Lessons from the El Salvador Peace Process for Afghanistan

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Key Takeaways

Peace talks in Afghanistan between the Afghan government and the Taliban began in September 2020 in Doha, Qatar, marking a potential end to 40 years of conflict and war. The current peace talks are part of an almost two-decade long process, and both the Afghan government and the Taliban have expressed a desire for national unity following Afghan public support for peace and stability above other concerns. For peace negotiations to succeed, the Afghan government and the Taliban will need to reach a compromise on security, political objectives, and regional acceptance, and they will need to agree on governance and a development strategy for addressing the nation’s future.

The peace process that brought an end to the civil war in El Salvador, while having taken place under significantly different conditions, provides some key lessons for Afghanistan:

- A third-party mediator is likely to be essential to concluding a peace pact, like the UN was for El Salvador.

- International support and verification are likely to be required for the demobilization, military disarmament, and security sector restructuring.

- Mechanisms for the political reintegration of the Taliban—particularly at community and regional levels—must include civil society and must take into account the fundamental rights of women and of ethnic minorities. Various ethnic groups and factions (e.g., Hazaras, Tajiks, the competing Pashtun parties, and other religious groups) should be fully integrated into the peace process.

- The peace talks should recognize the importance of land reform and property rights. Settling land disputes and formalizing mechanisms to register and enforce property rights will be critical to enabling disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) of combatants on both sides.
• The peace agreements should emphasize ample and sustained opportunities for ex-combatants to participate in an expanding economy. International financing to facilitate this effort should be available for at least a decade—provided by the United States, the European Union, the Asian Development Bank, the World Bank, or other bilateral donors.

• How legitimate the Afghan government is perceived to be will greatly impact the longevity of peace in Afghanistan. Additionally, a reformed justice system must be put into place. Anyone engaging in corruption must be held accountable, and community-level dispute resolution must show clear evidence of fairness.

• The restructured Afghan government will need to provide non-discriminatory basic services. This includes access to healthcare, economic opportunities, security in areas of ex-conflict, and educational access for all children and young men and women.

The Salvadoran Civil War

General Carlos Humberto Romero became President of El Salvador in 1977 through a fraudulent election that followed nearly 50 years of military rule supported by economic elites. Tens of thousands of Salvadorans violently protested the election, while U.S. officials urged Romero to reach some agreement with the political opposition, including calling for early elections. In the end, Romero refused. On October 15, 1979, a reform-minded faction of Salvadoran military officers carried out a bloodless coup, and Romero and most of his cabinet fled the country. The military invited Christian and Social Democratic party leaders and a business representative to join the junta, and for a few brief months—as later noted by various observers, including U.S. Ambassador Robert White—El Salvador may have been on its way to a peaceful transition. However, the new junta, which enjoyed limited support within the military and society, was unable to manage either the military or the government. Political instability followed, and there was a crackdown on protesters and dissidents.

The defining moment that likely made civil war inevitable was the March 1980 assassination of the Archbishop of San Salvador, Monsignor Oscar Romero. This was widely accepted to have been perpetrated by right-wing actors, some of whom were subsequently jailed. In response, an umbrella coalition of far-left guerrilla groups—known as the Farabundo Martí Liberation Front (FMLN)—was formed between October and November 1980, with direct support from Cuba and Fidel Castro. The Soviet Union, working with Cuba, was supporting left-wing guerrilla movements in the Western Hemisphere as part of the Cold War; thus supplied with weapons and intelligence, the FMLN launched an armed offensive against the Salvadoran government. Violence escalated, and the country found itself embroiled in a civil war that would last nearly 13 years and lead to the deaths of more than 75,000 Salvadorans, the majority of whom were civilians living in rural areas.

During the civil war, the military committed several massacres of non-combatants, infamously including the El Mozote massacre that left almost 1,000 people dead. A variety of international human rights investigations, including by U.S. State Department officials, confirmed the direct involvement of the military high command in rural massacres, determining that they had targeted peasant organizations and labor leaders, including the torture and killing of several priests. Both the FMLN and the Salvadoran military forced children to become soldiers and targeted those who refused to join. The FMLN were widely blamed for many kidnappings and murders of workers, entrepreneurs, and others who were unwilling to collaborate with or join the FMLN. The FMLN also took on a strategy of economic sabotage targeting the nation’s infrastructure. Over the course of the civil war, the FMLN destroyed bridges, the electrical grid, farms,
factories, and other infrastructure. By the end of the civil war, the FMLN had destroyed 90 percent of the country’s major bridges with explosives and caused between $1 billion and $1.5 billion in damages.

While the U.S. government supported the Salvadoran government and its military forces, the Nicaraguan, Cuban, and Soviet governments armed the FMLN. The resulting conflict devastated Salvadoran society, leading to numerous human rights violations, mass displacement, extrajudicial executions, the disappearance of approximately 8,000 Salvadorans, and the deaths of over 75,000 people.

The mid-1980s saw the first of several attempts at a peace process between the FMLN and the Salvadoran government, but none of these were successful. In September 1989, the FMLN and the Salvadoran government—now led by Alfredo Cristiani of the Alianza Republicana Nacionalista (ARENA) party—requested mediation by the UN. However, on October 31, 1989, a union hall was attacked, and the FMLN stopped the talks. Less than two weeks later, the FMLN launched what was arguably their biggest offensive of the civil war, occupying large portions of major cities like San Salvador, San Miguel, and Santa Ana. On November 16, 1989, Salvadoran military forces stormed the University of Central America in San Salvador, murdering six Jesuit priests and two bystanders. The violence at the end of 1989 demonstrated that a military win by either side was unlikely. Additionally, the FMLN was negatively impacted by the demise of the Soviet Union, which had been its supplier of arms. The FMLN was facing increased criticism because of its high-profile executions and the forced disappearances of some of their own leaders and other prominent Salvadorans. Furthermore, the U.S. government—which had opposed regional efforts to promote negotiations during most of the 1980s—suddenly found itself in danger of congressional military aid cutoff and was facing increasing domestic pressure to end the crisis. In December 1989 and January 1990, both President Cristiani and the FMLN requested again that the UN lead a negotiation.

