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An Uphill Climb

Pushing for Inclusive Political Dialogue in Afghanistan

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 New Rules

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Executive Summary

TO AVOID WHAT IS becoming a human rights catastrophe for the women and girls of Afghanistan and a ticking time bomb for a major terrorist resurgence in the nation, the international community must press for the development of an inclusive and sustainable political process to influence the future trajectory of governance of the country. The United States should work with the United Nations (UN) and like-minded nations to support the establishment of a structured process of engagement for Afghanistan's citizens, inside and outside the country, that leads to a political dialogue with Taliban leaders. While there is presently no significant challenge to Taliban rule pushing the group to consider engaging in such a dialogue, the international community should still use its levers of influence to seek to convince the Taliban of the necessity to engage with non-Taliban groups and individuals.

It is important to consider a leading role for young people in this effort. Engaging this generation in a peaceful political process and finding ways for them to move beyond historical internal divisions are critical to finally writing a new chapter for the country. Equally essential to the foundation of a new political order that young people want is ending impunity for those responsible for war crimes—not only the Taliban but also leaders from previous periods.

Another step toward encouraging a more inclusive political dialogue in Afghanistan is holding the Taliban to account on its human rights abuses, especially toward women and girls. Several international initiatives that aim to hold the Taliban accountable for its treatment of women and girls have emerged in the last few years. These include the establishment of a UN Human Rights Council investigative mechanism, bringing Afghanistan before the International Court of Justice for failing to meet its international obligations under the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, issuing arrest warrants at the International Criminal Court for Taliban leaders accused of abusing the rights of women and girls, and codifying the Taliban's treatment of women and girls as gender apartheid within the Crimes Against Humanity Treaty. These efforts can serve as a stepping stone to launching an inclusive political dialogue.

Pakistan's frustration with the Afghan Taliban over its support for the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) has led the Pakistani government to take military action against TTP targets on Afghan territory and host anti-Taliban opposition leaders for meetings in Islamabad. Washington and Islamabad may find increasing points of convergence on Afghanistan that could lead them to cooperate more closely on efforts to press the Taliban to both crack down on terrorism and engage in an inclusive political process.

With increasing repression of women and girls—as well as minorities and those opposed to the Taliban’s policies—and the proliferation of international terrorist groups inside the country and expanding indoctrination of the youth in the Taliban’s extremist ideologies, the United States cannot afford to ignore the situation in Afghanistan. The United States should work more closely with the UN and international partners, including the European Union and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, to spur an inclusive political dialogue that will help create a more stable and prosperous Afghanistan that is inhospitable to terrorist movements. To facilitate this process, the United States must take the following actions.

Maintain a policy of nonrecognition of the Taliban.

Washington must lead international efforts to continue to refuse concessions to the Taliban, such as diplomatic recognition, unfreezing Afghan assets, or lifting sanctions on Taliban leaders, until the Taliban demonstrates concrete, verifiable, and sustained reversal of its systematic violations of the rights of women and girls, particularly by fully restoring their access to education, employment, and public life.¹

Work within the UN Security Council to pressure the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) to support an Afghan national dialogue.

Washington should lead an effort to ensure the quarterly Security Council reviews of UNAMA include reporting on the establishment of an Afghan political process that accords with the Report of the *Report of the Independent Assessment Pursuant to Security Council Resolution 2679*, which calls for “a national political dialogue that reflects the views and participation of all Afghans” that leads to “predictable governance based on the rule of law” protecting the rights of all its citizens.²

Provide structured support to Afghan civil society and opposition forces to help them map their areas of agreement onto future governance.

The United States and other members of the international community should support a framework for mapping and internal consultations among Afghan stakeholders. They can do so by funding, protecting, and amplifying platforms to facilitate discussion among the various opposition groups, offering incentives such as high-level diplomatic engagement with these platforms, and urging them to solidify areas of commonality and cooperation.

Catalyze dialogue with nonpolitical sectors of Afghan society, particularly the youth.

Considering lessons from the South African and Colombian peace processes regarding the vital role of youth, business, community councils, and religious communities in establishing conditions for peaceful political dialogue, Afghan political and civil society leaders and the international community should engage with these sectors within Afghanistan.³

Find new ways to work with Pakistan on Afghanistan.

