



CEASEFIRE IN AFGHANISTAN: PEACE MUST BE GIVEN A CHANCE

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(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)



On June 5, 2018, President Ashraf Ghani made an unconditional yet temporary ceasefire with the Afghan Taliban effective from June 12-19, 2018.¹ According to President Ghani, the proposed ceasefire was, "an opportunity for the Taliban to introspect that their violent campaign is not winning them hearts and minds, but further alienating."²

In a further unexpected development on June 9, 2018, the Taliban reciprocated Kabul's offer by announcing a three-day ceasefire. The Taliban spokesperson Zabihullah Mujahid stated that the group's three-day Eid ceasefire proved that the group is, "unified and trustworthy ... the way our fighters were welcomed by the people proves that our demands and the nation's are identical - all want the withdrawal of foreign invaders and establishment of an Islamic government."³

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¹ "UNAMA welcomes Taliban's temporary ceasefire," *Pajhwok News*, June 9, 2018, <https://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache:z0bRBfbmpoEJ:https://www.pajhwok.com/en/2018/06/09/unama-welcomes-taliban%25E2%2580%2599s-temporary-ceasefire+%&cd=1&hl=en&ct=clnk&gl=pk>

² President Ashraf Ghani tweeted at @ashrafghani, <https://twitter.com/ashrafghani/status/1004614834896465921>, "Afghan president announces ceasefire with Taliban insurgents," *Express Tribune*, June 7, 2018, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/1729898/3-afghan-president-announces-ceasefire-taliban-insurgents/>

³ Shereena Qazi, "Afghanistan: Taliban resume fighting as Eid ceasefire ends," *Al Jazeera*, June 18, 2018, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/06/afghanistan-taliban-resume-fighting-eid-ceasefire-ends-180618044536196.html>

Pakistan and China played roles as facilitator and mediator respectively, as reported by the *Express Tribune*, quoting Pakistani officials who spoke on the condition of anonymity. In fact, the same officials expressed that the Taliban had agreed to the ceasefire "only if China and Pakistan become guarantors."⁴ The move was widely welcomed by the international community, with Washington appreciating Islamabad's role in encouraging a ceasefire between Kabul and the Taliban.⁵

Welcoming the ceasefire, Pakistan expressed "its support of recent peace initiatives in Afghanistan."⁶ Pakistan has resolutely supported an Afghan-led and-owned reconciliation process⁷ and has "always advocated for a negotiated settlement with the Taliban as the only viable solution to end the conflict."⁸ Pakistan's policy is governed by its desire to see a peaceful, stable and united Afghanistan as it is in Pakistan's vital interest.⁹

While there were hopes that the Taliban would accept and reciprocate Kabul's extension of the ceasefire by 10 days, the proposal was met with rejection. The Taliban stated they would "resume operations across the country against foreign invaders and their internal puppets."¹⁰ The group's spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid further said the group was "not interested in talks while foreign soldiers are still on Afghan soil."¹¹

Despite the Taliban's refusal, President Ghani has continued to iterate his desire for the Taliban group to respond positively to the peace proposal extended to them in February 2018, extend the

⁴ Kamran Yousaf, "Afghan Eid Truce backed by Pakistan, China, *Express Tribune*, June 11, 2018," <https://tribune.com.pk/story/1732330/1-afghan-eid-truce-backed-pakistan-china/>

⁵ Umair Jamal, "Why Can't Pakistan Facilitate a Long-Term Ceasefire in Afghanistan?," *The Diplomat*, July 4, 2018, <https://thediplomat.com/2018/07/why-cant-pakistan-facilitate-a-long-term-ceasefire-in-afghanistan/>

⁶ "Pakistan reiterates support for recent peace initiatives in Afghanistan," *Geo News*, June 9, 2018, <https://www.geo.tv/latest/198689-pakistan-reiterates-support-for-recent-peace-initiatives-in-afghanistan>

⁷ Mateen Haider and Irfan Haider, "Nawaz Sharif pledges support in Afghan fight against Taliban," *Dawn*, May 13, 2015, <http://www.dawn.com/news/1181502/nawaz-sharif-pledges-support-in-afghanfight-against-taliban>.

⁸ "Pakistan urges Afghan parties to seize critical opening for peace in Afghanistan," *Associated Press of Pakistan*, June 27, 2018, <https://www.app.com.pk/pakistan-urges-afghan-parties-to-seize-critical-opening-for-peace-in-afghanistan/>

⁹ "Peace in Afghanistan is in Pakistan's interest: Maleeha Lodhi," *Pakistan Today*, March 17, 2016, <https://www.pakistantoday.com.pk/2016/03/17/peace-in-afghanistan-is-in-pakistans-interest-maleeha-lodhi/>

¹⁰ Memphis Barker and Sami Yousafzai, "Taliban refuse to extend truce with Afghan forces," *The Guardian*, June 17, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jun/17/taliban-refuse-to-extend-truce-with-afghan-forces>

¹¹ "Afghan Taliban again reject talks offer", *Dawn*, July 7 2018, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1418458>

cease-fire, agree on a venue for negotiations and engage in a formal negotiation process in good faith.¹² The Taliban have yet to respond positively.