**Peace Process Negotiations and Substantive Frameworks**

In February and March 1990, UN mediator Álvaro de Soto worked with the two parties to first establish a framework for the talks. In April, a plan with four major objectives was presented: 1) to end the armed conflict by political means, 2) to promote the democratization of El Salvador, 3) to guarantee respect for human rights, and 4) to reunify Salvadoran society. In May, the Caracas Agreement established two phases for the negotiations. The first phase would ensure political agreement on several issues, including the armed forces, human rights, constitutional reforms, judicial and electoral reforms, economic reforms, and a ceasefire, all to be verified by the UN. After UN verification, the second phase of the negotiations would ensure the implementation of the agreements and the reintegration of FMLN fighters into political, civil, and institutional life in El Salvador.

In July 1990, both the FMLN and the Salvadoran government agreed to a human rights framework. Several months later, in April 1991, both sides agreed to a package of reforms known as the Mexico Agreement. This agreement reached a consensus on several points, including:

- the reform of the armed forces, placing them under civilian authority;
- the creation of a National Civil Police independent of the armed forces;
- a new procedure for the election of Supreme Court justices, and broader judicial system reform;
- a new National Council for the Defense of Human Rights;
- the establishment of a Supreme Electoral Tribunal to replace the Central Board of Elections; and
▪ the formation of a truth commission to investigate the most serious acts of violence during the civil war and to publish a report of human rights abuses during the conflict.

The Mexico Agreement marked an important point in the negotiations, **but serious human rights offenses were still occurring.** The FMLN continued to force minors to join its ranks and continued to kill suspected government collaborators, and the Salvadoran government continued to execute political prisoners. The United Nations Observer Mission in El Salvador (ONUSAL) stepped in to investigate alleged human rights abuses, identifying actions of both the FMLN and the Salvadoran government and seeking to stop abuses and to punish those responsible. This continuation of violence throughout negotiations made the role of UN mediators even more important. In the absence of a neutral third party to shuttle communications between warring groups, it is likely that the peace process would have broken down.

After the Mexico Agreement, the government and FMLN still continued a dialogue, but made little additional progress. The FMLN had originally demanded a ceasefire that would still allow it to retain its military capability, so the UN adjusted the previously agreed-upon timeline and began to explore how to guarantee the reintegration of the FMLN into society. In September 1991, the FMLN and the Salvadoran government met at the UN headquarters in New York, where they signed the New York Agreement. This addressed outstanding reforms, including:

▪ reducing the size of and purifying the armed forces;

▪ redefining the mandate of the armed forces to focus on defending the sovereignty of the State;

▪ organizing of a new national police;

▪ using lands larger than 245 hectares to meet the needs of landless small farmers; and

▪ establishing a National Commission for the Consolidation of Peace (COPAZ) to oversee the implementation of the political agreements.

On November 16, 1991, the FMLN formally announced the cease of its operations. This was followed by the FMLN and the Salvadoran government formally wrapping up their negotiations on December 31. On January 16, 1992, the FMLN and the Salvadoran government signed the formal peace agreement known as the Chapultepec Peace Accords, and a formal ceasefire came into effect on February 1.

Despite the formal conclusion of the peace process, **the reforms agreed to during negotiations still loomed.** Again, the presence of the UN through ONUSAL was critical, as its mandate was expanded to ensure reform implementation. Originally, both the FMLN and the Salvadoran government were to complete several important measures—like the demobilization of FMLN fighters—by October 31, 1992. However, the tight timetable proved difficult to execute, and full disarmament of the FMLN did not occur until 1993.

By the end of 1993, the UN reported that the implementation of the peace accords was progressing relatively well, but there were still serious delays in realizing certain key programs, including the transfer of lands, the reintegration of former FMLN combatants, and the full elaboration of human rights reforms. Deep distrust still existed between the FMLN and the Salvadoran government, which complicated the implementation of reforms.

Despite delays, by the time ONUSAL’s mandate ended in March 1995, several significant strides had been made, including:
• the full disarmament of the FMLN;
• the publication of the Truth Commission report on human rights abuses committed during the civil war;
• the demobilization of the National Police and the full integration of the National Civil Police;
• the establishment of a new Supreme Court; and
• the completion of democratic elections, albeit with some irregularities, in Spring 1994.

However, the UN noted that several important reforms had yet to be executed fully. The land transfer program had stalled several times in the years after the end of the conflict, and by March 1995, only 45 percent of potential beneficiaries had received a land title. Additionally, the transition to the National Civil Police had been incredibly difficult, and there was a reluctance to end certain military structures; while both the FMLN and the Salvadoran government had laid down their arms, many weapons remained unregistered and were not surrendered. Finally, while many of the judicial and legislative reforms had made some progress, most still required additional strengthening and modernization.

The Role of International Actors

International actors played a key role in both the Salvadoran peace negotiations and the implementation of their reforms. The facilitation of talks through a UN mediator—an objective, third-party actor—restored trust between conflicting sides, built mutual respect among delegates to the peace talks, and allowed parties to find common points of interest despite competing ideologies. A Group of Friends stemming from regional efforts during the 1980s was formed to bolster the UN role. This consisted of Colombia, Venezuela, Mexico, and Spain, and their heads of state intervened more than once to help move the negotiations along, at the request of the UN. When the process began to stall in late 1991, the United States came in to grant additional support to the Group of Friends. By relying on the UN as a multilateral institution, rather than on a neighboring country or other foreign mediator, the peace process—despite its dependence on a fundamental shift in the Cold War balance—remained relatively separate from its previous Cold War patrons. Today, policymakers largely recognize that in the absence of third-party mediation, peace talks in El Salvador would likely have broken down.

The UN peacekeeping mission to El Salvador, ONUSAL, further played a key role in the monitoring of peace and the implementation of the accords. Using a two-phased approach, the body set up offices in-country and identified conceptual frameworks for implementation, beginning in July 1991. In October of that year, ONUSAL launched investigations into the government’s human rights violations and identified opportunities for justice and reconciliation within the newly reformed Salvadoran government. Over the course of 1992 and 1993, the body’s mandate expanded to include 1) facilitating a transitional security force during the formation of the National Civil Police force, 2) election monitoring, 3) the establishment of a truth commission, and 4) tracking FMLN disarmament efforts.

