibility in this regard. It would be naive to think that others will prescribe a disinterested solution for us. It would also be a case of improper pride to say that we don't need anyone's help in this national disaster.

So far, many prescriptions have come from different groups and individuals but none of the them have been accepted by all because of flaws and the opposition of the various sides. One-sided Jirgahs and elections that have been held so far by both sides have not given legitimacy to either and won't do so in the future either. Unless such Jirgahs and elections are held nationally and without interference and domination by foreigners, they will not represent the general will of the people.

Respectfully

Signature

Mohammad Hassan Kakar

for usurping power through military means for the purpose of securing, growing and strengthening democracy in the country. At the same time, a system for the administration of security and rule of law and a reasonable defense force for the protection of the country's borders can be contemplated for the future of the country.

At the end of this discussion, for the sake of your information, I add that plans for the permanent neutrality of Afghanistan and the country's demilitarization have been put forward in a number of my official speeches in the year 1367, and the 5-point proposals of the Republic of Afghanistan which explicitly contain the permanent neutrality and demilitarization of the country were offered at the conclusion of the second session of the National Assembly of the Republic of Afghanistan in Qaws 1367 which have subsequently been reiterated in the proposals and plans regarding the political resolution of Afghanistan's issues. At any point, these are matters that only the elected representatives of the people will decide upon.

Regarding a "neutral international force," we have deliberately not wanted to talk specifically about the nature of the role, composition and duties of the international monitoring commission and the United Nations because this matter also must be discussed and agreed in the framework of Afghans negotiations. There is no doubt that countries that will be included in the composition of the commission will also have views about the matter. In sum, we have had full understanding about your view from the past regarding the active and effective role of the United Nations and the international community.

Respected compatriot,

Your letter speaks to your deep sense of responsibility and attention about your country and people. Your honesty and sincerity of intention and will are evident from the midst of your views and will surely form an important part of the exchange of views among Afghans. I wish the series of correspondence for the sake of our beloved country's future and its suffering people will continue.

I have no doubt that in the not too distant future we will get our hands on sensible and realistic tools for a just political solution.

I wish you, your esteemed family and Afghan friends health and prosperity from the court of the immortal Allah.

Najibullah
President of Afghanistan
(Signature)
Kabul – 21 July 1990