President Ghani's offer was a result of the Kabul Peace Process of June 6, 2017, an initiative aimed at achieving peace with the Afghan Taliban. President Ghani renewed a call for peace talks with the group at a "mutually agreeable" location and said that the group would eventually be allowed to open a representative office if significant progress was achieved.¹³ While the conference was attended by representatives of 24 countries including the US, Russia, China and the EU, it did not include one of the most important components of the Afghan conflict - the Afghan Taliban.

Eight months later in February 2018, during the second round of the Kabul Process for Peace and Security Cooperation in Kabul, President Ghani made what is being termed as the best offer presented by any Afghan government, offering recognition of the Taliban as a legitimate political group, and proposed to hold new elections involving the Taliban, as well as to have a constitutional review, and, to open an office for the group in Kabul.¹⁴ In addition, he proposed a ceasefire, promised the release of Taliban prisoners and removal of their names from international blacklists, and offered security arrangements, as well as pledges to reintegrate and provide employment to those Taliban willing to join the process.¹⁵

The offer made by President Ghani is unlike any made in the past, considering the fact that a constitutional review or amendment has always been rejected despite being a demand of the Taliban. However, it is no secret that the Taliban question Ghani's ability to deliver on these promises and proposals, since they consider the Afghan government as "internal puppets".¹⁶

Although celebrations and hopes for a peaceful settlement were cut short with the group resuming their operations, the fact that the Taliban ceased hostilities and agreed to put down their arms for the first time in their 17-year conflict is significant and warrants some recognition. The move,

¹² Ashraf Ghani, "I Will Negotiate With the Taliban Anywhere," *New York Times*, June 27, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/27/opinion/ashraf-ghani-afghanistan-president-peace-talks-taliban.html>

¹³ Ayaz Gul, "Ghani to Allow Taliban Office if Afghan Peace Progresses," *Voice of America*, <https://www.voanews.com/a/afghanistan-kabul-process-peace-conference/3889221.html>

¹⁴ Hamid Shalizi, James Mackenzie, "Afghanistan's Ghani offers talks with Taliban 'without preconditions,'" *Reuters*, February 28, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-afghanistan-taliban/afghanistans-ghanioffers-talks-with-taliban-without-preconditions-idUSKCN1GCOJ0>

¹⁵ "Ghani Makes Taliban An Offer To Join Peace Process," *Tolo News*, February 28, 2018, <https://www.tolonews.com/afghanistan/ghani-makes-taliban-offer-join-peace-process>

¹⁶ Halimullah Kousary, "The Afghan Peace Talks, QCG and China-Pakistan Role" *The Diplomat*, July 8, 2016, <https://thediplomat.com/2016/07/the-afghan-peace-talks-qcg-and-china-pakistan-role/>
Rupam Jain and Jonathan Landay, "Prospects for U.S.-Taliban talks rise after Afghan ceasefire," *Reuters*, June 19, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-afghanistan-taliban/prospects-for-u-s-taliban-talks-rise-after-afghan-ceasefire-idUSKBN1JF14R>

despite major hurdles and deep ethnic divides, clearly shows willingness on both sides to enter into some form of engagement, and put an end to the bloody conflict. At this particular juncture, an opportunity for Afghanistan to move towards unity has materialized. This opportunity needs to be managed wisely. More importantly, the ceasefire has proved that peace must be given a chance in Afghanistan.

The ceasefire also highlighted willingness on the Taliban's side to move towards peace (even if for a limited time). Although they are stronger than before and have taken more territory in 2017 than at any other time in the nearly 17 year insurgency, the Taliban have been facing internal challenges over leadership and peace talks. This has resulted in divisions within the group, with many joining the Daesh. Hence, in order to capture any means of political power and counter the threat posed by the Daesh, the Taliban know that they cannot operate in isolation and therefore they will have to reach a political compromise with Kabul. The Taliban should not let this opportunity go to waste.

Moreover, the ceasefire also showed a growing change within the group - after all, as was reported in local and international media, members of the Taliban interacted, prayed and broke bread with government and security officials "across the country" during the Eid celebrations.¹⁷ More importantly, the group also interacted with women in different parts of the country, such as Kabul, Baghlan and Jalalabad, who voiced their concerns and demands for peace and inclusion.¹⁸ Considering the rigid and extreme mindset that is attributed to the Taliban, this was an inconceivable yet positive development that undoubtedly indicates a change within the group.