While the UN focused on issues of transitional governance, the United States emerged as the primary financier for the accord’s limited development and democracy-building projects, providing an estimated $535.9 million of the $698.9 million in bilateral funding received between 1992 and 1995. The overall national reconstruction plan was estimated at $2 billion, with international financial institutions making up a significant portion of the funds and the country itself covering the rest. Once El Salvador’s reformed government had stabilized, however, the negative consequences of this approach emerged, as U.S. and other international funding dropped precipitously after 1996.
The Catholic Church also played a significant role in peace negotiations. The Church mediated between ARENA and the FMLN throughout the negotiations and hosted or attended several bilateral meetings throughout the civil war. While the Catholic Church was not an official mediator, its moral authority in El Salvador played an important role in pushing both the FMLN and ARENA towards negotiations.

Outcomes

The fundamental objective of the peace negotiations was to end a war that had claimed over 75,000 lives, mostly civilians, and countless casualties, forced hundreds of thousands of Salvadorans to flee; and severely damaged family, community, and national economic infrastructure. From this perspective, the negotiations were successful. Politics were—and largely still are—demilitarized, and the full ideological spectrum can participate; the security forces were reformed, and their worst human rights abusers were cast out; municipal, legislative, and presidential elections have continued to take place largely on time and largely without the kind of fraud seen in El Salvador's Northern Triangle neighbors; and human and civil rights, despite recent challenges, are in no way at the kind of risk the country endured in the past.

However, the peace process could not address all of El Salvador’s underlying economic and political issues. Nearly three decades later, polarization, inequality, income disparities, and lack of economic and institutional reforms all continue. El Salvador still grapples with issues of emigration, deportations, and the inadequate integration of youth into meaningful opportunities. In the last 15 years, the economy has faced additional challenges from both left- and right-wing populist governments, setting back growth and progress in the country. Furthermore, the international financial meltdown, and more recently the Covid-19 pandemic and natural disasters, have left little incentive for significant foreign investment—or for domestic investors to choose El Salvador over the risks of investing abroad.

El Salvador’s economic challenges have many causes. The economic reforms presented by the peace process left issues of inequality on the table without defining clear responsibilities from the government, the UN, or international actors. After the first five years, as aid fatigue set in in the United States—something which should have been predicted—El Salvador was left with few options for creating jobs to permanently reintegrate former combatants and returning refugees. Moreover, the reappropriation of land to former combatants left many without a sustainable income, since El Salvador’s fragile agricultural sector was already collapsing by the time ex-combatants were given the opportunity to start cooperatives. In this sense, reintegration efforts were doomed to fail before they even began. While funding the DDR and security provisions of an accord is essential, the financing of longer-term reconciliation, economic development, and institutional strengthening must be clearly provided for as well. A country devastated by war, not to mention natural disasters, is unlikely to be able to manage economic recovery or to sustain expanding job opportunities on its own. On average, successful peacebuilding after a conflict takes 17 years. However, all of the financing sources El Salvador depended on after the civil war—such as U.S. and other bilateral foreign aid allocations and international financial institutions—lacked a firm commitment beyond the completion of the peace accords. Furthermore, the structural underpinnings of the civil war remained unaddressed.

Despite the complications of the post-war context, from 1992 to 2005, El Salvador was able to make enormous economic strides under ARENA leadership. El Salvador cut down on government spending and privatized state-owned enterprises, and during the 1990s and early 2000s, inflation declined to single digits, GDP increased, and the country enjoyed strong exports. The dollarization of the Salvadoran economy in 2001 lowered lending and deposit rates and increased net interest savings as a percentage of GDP. Although El Salvador has had low levels of economic growth in recent years, the country still ranks in
the second quartile for the Fraser Institute’s Economic Freedom in the World Report, demonstrating the positive long-term impacts of earlier regulatory, legal, and fiscal reforms. The country has also seen some recent progress: the poverty rate fell from 39 percent in 2007 to 29 percent in 2017, and the Salvadoran Gini coefficient for inequality dropped from .51 to .38 between 2001 and 2018, making El Salvador the second most equal country in terms of socioeconomic standing in Latin America and the Caribbean. If the country can further mitigate concerns around its security situation, and return to a reform path, El Salvador has the potential to return to higher levels of growth and lower levels of poverty.

A second crucial challenge for the long-term reconstruction of El Salvador has been political. The lengthy civil war undermined trust between ARENA and FMLN supporters. The peace accords presented a purely political solution, allowing both parties to identify common interests rather than focusing on ideological compromise, which likely would have led to the disintegration of talks. While the agreement ensured the core interests of competing groups, dismantled most of the abusive military and police entities, and ended the civil war, it did little to address the underlying socioeconomic drivers of the civil war or set in place meaningful transitional justice mechanisms.

Additionally, the political solutions did not require the two parties to fundamentally resolve economic differences, and today’s leaders continue to battle over the same issues in a highly polarized political environment. Beyond the bargain reached among the elites, the exclusion of non-combatant interests in negotiations and the failure to consider marginalized groups disproportionately affected by conflict has had a profound, lasting impact on the durability of peace, stability, and democracy in El Salvador. By translating the negotiating combatant forces into two major parties—both of which have little internal democracy and which are grounded entirely in opposing ideologies—political life in El Salvador has remained largely without potentially stabilizing cross-cutting commonalities. With antagonistic ex-combatants still serving as the country’s main political leaders nearly thirty years after the war, Salvadoran politics have remained highly divisive, contributing to a political gridlock that has stifled the country’s economic, social, and political development.

Third, the judicial reform agreed to during the peace process was not fully implemented. The failure to overhaul the judiciary meant that the rights of individual victims of human rights abuses were not adequately addressed. Those responsible for human rights violations on both sides of the conflict were not sufficiently held accountable, a problem which continues to haunt victims today. Furthermore, the Truth Commission’s recommendation of specific reparations was not implemented, and there was no targeted response to victims’ social and economic needs. The passage of an amnesty law for almost all offenders—covering the army, other government security forces, and the guerrillas—has led to ongoing divisions and resentment within Salvadoran society. The military and security force high command and the leaders of the FMLN were purged from the ranks, but not punished. The amnesty law has since been declared unconstitutional, but subsequent decisions have limited most judicial actions.

