

Afghan women key to sustainable peace in Afghanistan

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BY MANIZHA NADERI AND MEGAN E. CORRADO, OPINION CONTRIBUTORS

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For years, the United States has engaged in backchannel talks with the Taliban to little avail. However, news that principal deputy assistant secretary for the Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs, Alice Wells, met with the militant group in Doha last month represents the latest wave of diplomatic efforts to address America's longest running war. In this endeavor, the U.S. empowered one of its most experienced diplomats, at once forcing the Taliban to confer with a woman as a condition for dealing with the U.S. directly, while simultaneously demonstrating leadership in the implementation of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325, which calls for incorporating women into all facets of peacebuilding processes.

These successive waves of women's leadership in dialogue with the Taliban — and the latter's acquiescence to participation — may signal a relaxation of their hardline positions toward women, and obviates a tacit recognition that women's involvement creates more durable, inclusive peace agreements.

Indeed, some herald this high-level, female-led engagement on the heels of the Eid-al-Fitr ceasefire as a potential opening toward ending the long-running conflict. Those three days — the first peace in 17 years — demonstrated that regardless of internal ideological schisms, the Taliban's central leadership maintains the ability to enforce commands throughout its ranks.

Nevertheless, skepticism that momentum toward peace truly exists should abound. Most evidently, the Taliban rejected the ceasefire's extension, killed 30 Afghan soldiers immediately after its conclusion, and has since orchestrated a spate of attacks.

Moreover, the Taliban consistently repudiate reconciliation overtures by Afghanistan's President Ashraf Ghani and insist they will only participate in a peace process with the U.S. Despite reports Wells undertook "talks, not negotiations," any exclusive engagement between the U.S. and Taliban undermines the embattled Ghani government's legitimacy, capitulates to the militants' demands, and belies American avowals that negotiations be "Afghan-led and Afghan-owned."

In light of this concession, it is worth reflecting as to whether the Eid ceasefire was merely a means to garner American favor and get the conversation — devoid of the Afghan government — for which they have long angled.

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It is unclear as to why the Taliban would pursue diplomacy now. After years of gains, they maintain substantial territorial and population control and have effectively created a military stalemate; yet, the Taliban remains capable of conducting a sustained insurgency. With no tactical urgency, they likewise have failed to advance political priorities: they rejected multiple invitations to become a political party, called on Afghans to boycott the October elections, and continually attack voter registration centers. Indeed, the Taliban stands to gain by disrupting the elections and may use talks with the U.S. as a ploy to sow popular distrust in the government.

The peace marches across Afghanistan and the Eid ceasefire celebrations illustrated the people's war-weariness. However, are the Afghan people ready to accept the outcome of a negotiated peace with the Taliban, as well as a government and security forces filled with former combatants?

Many Afghan women, who were disproportionately affected by Taliban tactics, see talks between the Taliban and government as a non-starter and dialogue between the militants and U.S. as a betrayal — particularly because the U.S. partially predicated its invasion on the empowerment of women. Women and girls have made phenomenal strides in exercising their rights since 2001, and any efforts to subvert that progress cannot be tolerated. The U.S. has an obligation to the Afghan government it supports and the Afghan people — specifically, its women and girls — to promote stability and prevent the country from descending back into bloody Taliban rule.

While the only solution in Afghanistan may be political, the Afghan and U.S. governments must first ensure that the political will exists amongst the Afghan people to include the Taliban in peacebuilding efforts. This can be achieved through a national dialogue — one that is inclusive of women in both its facilitation and conversation.

While American women are leading current diplomatic efforts with the Taliban, Afghan women must be able to elucidate their concerns about the peace process and give voice to their traumatic experiences after bearing the brunt of the Taliban's brutality. Women's involvement must occur at the most nascent stage of peacebuilding to determine who should participate, reify gender inclusion in the process, establish their role in the state's future, safeguard their rights, help shift entrenched cultural norms, and ensure their empowerment will be preserved and expanded before the peace for which they so desperately yearn can be attained.

Manizha Naderi is an Afghan-American and executive director of Women for Afghan Women, headquartered in New York and serving as the largest women's non-governmental organization in Afghanistan. The organization provides vital protection and services to victims of gender-based violence, including pro bono legal, vocational, educational, mediation, healthcare, childcare, counseling, and housing assistance.

Megan E. Corrado is a human rights attorney and serves as Women for Afghan Women's advocacy director. Ms. Corrado leads the organization's advocacy efforts in New York and

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Washington, D.C., to influence policy related to women, peace, and security and to promote and expand women's rights around the world.