Considering that Pakistan’s policies are significantly changing toward the Taliban, U.S. officials should examine areas of convergence and how the two sides might cooperate toward mutual objectives of an Afghan government that provides for its people economically and is strongly motivated to reject extremism. For example, Washington can incentivize Pakistan to support peaceful anti-Taliban opposition groups, media, and other individuals; protect them from deportation; and even help to fund conferences and meetings of these groups inside Pakistan. U.S. officials should also explore working with Pakistan within the UN sanctions committee on al-Qaida through UN Security Council Resolution 1989 to designate the Taliban for hosting and supporting the TTP.

Introduction

FIVE YEARS AFTER TAKING Afghanistan by military force, the Taliban holds a firm grip on power and faces no credible threat from the opposition. Meanwhile, the Taliban regime is engaged in systematic human rights abuses, especially toward women and girls, who are slowly being erased from society and increasingly face gender persecution and possibly even crimes against humanity. At the same time, the Taliban continues to harbor terrorist groups, including al-Qaida, the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), and dozens of others and is inculcating its extremist ideologies into a new generation of young Afghans by expanding the number of jihadi religious schools (madrassas) throughout the country.⁴ Those Afghans in opposition to the Taliban's totalitarian policies have no way to protest without risking harm to themselves or unlawful detention.

Some geopolitical trends have indirectly supported an Afghan political dialogue, but the negative trends have been stronger. On the positive side, there has been agreement at the United Nations (UN), the UN Security Council, and myriad human rights bodies not to recognize the Taliban, although some countries have de facto normalized relations with the Taliban by allowing Taliban officials to serve as ambassadors in their capitals. The consensus remains that the Taliban is depriving huge numbers of the population of basic rights, that it has promoted extremism and hosted terror groups, and that it lacks legitimacy with respect to its international status.

Active animosity between Pakistan and its former clients has added some energy to an effort to find alternatives to the Taliban. However, key players such as Russia, China, Iran, and India, as well as most Central Asian nations, are interested in a transactional relationship with the Taliban and have resisted efforts to center human rights in their interactions with the Taliban or to support the appointment of an empowered UN special envoy to help resolve the political vacuum. And Pakistan, for all its ire, probably does not want to topple the regime. Adding to this stasis, the role of special representative of the secretary general at the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) has been filled by weak international figures who prioritized the mission's humanitarian role and maintaining Taliban permission to remain in the country, rather than pushing for a credible and inclusive political process.

To avoid what is both a human rights catastrophe for the women and girls of Afghanistan and a ticking time bomb for a major terrorist resurgence in the nation, the international community must press for the development of an inclusive and sustainable political process to influence the future trajectory of governance of the country. The United States should work with the UN and like-minded nations to support the establishment of a structured process of engagement for Afghan citizens,

inside and outside the country. What is needed is a negotiating structure for the people of Afghanistan to eventually enter dialogue with the de facto authorities—rather than a “Doha process” structure involving international diplomats negotiating with the Taliban. While there is presently no significant challenge to Taliban rule and therefore no real impetus for it to consider engaging in political dialogue with those opposing it, the international community should still use its levers of influence to seek to convince the Taliban of the necessity for engagement with non-Taliban groups and individuals. The key levers for doing so include sanctions, banking restrictions, and nonrecognition.

To avoid what is both a human rights catastrophe for the women and girls of Afghanistan and a ticking time bomb for a major terrorist resurgence in the nation, the international community must press for the development of an inclusive and sustainable political process to influence the future trajectory of governance of the country.