Finally, deportations since the war ended have added to El Salvador’s challenges. Both during and after the civil war, hundreds of thousands of Salvadoreans fled to the United States. In the ensuing decades, the United States adopted a policy of mass deportation against Salvadoreans who have violated immigration laws, as well as those who have spent time in prison for more serious crimes (comprising a minority of those deported each year). Mass deportations broke up Salvadoran families, and thousands of U.S.-born children were sent to live with family in El Salvador. Furthermore, the membership of several street gangs in Los Angeles—notably MS-13 and Barrio 18—was largely Salvadoran; when gang members began to be deported back to El Salvador in the 1990s, they established themselves in mostly urban neighborhoods, essentially taking over entire communities. These criminal gangs, funded by drug trafficking operations and the extor-
tion of local businesses, have deteriorated the security situation in El Salvador and made it one of the most violent countries in the world. El Salvador’s current volatile security can be partially attributed to the failure of the peace process to address the root causes of conflict, but the family and societal disruptions following mass deportations have also contributed to many of El Salvador’s ongoing problems.

**Key Takeaways from the El Salvador Peace Process**

- UN mediation was key to the success of negotiations. Without a neutral, third-party negotiator, competing parties would have been unable to establish credible commitments for disarmament or build trust between FLMN and government leaders.

- U.S. leadership mattered. Presidents Reagan and Bush and their delegates leveraged the power of their offices, U.S. military and economic support, and the influence of UN institutions to encourage the Salvadoran government to negotiate for peace.

- Beyond the official UN mediation, the Catholic Church played an important role as an unofficial facilitator of talks between the FMLN and the Salvadoran government. Other countries, like Mexico and Venezuela, also supported the process by hosting several talks throughout the negotiations.

- The Salvadoran peace process focused on a wide range of political and economic solutions to the conflict, but it did not seek to fully address ongoing issues of underlying inequality in El Salvador, many of which continued after the end of the conflict.

- The solutions in the peace process focused on negotiating the demands of both the Salvadoran government and the FMLN, but they excluded any significant participation of the many non-government, peasant, worker, and religious organizations directly affected by the conflict. As a result, the significant needs of many civilians who had suffered greatly during the conflict were not well addressed by the peace accords.

- Some of the reforms agreed to in the peace accords took longer than expected to implement, and others were never fully realized.

**Background on the Afghanistan Conflict and Recent Peace Process**

The current intra-Afghan peace talks, which began in September 2020 between the central Afghan government and the Taliban, mark a potential end to 40 years of conflict in Afghanistan. In recent history, Afghanistan’s extended period of conflicts includes the Soviet-Afghan War from 1979 to 1989, the Afghan Civil Wars from 1989 to 2001, and the U.S.-led military operations and subsequent war that began in October 2001 (motivated by the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on the United States). The continuous state of war in Afghanistan has reinforced long-standing tribal, ethnic, political, religious, economic, and social divisions. Neither the Taliban nor the Afghan government can claim a military victory, and the years of fighting have stymied efforts to strengthen security, access to basic services, human rights, development, and sustainable economic growth within the country.

The origins of the 40-year conflict in modern Afghanistan stem from the Cold War and Afghanistan’s alliance with the former USSR in the early 1950s. In 1973, General Mohammed Daoud Khan, with support of the Soviet Union, overthrew the Afghan monarchy and established a modern communist state. This new government lasted only a few years; in 1978, leaders of the Afghan Communist Party led another coup, killed General Khan, and established a new communist political structure based on Islamic principles, nationalism, and socioeconomic justice. This government, led by Nur Mohammad Taraki, soon suffered
rife internal conflict and was further challenged by the emergence of a guerilla movement of conservative religious and ethnic leaders called the mujahideen (“Islamic Holy Warriors”). Set against the backdrop of the Cold War, the resulting conflict led to a decade-long war between the Soviet-backed communist Taraki government and the U.S.-, British-, Chinese-, and Pakistani-financed mujahideen, causing millions of Afghan refugees to flee to Pakistan and Iran. During the same period, the terrorist group al Qaeda was formed by Osama bin Laden and other mujahideen with the aim to uproot Soviet influence and other obstacles to an Islamic state in Afghanistan (including the influence of the United States). Afghanistan became a theater of Cold War power politics, as the United States helped provide arms for Afghan guerilla groups to fight against Soviet involvement and influence under Operation Cyclone.

The Soviet-Afghan war came to an end in 1988 when the United States, the USSR, Pakistan, and Afghanistan signed the Geneva Peace Accords negotiating the withdrawal of Soviet troops and the establishment of an independent state in Afghanistan. After the peace accords were signed, the mujahideen ousted the remnants of the communist regime in 1992, signaling the beginning of another Afghan Civil War. Afterwards, the mujahideen quickly fractured and enabled the rise of a new radically Islamic militia—the Taliban—that consolidated control and formed an Islamic government in Afghanistan in the early 1990s. Opposition to the new Taliban government took the form of a Northern Alliance, composed of both northern and southern Afghan ethnic groups. Nevertheless, the Taliban maintained the monopoly of force and subjected the Afghan population to its rules.

Under Taliban rule, Islamic law was strictly enforced through public executions and amputations, women’s rights were severely curtailed, and religious and cultural freedoms were restricted. Poppy cultivation and trade were also banned. An extended drought period led to food insecurity, prompting millions of refugees to flee to neighboring Pakistan. During this period, the United States refused to recognize the Taliban’s growing authority in Afghanistan; instead, it remained engrossed with preventing the emerging global terrorism campaign directly targeting U.S. interests, led by Osama bin Laden and al Qaeda.

