

## **If the U.S. supports the idea of an inclusive government in Afghanistan, then it needs to have an inclusive engagement with all Afghan factions**

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### *Afghanistan: The Next Chapter Cornerstone Forum Series*

*More than one year after the Taliban's nearly unimpeded takeover of Afghanistan, religious freedom and associated rights in the country are spiraling towards an all-time low. The modest gains in these freedoms made over the past two decades risk complete erasure. The withdrawal of NATO forces and subsequent rapid fall of the previous government in 2021 sparked an emergency evacuation of the international community and of Afghans who supported their work. With energies focused on the closure of diplomatic offices and the withdrawal, there has been limited contact with actors remaining in Afghanistan.*

*This series invites scholars, diplomats, and regional and policy experts to share their insights into the country and provide recommendations to ensure protections for religious and ethnic minorities and other vulnerable communities, including women and children, across the country.*

After capturing Kabul in August 2021, the Taliban essentially had two options in dealing with their rivals and the local population: suppress them into silence or negotiate a settlement. The Taliban regime has chosen the former strategy. They banished Afghanistan's constitution, appointed an all-male, all-Taliban acting cabinet, replaced the national flag with their party banner, and excluded women from public participation.

The rebel group signed a [deal](#) with the U.S. in 2020 which was a pivotal moment in running their violent campaign home. And, after forcefully seizing power, they harbored Al-Qaeda's al-Zawahiri in the capital of Afghanistan against the provisions of this deal. America subsequently killed al-Zawahiri by a [drone strike](#).

Washington may wish to announce at home that "the war" in Afghanistan has come to an end, but reality dictates that we acknowledge it is not over yet.

### **Global Response**

For twenty years, the United States and its global allies backed the former government of Afghanistan to fight terrorism with a narrow focus on Al-Qaeda, which had orchestrated the September 11 attacks in America. Then Washington assessed that Al-Qaeda was degraded enough to not have the capacity to target America, and that threats of terrorism were no longer confined only to the geography of Afghanistan.

Thus, the U.S. not only shifted its sights to withdrawal but also it negotiated with the Taliban—which had in the first place provided the breeding ground for Al-Qaeda—for safe passage on their way out. The U.S.-Taliban deal, which was endorsed by the United Nations, paved the way for the latter to overrun Afghanistan last year.

Ever since, the world, including the U.S., appears to remain in a season of policy drought regarding the country. The American administration has been grappling with one major question: engage the Taliban or isolate them?

Washington officials have run toward both poles at different times. But largely, the administration in America has hidden behind a pragmatic engagement as a middle ground to define its policy toward the Taliban.

This approach may have seen some short-term gains, but only in two areas: evacuating certain at-risk people and providing some humanitarian relief to the local population.

While it's true that the US has imposed sanctions on the Taliban, which have been upsetting to the regime, it has also engaged the Taliban and lifted travel bans at times, upsetting anti-Taliban forces. Rather than doing whatever is most expeditious for the U.S.'s own interests in a given moment, the U.S. should maximize their efforts toward policies that understand their own well-being is bound up in the well-being of Afghanistan.

But engaging the Taliban alone is not the way to mutual well-being.

This tentative approach falls short of the U.S.'s policy, which also aims to counter terrorism and promote human rights in Afghanistan. The insufficiency of this approach is starkly depicted in recent and ongoing events inside the country. Neighboring Uzbekistan was hit by rockets fired from Afghanistan's soil repeatedly over the last year. Al-Qaeda's leader al-Zawahiri was found sheltered by the Taliban in Kabul when he was eliminated in July. The Taliban have continued to impose restrictions on women including their ban on education of teenage girls.

### **Conditions for Armed Conflict**

A [study](#) of rebel regimes at the Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies shows that weak institutions, arms availability, and economic and political grievances—which are all existent in Afghanistan—create the conditions for new cycles of armed opposition. Suppression provides the motivation for the public to revolt.

[U.S. officials](#) have said they do not back another armed conflict in Afghanistan. However, they have also [stated](#) that it is not a matter of if but when the armed conflict reemerges. Their assertions have been supportive of forming an inclusive government to prevent the recurrence of full-scale violence. Pursuing these policies will require a more active effort than mere statements. Beyond the current tenuous policy, Washington should contribute to fostering the conditions for a political process that leads to the formation of a government that is shaped by all Afghans, not just the Taliban. As a start, the U.S. should adjust the degrees of its engagement with local factions in such a way that does not favor the Taliban over others.

When achieved, a peaceful political settlement will counter terrorism, advance human rights, stem further displacement of Afghans, and stabilize the humanitarian crisis.

### **Inclusive Engagement**

Neither total isolation of the Taliban nor pragmatic engagement is conducive to these ends. The United States should instead proactively engage with all Afghan stakeholders including political factions, civil society activists, women, youth, and anti-Taliban armed groups.

Turning a blind eye to the existing and emerging opposition groups will not make them disappear. America should instead communicate with them, resisting the dichotomy of either ignoring or supplying these factions, to balance the scales of political engagement that currently weigh in favor of the Taliban. Congress needs to step in should the American administration shy away from such a stance.

It is true that the Taliban regime has actual power now: control over state institutions, government revenue, and arms. Opposition—be it political, civil society, or armed—may be in their initial stages of formation, but they carry a powerful potential: the ability to mobilize and threaten the regime.

America's engagement with all Afghan factions, among other methods, can serve as a tool to exert pressure on the Taliban to consider talks with other local factions. It also broadcasts a confident message to the people of Afghanistan that America stands with them in their fight for a free and peaceful country, that America has not abandoned them.

This is the time to create history by actively promoting a settlement or allow the momentum toward conflict to determine the fate of Afghanistan and the world by extension—again.

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