This paper examines the challenges and opportunities for establishing an inclusive political dialogue in Afghanistan. The paper argues that the first step to instituting such dialogue is for the opposition groups to unite themselves. It also describes how recent international efforts to hold the Taliban accountable on its human rights abuses, especially against women and girls, can assist in pushing the Taliban toward an inclusive dialogue. It further analyzes the recent conflict between Afghanistan and Pakistan and the implications for Pakistan's role in contributing toward efforts both to push the Taliban to crack down on terrorism and to engage with non-Taliban actors. The paper also analyzes peace processes in other countries—namely Colombia, South Africa, and Syria—which can serve as models, or at least provide ideas, for catalyzing an inclusive dialogue in Afghanistan. Finally, in view of the urgent need for a U.S. strategy to address American interests in a region with active conflicts, nuclear-armed states, and a growing terrorism problem, the paper provides U.S. policy recommendations that could help improve prospects for the development of an inclusive political process in Afghanistan, while noting that ultimately it is the Afghans themselves who must take this vital step for stability and prosperity of the country.

UNAMA Mandate Renewal Debate



The United Nations Security Council Chamber at UN Headquarters in New York City on March 16, 2026. On that day, the Security Council unanimously adopted Resolution 2818 (2026), extending the mandate of the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan through June 17, 2026. (Michael M. Santiago/Getty Images)

The United States is leading an effort at the United Nations (UN) to revise the mandate of the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) and to reform its operations and trim its budget. While UNAMA has focused primarily on humanitarian aid coordination and human rights oversight since 2021, it has done less to carry out its mandate to support conflict resolution and negotiations with a wide variety of political actors. The United States rejected UNAMA's yearly extension in March and insisted that its mandate be amended. In June, Security Council members agreed to an extension with a new focus on UNAMA's political tasks. It is too early to assess whether this mandate adjustment will positively impact UNAMA's effectiveness.

Uniting the Opposition

ALMOST FIVE YEARS AFTER the collapse of the Afghanistan Republic, itself riven by internal rivalries and mistrust, no single opposition voice or structure has emerged. In stark contrast to the Taliban, with famously inflexible and unified positions and negotiating stances, the people of Afghanistan who want a representative government have been divided, not only by ideologies and ethnic loyalties but also by more tangible hurdles: worldwide dispersion, tenuous legal and immigration status, lack of funding, and an inability to engage from inside Afghanistan without risking physical harm.

Historical animosities remain an important psychological obstacle to political unity among non-Taliban actors, with individuals accusing one another of failing the Afghan people through corruption or misrule during the era of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (2002 to 2021). Many members of the younger generation both inside and outside Afghanistan are calling for young people to have a chance they have lacked in previous generations to be a leading force within a viable political movement and any consultation process.⁵

Afghan interlocutors have articulated the need for principled leaders within a defined, transparent process as a foundation for promoting unity. Despite considerable constraints, multiple

post-2021 consultation meetings have taken place among Afghan leaders, subject matter experts, and activists, particularly women and youth, on the issue of finding a legitimate alternative to Taliban rule. The meetings and groups are not part of a larger and internationally recognized structure, however. Researchers at the Center for a New American Security hosted a private roundtable in April 2026 that focused on how to bring the young generation into an inclusive political process and included civil society leaders from inside and outside Afghanistan. During the roundtable, one participant suggested mapping major political parties and other groupings, including newly formed initiatives, and creating platforms for diverse voices to agree on common principles in an atmosphere where no single entity tries to take over the process.⁶ These platforms could include leaders who may not be part of any political movement and a wider spectrum of actors than have been engaged to date, both inside and outside Afghanistan.

Other roundtable participants noted that consultations should account for the current repressive situation in Afghanistan and social media environment, for example, by allowing for virtual meetings, anonymous polling, and in-person gatherings at a local level within Afghanistan.⁷ One Middle East expert has coined the

term “digital ulema”—that is, tech-savvy individuals who shape online discourse on political issues.⁸ Given severe repression inside Afghanistan, careful and intentional efforts are needed to both catalyze internal participation and keep participants safe.

This difficult but feasible task needs outside help. This requirement was articulated in the 2023 *Report of the Independent Assessment Pursuant to Security Council Resolution 2679* by former Turkish Foreign Minister Feridun Sinirlioglu, which called for the international community to “support Afghan stakeholders to ensure inclusive and representative participation in a dialogue with the de facto authorities about the future of their country,” particularly the creation of predictable, lawful institutions and a representative constitutional order.⁹ Efforts such as the “Mosaic” approach and Doha process (Qatar-based formats in which UN officials have brought international diplomats and Taliban representatives together, most recently to discuss areas of potential collaboration on counternarcotics and the private sector) have fallen short because they excluded important stakeholders, especially women of Afghanistan.¹⁰ The recent UNAMA mandate renewal debate focused attention on the importance of international support for a genuine and inclusive political process.