The turning point for U.S. involvement was the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, which fundamentally transformed U.S. foreign policy toward Afghanistan and became a catalyst for the “War on Terror.” On September 4, eight international aid workers were imprisoned for three months for proselytizing Christianity; on September 9, the commander of the Northern Alliance, Ahmad Shah Massoud, was assassinated; and finally on September 11, terrorist attacks were carried out on New York, Washington, D.C., and Pennsylvania by means of four hijacked commercial flights commercial airline flights, resulting in the deaths of nearly three thousand people, mostly U.S. citizens. This led to the U.S.-led invasion of Afghanistan in October 2001. After intense fighting against the United States and its allies (including the Afghan Northern Alliance), the Taliban retreated from Kabul. The United States and its allies established an interim government under the Northern Alliance, with Hamid Karzai as interim president. Soon thereafter, the Taliban retreated to Pakistan, surrendering its remaining stronghold in Kandahar. After the formation of a new government and the drafting of a constitution, Hamid Karzai was elected president of Afghanistan in the 2004 elections.

The Karzai government, however, was riddled with capacity issues and corruption, and international support did not effectively help legitimize the Karzai government or facilitate Afghan reconstruction. The number of International Security Forces (ISAF) fighters in Afghanistan continued to increase, and they became involved in combat operations against the remnants of the Taliban and other insurgent groups, who were mainly based in rural Afghanistan. Additionally, the Taliban steadily rebuilt its support following increased resentment towards the U.S. occupation, turning to the illegal drug trade, Pakistan, and Russia to finance attacks on both U.S.- allied forces and civilians. As one of the largest producers and exporters
of opium and other drugs (e.g., methamphetamine), Afghanistan possesses a large drug trafficking and production operation that began in the mid-1950s. From 2016 to 2017, total opium production was the highest in Afghanistan's history, estimated at 9,000 metric tons. Control over the drug trade has often been a large source of hostilities throughout the 40-year conflict.

More than a decade after the start of the war, the international community helped push for troop withdrawals from Afghanistan, allowed the Afghan Army to take control of ISAF and NATO security forces, and attempted to structure aid for Afghanistan in order to assist with reconstruction efforts. But these efforts were marred by the lack of a comprehensive plan, corruption and incompetence in the Afghan government and military, and Pakistani sanctuary for the Taliban. In 2014, the Obama administration committed to a withdrawal of troops, and after contentious new elections were held in Afghanistan, a power-sharing agreement between the two principal contenders—Ashraf Ghani and Abdullah Abdullah—was brokered by then U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry.

More recently, under the Trump administration, the United States began increasing military operations again in Afghanistan, especially given the resurgence of the Taliban and of Islamic State-affiliated groups. With the situation becoming increasingly uncertain, in late 2018 the Trump administration initiated peace negotiations with the Taliban in Doha, Qatar.

Although the current central government of Afghanistan has made progress in terms of women's rights and individual freedoms, its inability to provide citizens with basic services (e.g., sanitation, legal access, or healthcare) and food security has allowed the Taliban to gain support, particularly in rural communities. Facing limited job prospects, young unemployed men have been enticed to join the Taliban, given the promise of money and community. However, the Taliban also lacks a system of basic services and has often resorted to violent coercion to maintain its influence in rural Afghan communities.

From 2001 to 2019, the total human cost of the Afghan conflict is estimated to number 157,000 people, including 43,000 civilians, 64,000 Afghan security personnel, and 42,000 anti-government fighters. In 2019, over 10,000 civilians were either killed or injured. Moreover, the recent global Covid-19 pandemic has further exacerbated the challenges of instability, insecurity, and impoverishment in Afghanistan. Afghan hospital capacity and healthcare infrastructure have been overwhelmed by the crisis, and increasing rates of poverty, infection, and food insecurity have led to ethnic tensions over food distribution.

**Peace Process Negotiations**

The latest attempt at a peace process—aiming to end 19 years of U.S. involvement and a 40-year period of conflict—is riddled with challenges. During the 2020 peace talks, both the Afghan government and the Taliban have expressed a desire for national unity, rooted in Afghan public support for peace and stability above other concerns. The success of the peace negotiations will require reaching a compromise between the Afghan government and the Taliban, and it will also need to address Afghanistan's development challenges, including its overreliance on foreign financing.

Following the 2018 peace talks in Doha, the Trump administration temporarily halted the process after a U.S. soldier was killed in combat. However, in February 2020, the United States and the Taliban signed an agreement that restarted peace talks. The agreement consisted of the following conciliations: a U.S. military withdrawal over 14 months, a prisoner exchange between the Taliban and the central government, the removal of economic sanctions, and a commitment from the Taliban to counter terrorism efforts—including severing ties with terrorist groups such as al Qaeda and groups affiliated with the Islamic State (e.g. Islamic State and Levant Khorasan). These objectives have proved challenging, especially since the
February deal did not include any form of ceasefire agreement; this was due largely to emerging divisions within the Taliban, its unwillingness to halt attacks on Afghan military forces and civilians, and the government’s own reluctance to move towards power-sharing with the Taliban. The Taliban has, however, strategically avoided provoking or attacking U.S. forces, in order to ensure a continued international military withdrawal.

The most recent peace talks opened on September 11, 2020, with delegations representing the central Afghan government, the Taliban, and Afghan civil society. These peace negotiations are attempting to structure a power-sharing agreement between the current government and the Taliban. Nonetheless, nearly nine months have passed since the beginning of the peace process in February, and much uncertainty remains. Both the Taliban and the Afghan government have refused a third-party mediator or other international facilitation methods for peace. The negotiations are at risk of collapse due to an impasse over the role of religious minorities, fractures in the Afghan government, the Taliban breaking negotiation commitments, and too little progress towards peace amidst rising violence. Meanwhile, U.S. forces are leaving Afghanistan on schedule: military bases are closing and the U.S. presence in Afghanistan will be reduced to 4,500 troops by November and 2,500 by early 2021.

**Obstacles to a Lasting Peace**

**THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC**

Large obstacles to peace include concerns that the Taliban is not negotiating in good faith and is waiting for U.S. political changes that might usher in a full troop withdrawal. Covid-19 has exacerbated the poor economic and security conditions in Afghanistan and has stressed an already weak healthcare system. Previous cuts to the healthcare system and to reconstruction have hurt response efforts, and preexisting socioeconomic inequalities have helped spread the virus throughout the region.