At the same time however, the ceasefire has elucidated the complexities and spoilers involved in the peace process, with elements within the Taliban opposed to peace talks, and those within the Afghan political set up also refusing to recognize the Taliban, let alone share power with them. Within the current Afghan administration, there is strong opposition towards initiating peace with the Taliban and many members oppose the inclusion of Taliban in the political process.¹⁹ Hence, political and national reconciliation continue to be major hurdles in pursuing peace talks with the Taliban. It remains to be seen whether the efforts for peace and reconciliation in Afghanistan will be able to make a breakthrough in engaging both the Taliban and the Ghani government in a constructive dialogue process.

¹⁷ "Govt Employees, Taliban Perform Eid Prayers Together," *Tolo News*, June 15, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5jfH-Z36RdE>

¹⁸ Ruchi Kumar, "Selfies with the Taliban: Afghan women buoyed by ceasefire snaps," *The Guardian*, July 6, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2018/jul/06/selfies-with-the-taliban-afghan-women-buoyed-eid-ceasefire-photos-viral>

¹⁹ Hamid Shalizi, "Afghan spy chief resigns after fallout with president," *Reuters*, December 10, 2015, <http://www.reuters.com/article/afghanistan-taliban-resignationidUSKBN0TT1K720151210>

Amongst the spoilers is the presence of Daesh in Afghanistan, which is probably the most lethal since it poses a grave danger to the survival of the Taliban, as well as Kabul. The ongoing fight between Kabul and the Taliban is resulting in a possible vacuum for the Daesh to fill. This was exemplified by the fact that celebrations of the ceasefire were interrupted as a result of an attack by the Daesh in Nangarhar, killing 30 and wounding more than 65.²⁰ Hence, in order to deny space to the Daesh, a negotiated settlement between Kabul and the Taliban is the need of the day.

Despite these hurdles and challenges, all principal stakeholders must learn from the three brief yet decisive days of peace, at the same time exhibiting flexibility and patience if they are to put an end to the conflict.

For Kabul and the US, there could be an opportunity in the Taliban's demand to initiate dialogue with the US first and with Kabul later. The Taliban's demand should not be seen as a hurdle, rather a first step in a series of many that could lead to a breakthrough in peace talks.

In a major tactical shift on July 16, the Trump administration has now ordered American envoys to seek direct talks with the Taliban.²¹ According to US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, "The United States will support, facilitate, and participate in these peace discussions, but peace must be decided by the Afghans and settled among them. We expect that these peace talks will include a discussion of the role of international actors and forces."²² This has also been reiterated by the commander of US forces in Afghanistan, General John Nicholson who said in a statement that, "there is hope direct talks can move the peace process forward."²³ He further emphasized in his statement that the US Secretary of State, Mr. Pompeo said that "the United States, are ready to talk with the Taliban and discuss the role of international forces."²⁴

Likewise, the Taliban should not consider entering into talks as a form of surrender, and rather see this as an opportunity to further their cause and mission through a new and non-violent platform, allowing them to become a legitimate part of Afghanistan's future. The group will also have to ensure a visible reduction in attacks against the state - the Taliban can no longer justify their ongoing

²⁰ Shereena Qazi, op.cit.

²¹ "Trump sends envoys to Afghanistan to open talks directly with Taliban over peace deal," *The Telegraph*, July 16, 2018, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2018/07/16/trump-sends-envoys-afghanistan-open-talks-directly-taliban-peace/>

²² "Officials: In Policy Shift, US Open to Meeting With Taliban," *The New York Times*, July 17, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/aponline/2018/07/17/us/politics/ap-us-united-states-afghanistan.html>

²³ Siobhan Heanue, "US ready for direct talks with Taliban in blow to 'Afghan-led' approach to end war," *ABC News*, July 16, 2018, <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-07-17/us-seeks-direct-talks-with-taliban-to-end-war/10001998>.

²⁴ Ibid

offensive of "liberating Afghanistan from foreign control,"²⁵ as they are not just fighting a foreign enemy, but also fellow Afghans who make up the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF).

At this crucial point, both the Taliban and the National Unity Government (NUG) in Kabul cannot afford to prolong the conflict. The recent ceasefire and the response by the Taliban, no matter how brief, has shown that peace is achievable if such opportunities are grasped.

²⁵ "Good Islamic ethics, the sign of the sacred Azm (Determination) of Mujahideen," *Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan*, May 28, 2015, <http://shahamatenglish.com/good-islamic-ethics-the-sign-of-the-sacred-azm-determination-ofmujahideen/>