Some observers have suggested breaking the bigger problem into more manageable pieces. One idea that has been presented is putting Afghanistan’s UN headquarters seat (which remains in the hands of a former Republic diplomat) into play, but if this approach is not made with appropriate political consensus and safeguards it could be perceived as another concession to the Taliban.¹¹ In this case, a proposal to support a new representative—neither from the former Republic nor the Taliban—would allow a debate over the issue of legitimacy and valid representation for the people of Afghanistan. A small facilitation group could be empowered to consult with relevant actors, take UN Charter and Security Council resolutions on Afghanistan into account, and propose a time-limited plan for filling the seat. Other tools for approaching a dialogue could consist of debates over the UN sanctions on the Taliban.

If the international community speaks to the Taliban before the non-Taliban opposition becomes unified, it will invert the sequence that would otherwise empower Afghan voices. This is at the heart of why the UN-led Doha process in its current form is the wrong approach. International interlocutors speak in general terms about Afghan governance and human rights but cannot alone decide what Taliban concessions on these issues would be sufficient to warrant recognition. In any case, the Taliban remains fundamentally uninterested in international rewards in exchange for such concessions. Five years of failed Doha process dialogue is too long to keep trying the same approach.

Defining the principles upon which stakeholders can engage in future negotiations with the Taliban will involve debate and compromises, the exact nature of which must be the prerogative of the people of Afghanistan. Worldwide consultations should focus

on the key issues identified in the 2023 *Report of the Independent Assessment Pursuant to Security Council Resolution 2679*, such as inclusive governance and Afghanistan’s human rights obligations, with the goal of a common and agreed-upon negotiation platform for an eventual Taliban dialogue.

Civil society and democratic forces, which have been under extreme constraints since 2021, are active agents with their own agendas, legitimacy, and accountability to their constituencies; the international community should fund, protect, and amplify their processes. Points of convergence from multiple consultations include inclusive governance that reflects the full diversity of Afghanistan’s society, a commitment to accountability for past atrocities, and a shared vision of reintegration into the region and international economy under conditions that respect human rights and the rule of law.

Many members of the younger generation both inside and outside Afghanistan are calling for a new narrative that allows young people to have a chance they have lacked in previous generations to be a leading force within a viable political movement and any consultation process.

As a final consultation process takes shape, advancement of a common platform should be matched by the growing engagement of regional players and participation of dialogue representatives in international forums, including at the UN General Assembly. If the Taliban objects to international engagement with the dialogue, UNAMA could continue its political work through external offices, or the Security Council could require the UN to appoint a separate special representative to carry out the task. In any case, UNAMA’s mandate should have clear and measurable benchmarks for supporting this effort.

Bringing the Taliban to the table can only happen if it sees the overwhelming desire of the people of Afghanistan for representation and rights, so it is vital that Afghans who may see themselves as “apolitical” view their own interests aligned with inclusive governance structures and Afghanistan’s reintegration into the world economy. Ulema councils, elders, academics, and other highly respected members of society, who often belong to no political party, are essential to a broad consultation. Specific approaches should be tailored for consultations and outreach to government employees, such as teachers and civil servants, who in addition to losing rights see mismanagement and flagrant corruption affecting their sectors. Traders and other members of the private sector can also make a strong business case for respecting human rights and rule of law.

Including the Younger Generation

IT IS PARTICULARLY IMPORTANT to consider a leading role for the youth in this effort. The demographics are clear: Afghans under 25 are an estimated 63 percent of the population and for most of them, access to education, work, and political representation is severely limited.¹² Years of conflict have exacerbated social divisions and mistrust in government, and extremist messages are now being taught to schoolchildren and the all-male university students. Engaging this generation in a peaceful political process and addressing the need to overcome longstanding divisions are critical to finally writing a new chapter for the country. Also essential to the foundation of a new political order are efforts to end impunity for those responsible for war crimes—not only the Taliban but also leaders from previous periods.