The pandemic has caused serious disruptions in economic activity, regional trade, and remittance flows. Covid-19 has also resulted in a decline in household income, an increase in food insecurity, and an expected increase in the poverty rate to 72 percent of the population. In sum, the region has seen reduced trade and decreased economic output, which will increase existing inequalities and poverty levels.

**THE TALIBAN’S OPAQUE VISION FOR PEACE**

The Taliban’s vision for peace is vague: during the peace talks, it has described a desire for an Islamic government, but has not provided many specifics. For example, the Taliban has not been explicit about its approach to human rights. Furthermore, it has failed to call for a ceasefire, unlike every other delegation to the peace talks—a critical component of an emerging peace. With the lack of potential for a ceasefire agreement from the peace talks, DDR will be made far more difficult to implement, even if it is included in a peace accord.

Currently, violence from the Taliban and other insurgent groups has remained constant. In fact, increased conflicts in the region have displaced 38 million Afghans, and according to the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), have caused 5,939 civilian casualties from January to September 2020.

Additionally, the Taliban has not made any concrete offers to recognize the Afghan government’s legitimacy or to acknowledge the role of religious minorities. It has also retained ties with al Qaeda and other terrorist groups, despite the February deal. If sufficient progress is not made prior to a U.S. withdrawal, the Taliban may be emboldened to end peace talks and continue the conflict in order to secure a new Afghanistan on its own terms.
**LACK OF INCLUSIVITY OF CIVIL SOCIETY AND WOMEN**

Another obstacle to peace is insufficient representation of civil society and other internal third-party actors. The inclusion of civil society will be critical to the success and sustainability of peace negotiations. Civil society stakeholders include tribal and religious leaders, victim groups, NGOs, universities, labor unions, media professionals, artists, youth and women groups, and community development organizations. While the likelihood of formal civil society representation at the peace talks is low, civil society groups should play a key advisory role in the peace process to ensure that their interests are represented.

Noticeably absent from the government and Taliban delegations is adequate representation of women, presenting concerns for whether the peace talks will include explicit mention of women’s rights. The number of women representatives from the Afghan government is only **four**, and the Taliban delegation has no women representatives. Although the Taliban has expressed a commitment to respect women’s rights and the progress made in the last 20 years (such as in education, entrepreneurship, and job opportunities), given their actions during the 1990s, it is unclear whether the Taliban is actually willing to respect human rights in the face of its more conservative religious elements.

Other actors involved in Afghanistan include internal and external insurgent groups, some of which are not allied with the Taliban (e.g., Islamic State and Levant Khorasan) but are keen on ensuring that Islam has a dominant role in Afghanistan’s political, social, and cultural future. Nevertheless, increased representation of these groups will impede rather than facilitate peace. In fact, the Islamic State and Levant Khorasan groups have been responsible for large-scale attacks on civilians as well as both Taliban and Afghan security forces.

**PROPERTY RIGHTS AND ECONOMIC GROWTH**

Another driver of violence and obstacle to peace in Afghanistan has been land disputes caused by a scarcity of cultivable land, large refugee inflows and outflows, the opium trade, and increased poverty rates. Moreover, Afghanistan’s weak formal institutional capacity, particular mechanisms of land rights, and limited records of ownership make solving disputes near impossible. Urbanization is underway for the formerly rural economy, and cities are a growing nexus of crime and poverty. Moreover, Afghanistan’s rising poverty rate, non-functioning financial and economic institutions, corruption, and poor economic performance remain challenges to the implementation of peace agreements.

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**Principal International Actors**

The Afghanistan peace process is subject to many international interests, including the UN, the United States, Russia, Iran, Pakistan, and India. As it stands, the UN has not undertaken a mediating role in the peace process. The UN has mainly monitored, and the UN Security Council has declared support for a successful Afghan-led and Afghan-owned peace negotiation process involving both a ceasefire and a tenable political agreement.

Due to its military presence in Afghanistan and the implications of a hasty withdrawal, the United States plays a critical role in the success of peace negotiations. In fact, a full U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan could hinder a sustainable peace agreement, despite it having been central to bringing the Taliban to the negotiating table. In addition, the United States can provide incentives for both sides to reach a settlement. This could include a willingness to support long-term economic, diplomatic, and military engagement, while also ensuring that other external actors (e.g., Pakistan) do not complicate the peace process.
Actors such as Russia and Iran are seeing opportunities for geopolitical gains in the region with the promise of U.S. military withdrawal from Afghanistan. Iran has supported the Afghan central government in the past, helping finance its security forces. During 2020, Iran has provided arms to the Taliban for the fighting season (e.g., anti-aircraft weapons and projectile components). In order to avoid compromising the current peace negotiations in Afghanistan, the United States has not taken concrete steps to address Iran’s role in the bounties on U.S. forces. However, even these players want a managed withdrawal. Iran desires stability in Afghanistan since it wants a secure border, a reduced Afghan refugee population in Iran, reduced drug trafficking, and a minimized Taliban threat to Iranian leadership. Conversely, Russia has increased ties to the Taliban by providing arms and arranging military training camps; nonetheless, Russia claims to not be interested in guiding Afghanistan to a particular structure of government, but rather wishes to partner towards achieving mutual interests, such as the security and stability of the region.

Pakistan remains one of the largest geostrategic players in the Afghanistan peace talks, and its recent involvement has helped restore its relationship with the United States after several years of distrust. Nevertheless, Pakistan’s remaining ties to militant Islamic groups and the Taliban may threaten the negotiations, and the country has been the source of sanctuary, weapons, and counsel (although not always taken) for the Taliban for over a decade. The Pakistani government would prefer a more staggered U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, with its overriding objective being to prevent a new government that will be more aligned with India. Overall, Pakistan desires a “moderate” Islamic government in Afghanistan, but one that does not maintain ties with Pakistan’s own Islamic extremists; in fact, it may prefer the current government structure and a continued U.S. presence.

Historically, India has supported Afghan security forces with training and equipment capacity building (e.g., the 2011 India-Afghanistan strategic partnership). India has provided billions of dollars in infrastructure and humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan since 2001. To offset Pakistan’s strategic interests, India has also established new channels with the Taliban and become an active participant in the Afghanistan peace process. Finally, while not a major player, China has also played a more active role in the Afghanistan peace process recently, in the hope of future trade and investment opportunities.

**Potential Peace Outcomes**

A successful peace process is essential to securing a sustainable future for Afghanistan. To achieve peace, joint identities and constructive dialogues need to be encouraged, international and local support needs to be increased, and the specific needs of communities and the larger region need to be met. Afghanistan will need to reach agreements on a multitude of contentious topics including a temporary power-sharing structure among elites, a constitution, women’s rights, addressing intra-Afghan violence, prisoner returns, and the future of electoral processes. An intra-Afghan solution must deliberately build clear and comprehensive guidelines for any peace agreement and political transition. Peace negotiations need to be inclusive and recognized by stakeholders, as 50 percent of all peace processes fail. Furthermore, to avoid a return to violence, minimum acceptance of the peace accord outcome by Afghanistan’s neighbors also is essential.

The role of Islam in both the political and legal systems of a possibly unified Afghanistan must also be decided during the peace talks. In the past, traditional forms of law (often a combination of tribal, customary, and Islamic laws) have been at odds with the legal frameworks outlined in the 2004 constitution—but have been considered more legitimate and accessible by the Afghan public than the constitution. The
constitutional framework still integrates Islamic principles but aims to provide more rights and agency to Afghans (notably, for instance, to Afghan women). Nevertheless, the conflict between various tribal norms, the Afghan government’s attempts to introduce democratic legal principles, the Taliban’s adherence to the Hanafi School of Sunni Islam, and other interpretations of law from the many divisions of Islam presents intense challenges for the creation of a legitimate, functional, integrated, and just legal framework in Afghanistan. This is particularly true regarding women’s rights and equal access to justice, as well as the rights of a large Shia minority.

The peace process may require compromises on both governance and individual rights, especially with the Taliban’s remaining influence. The goal of a democracy with guaranteed human rights may prove elusive for Afghanistan, but some model of an Islamic democratic state could be proposed. Nevertheless, public support for the Taliban’s ambiguous approach to human rights is tenuous, especially if too many rights are sacrificed for the sake of compromise.

At the beginning of 2020, a poll revealed the top five issues of importance to Afghan citizens, in order of priority: (1) ceasefire and an end to war, (2) women’s rights, (3) sustainable peace, (4) valuing people’s demands and recommendations, and (5) the establishment of security. Rural Afghanistan primarily seeks security, peace, and stability. In fact, many rural Taliban recruits do not necessarily join out of an ideological alignment, but because of meager opportunities and security. Other issues that need addressing include the presence of foreign troops and bases, other armed opposition groups (e.g. the Islamic State), war crimes and justice for civilian deaths, external interests, education, freedom of expression, corruption, and drug trafficking. The peace process must also build national consensus and invest in training and capacity building in Afghanistan.

Afghanistan can learn much from the experiences of other global peace processes—particularly El Salvador, which provides valuable lessons on DDR, the role of mediators, and the importance of long-term planning for infrastructure and economic development.

**Major Issues for the Afghanistan Peace Process**

- Two generations of Afghans have known nothing but conflict. To create self-sustaining stability, the Afghan peace process will have to reintegrate both combatants and civilian populations into a system that uses politics rather than arms to solve the country’s many challenges.

- The Afghan peace process marks the end of 19 years of U.S. involvement in the country. Despite the nation-building efforts of international donors, the Afghan government’s ability to advance human security, democracy, and economic development is in question. The current record of widespread government corruption undermines all these efforts. Without addressing the underlying conditions that brought the Taliban to power, real change will be next to impossible.

- Fundamental differences between the pro-democracy views of the Afghan and U.S. governments and the conservative Islamic perspectives of Taliban fighters create a challenging foundation for negotiations in the first place. However, Afghanistan also faces internal and external threats from third-party groups, such as Islamic State and other extremist organizations. When exacerbated by a lack of a ceasefire agreement and the lasting social, economic, and health-related effects of Covid-19, these challenges could defeat the Afghan peace process before it even begins.
Differences between the El Salvador and Afghanistan Peace Processes

While there are innumerable contrasts between the Afghanistan and El Salvador peace processes, the primary differences are the role of identity politics (e.g., religion and ethnicity), internal politics, international support of opposition groups, and the global landscape surrounding the peace talks. El Salvador is a considerably more homogenous society than Afghanistan, both in terms of ethnicity and religion: its population is predominantly Catholic and of mixed European and Indigenous descent. Regardless, income inequalities and the failure to incorporate broader civil society in the peace process was in part responsible for the less than full success of the accord—even if the accord did succeed in preventing any recurrence of civil war, protecting individual rights, and establishing a functioning, if flawed, political democracy.

Furthermore, El Salvador is also vastly smaller in terms of both land area and population size and density. One of the failures underpinning the Salvadoran peace accords was the precipitous decline of international funding after the first five years after the peace accord was signed. While the cost of implementing an Afghan peace accord will depend on its content, the size and complexity of Afghanistan’s geography and demography will demand even more significant aid contributions to support the implementation of peace accords, requiring the involvement of governments, multilateral development organizations, and regional development banks over a longer period of time.

As the bridge between various geopolitical regions (i.e., Asia, the Middle East, and Europe), Afghanistan is home to numerous ethnic, tribal, and religious identity groups. It boasts a complicated physical environment, ranging from plains to desert, with further divisions even amongst different identity groups. Ethnic groups in Afghanistan include Pashtuns (42 percent of the population), Tajiks (27 percent of the population), Hazaras (10 percent of the population), Uzbeks (9 percent of the population), and Aimaqs (4 percent of the population), among others. Afghanistan’s mostly Muslim population is split into a majority Sunni and minority Shia group, both of which have their own internal divisions in terms of orthodoxy and practice. Religious consensus in El Salvador was a forgone conclusion and not an element of the peace accords, whereas in Afghanistan some form of religious tolerance will be essential and difficult.