During the April 2026 roundtable, participants asserted that although ethnic and rural/urban differences are still major challenges in trying to create unity, there are many important areas of commonality among Afghan youth.¹³ Some participants suggested approaching political dialogue through economic spaces that would attract less Taliban attention, while others mentioned the importance of youth engagement with traditional local authorities. All agreed on the importance of social media platforms that allow Afghans to have access to international experts and engage in respectful disagreements that can help push back on extremist ideologies and online radicalization.

The exclusion of key components of society has been the impetus for Afghanistan's historical cycles of violence, so finding a stable solution will require the participation of a broad range of its citizens, from a variety of geographies, backgrounds, and areas of professional expertise. A political process needs to incorporate issues relating to accountability and restorative justice, especially for crimes against humanity, as well as multiple entry points for vulnerable populations. It will also require inclusion of the Taliban, or many of its supporters, to avoid the risk of another cycle of insurgency. As one participant noted, policies will be judged in the long run on their tangible impact on the daily safety, livelihoods, and freedoms of people in Afghanistan.

Accountability as a Stepping Stone to Inclusive Dialogue

ANOTHER STEP TOWARD ENCOURAGING a more inclusive political dialogue in Afghanistan is holding the Taliban accountable on its human rights abuses, especially toward women and girls. The Taliban's policies on restricting women and girls from attending

schools and universities, working outside the home, traveling without a male relative, speaking in public, accessing health care, and visiting public spaces like parks, gyms, and salons has made Afghanistan the most repressive country in the world for women and girls.¹⁴ In January 2026, the Taliban implemented a criminal procedure code for the courts that sanctions domestic violence against women and only criminalizes it if resulting in “a wound or bodily bruising,” which would then subject the husband to only two weeks imprisonment.¹⁵

Most citizens of Afghanistan do not support the Taliban's harsh policies toward women and girls but have no way to oppose the policies without risking physical harm or unlawful detention. According to the 2025 U.S. State Department *Human Rights Report*, the Taliban was responsible for enforced disappearances and arbitrary detentions of human rights activists, legal professionals, and protestors, including women activists who were often held incommunicado for weeks.¹⁶ According to Human Rights Watch, the Taliban uses enforced disappearances to invoke fear in those who oppose its policies and to gain control of the population.¹⁷

In addition to UNAMA's work on human rights, several international initiatives that aim to hold the Taliban accountable for its treatment of women and girls have emerged in the last few years. These include the establishment of a UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) investigative mechanism, bringing Afghanistan before the International Court of Justice (ICJ) for failing to meet its international obligations under the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), issuing arrest warrants at the International Criminal Court (ICC) for Taliban leaders accused of crimes against humanity on the basis of persecution of women and girls, and codifying the Taliban's treatment of women and girls as gender apartheid within the Crimes Against Humanity Treaty.

UN Human Rights Council Independent Investigative Mechanism for Afghanistan: On October 6, 2025, the UNHRC created an independent investigative mechanism for Afghanistan to collect, analyze, and preserve evidence of human rights abuses that can be used for prosecutions in national and international courts.¹⁸ The European Union introduced the resolution creating the mechanism at the UNHRC in Geneva, where it was adopted by consensus of the member states. Investigations will focus primarily on Taliban abuses against women and girls but also deal with abuses by former Afghan government officials, war lords, international forces, and other nonstate actors. The mechanism will mirror the work of two other similar mechanisms created to investigate human rights abuses in Myanmar and Syria.

ICJ case against the Taliban: In 2024, Germany, Canada, Australia, and the Netherlands started proceedings to bring a case before the ICJ against the Taliban for human rights abuses

against women and girls, accusing the Taliban of violating its international obligations under CEDAW.¹⁹ The process includes formal negotiations and arbitration, which are expected to lead to a formal filing with the ICJ. More than 20 other nations have expressed support for the initiative at the UN General Assembly. An ICJ ruling in favor of the petitioners would provide further basis for international sanctions against the Taliban and solidify the case that the Taliban should not be recognized as a legitimate government.