In both El Salvador and Afghanistan, the premise of ending violence is what brought both parties to the negotiating table. However, unlike the FMLN, the Taliban’s commitment to peace may not be strong unless it includes their vision of an Islamic system of governance. Moreover, El Salvador also benefited from a unified opposition under the FMLN umbrella and a single voice at the negotiation table; in fact, the tragedy is that much of the FMLN’s minimum demands could have been achieved far earlier without the complicating factor of the Cold War. Conversely, Afghanistan’s multitude of fractured and separate internal and external insurgent groups (e.g., Islamic State and Levant Khorasan, Haqqani Network, and al Qaeda) may not be able to be brought to the negotiating table in a unified manner. The Afghan peace process therefore may be less sustainable in the face of a fractured opposition.

In the case of Afghanistan, the difficult stability of the region will have a significant impact on the longevity of the accords. Conversely, in El Salvador, geopolitics and the country’s region not only played an important role in the conflict itself, but also in stabilizing and supporting peace. Throughout the Salvadoran Civil War, Cuba, Nicaragua, and the Soviet Union all provided financial backing and arms to the FMLN, while the United States trained, armed, and funded the government forces. Afghanistan will have to contend with considerably challenging regional dynamics, such as the volatility of Iran, state-sponsored terrorism in Pakistan, the rise of extremist ideologies around the world, and ongoing Russian armament of belligerent groups. Nonetheless, there are helpful actors within Central Asia, China, and India.
Perhaps the key difference between these two cases is that of era. In fact, Afghanistan’s “region” is not limited only by geographic boundaries: due to the rise of the internet, malign actors from around the world, including Islamic State, can undermine the peace process through disinformation campaigns, digital financing, and other nefarious activities. The El Salvador peace process occurred at a very different moment in time, at the end of the Cold War and before the digital revolution. The Afghanistan peace talks therefore entail a host of modern complications, including social media and digital activism, greater civil society representation, a larger international audience, and more stakeholders.

Lessons Learned from the El Salvador Peace Process

Despite their differences, several key lessons from the El Salvador peace process can be applicable to the ongoing Afghan peace talks. First, there should be an emphasis on the actual implementation of land reform and property rights, as well as dispute resolution over competing claims. One of the results of the El Salvador peace accords was land reform geared towards ex-combatant integration in agriculture; however, the reforms did not integrate non-combatants’ desires for land, despite the magnitude of suffering, displacement, and disruption they had endured. In Afghanistan, land ownership remains a pervasive problem. Settling land disputes and formalizing mechanisms to register and enforce property rights—whether individual or communal—will be critical to achieving DDR of the Taliban, peaceful return of military refugees and IDPs, and stability in Afghanistan. As of 2015, only 20 percent of land in Afghanistan was titled; the lack of formal documentation has been the largest obstacle to effective land titling, further impeding the distribution of ownership.

Second, establishing a ceasefire and cessation of hostilities was essential in El Salvador and will be in Afghanistan. Once a ceasefire is agreed upon and the Taliban have exhibited a willingness to adhere to set terms, the DDR process must begin. DDR was a central component of the Salvadoran peace process; the demobilization and disarmament portions were successful in ending the military structure of the guerrillas and reforming the security sector, and the FMLN were effectively reintegrated into politics. Thus far, El Salvador has had two FMLN presidents govern since the peace negotiations and has avoided any issues regarding power transitions following administrations. Economic reintegration in the rural areas, giving many a defined space in which to begin a cooperative enterprise for coffee and other exports, was limited by the difficulties of small farm agriculture—and some cooperatives were transformed into single parcel ownership after a few years. Other benefits through job training, education, and small business financing were also made available, but in equally limited fashion. The bulk of external reintegration ended after 1996. Furthermore, the scale of the DDR process in El Salvador was significantly smaller than it would need to be in Afghanistan, as there are an estimated 300,000 Afghan National Defense and Security Forces and 150,000 Taliban fighters and militia in the region.

The institution of a national police force helped unify El Salvador and reintegrate FMLN into society following the peace process, as the peace negotiations required not only DDR of the FMLN but also the reduction of power of the state military. However, despite the initial hope for significant national transformation, the socioeconomic realities of former combatants and their families were insufficient, and street gangs which had existed for decades ultimately were overtaken by MS-13 and Barrio 18 deportees, who have undertaken criminal violence in the country for a decade.

Third, the role of the UN as third-party mediator proved essential to the Salvadoran peace process. The UN has played a limited role in the Afghan peace talks in the past. In fact, a potential UN mediator could be seen as pro-Western by the Taliban, similar to their complaints regarding the presence of U.S. and NATO forces. That said, the Taliban has had informal contacts with the United Nations Assistance Mission in
Afghanistan (UNAMA) Special Representative of the Secretary General throughout the conflict, particularly on humanitarian issues. Much depends on the individual negotiator—who could come from an Islamic organization—and on the credibility they can establish with the actors in the peace process.

Fourth, the peace talks in Afghanistan should be inclusive to civil society and to the various ethnic groups and factions within the country. This was a missed opportunity in El Salvador; reconciliation efforts in El Salvador were not inclusive, with few steps being taken to address the needs of populations that were disproportionately affected by violence—including women, indigenous people, and people in remote rural areas. This must be a priority in the Afghan peace process. Afghanistan has a large and diverse civil society, including religious leaders, women’s rights activists, victims’ groups, media outlets, and community activist groups; all of these have a key role to play in the peace talks. For example, civil society groups could have formal consultative authority to make their interests known and addressed. This will be critical to reconstruction and peacebuilding efforts, as well as for attaining public support of the peace talks and any agreement made at them. A durable peace in Afghanistan will not be attainable without reconciliation.

Finally, the success of the peace talks will be dependent on the Afghan central government’s legitimacy, particularly as seen by the Taliban. After years of participation in the country’s conflict, the Salvadoran government’s willingness to negotiate peace accords and reform the country’s constitution helped to reestablish the legitimacy of the state. Government capacity has been an ongoing issue in Afghanistan since the Karzai years. The peace talks—and ideally, a peace accord—would provide a new opportunity to strengthen the Afghan central government’s capacity to provide basic services and access to healthcare, education, and economic opportunities. This will likely require amending the current constitution or drafting a new one in tandem with the Taliban, which—besides an emphasis on Islamic law—has been otherwise vague on what kind of government it would accept.

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