ICC arrest warrants against Taliban leaders: In July 2025, the ICC issued arrest warrants for Taliban supreme leader Haibatullah Akhunzada and Taliban Chief Justice Abdul Hakim Haqqani for crimes against humanity due to their policies against women and girls under Article 7(1)(h) of the Rome Statute.²⁰ The Pre-Trial Chamber II of the ICC determined that:

Specifically, the Taliban severely deprived, through decrees and edicts, girls and women of the rights to education, privacy and family life and the freedoms of movement, expression, thought, conscience and religion.²¹

Codifying Taliban actions as gender apartheid: There is an effort to codify the crime of gender apartheid within the Crimes Against Humanity Treaty as defined in the Rome Statute of the ICC. In January 2026, the Sixth Committee of the UN General Assembly hosted the first Preparatory Committee for establishing a stand-alone Crimes Against Humanity Treaty. The UN General Assembly is laying the groundwork for codifying gender apartheid, but the negotiations over the establishment of the Crimes Against Humanity Treaty will not begin until 2028.²² Still, the negotiations will offer a critical opportunity to discuss potential amendments to the draft treaty, including criminalizing gender apartheid.

These principled and concrete, albeit long-term, efforts by the international community to hold the Taliban accountable for its treatment of women and girls contrast sharply with the way in which the UN handled a meeting with the Taliban in Doha, Qatar, in July 2024. This was a UN-led meeting of the Doha process on Afghanistan where women were excluded from participating at the insistence of the Taliban.²³ The UN's decision to ban women from the international meeting was roundly criticized by international observers. One month following the meeting, the Taliban introduced the law on the Propagation of Virtue and

Prevention of Vice—or so-called morality laws—which codified and expanded upon restrictions on women and girls, including forbidding women from speaking in public.²⁴ The codifying of its repressive edicts against women so soon after the UN meeting demonstrated that the UN's catering to the Taliban's unreasonable demands only emboldened it to further crack down on women.

In addition to the growing number of international initiatives aimed at holding the Taliban accountable on women's rights, the U.S. Congress also has begun to get more active on the issue. In late March, U.S. Representative Sydney Kamlager-Dove, D-CA, introduced the Rejecting the Erasure of Afghan Women and Girls Act, which passed out of the House Foreign Affairs Committee (HFAC) with strong bipartisan support.²⁵ Kamlager-Dove said that HFAC's passage of the bill sends a "forceful message to the Taliban that Congress will not back down in our support for Afghan women."²⁶ The legislation requires the U.S. State Department to document Taliban abuses against women and girls and determine whether they constitute torture, crimes against humanity, or gross violations of human rights. It also states that it is the policy of the United States that it will not recognize the Taliban as a legitimate government in the absence of meaningful protection of Afghan women's rights. Finally, it urges the U.S. secretary of state to support efforts to document Taliban human rights abuses and to promote international support for the education of Afghan women and girls.



Burqa-clad Afghan women line up to receive a free Iftar meal on the outskirts of Kabul during Ramadan. The Taliban's systematic rollback of women's rights has left Afghan women among the most oppressed in the world. (Wakil Kohsar/AFP/Getty Images)



Afghan men pray at a mass funeral at Kabul's Eid Gah Mosque for victims of a Pakistani air strike that struck a drug rehabilitation center on March 16, 2026, killing 411 people, underscoring the deadly toll of the escalating conflict between Pakistan and the Taliban regime. (Wakil Kohsar/AFP/Getty Images)

Afghanistan-Pakistan Tensions: An Opportunity to Press the Taliban?

EVEN THOUGH PAKISTAN PROVIDED haven for the Taliban leadership and their fighters during most of the 20-year U.S. mission in Afghanistan, tensions are now flaring between the Pakistani military and the Afghan Taliban over the latter's support for the TTP. TTP attacks on Pakistan have grown exponentially in the last four years: In 2025, terrorist-related deaths in Pakistan reached their highest level in over a decade at 1,139.²⁷

Tensions between Pakistan and the Afghan Taliban have escalated to the extent that Pakistan has repeatedly conducted air strikes on suspected TTP hideouts inside Afghanistan's territory during the last year.²⁸ In October 2025, there were border clashes between Pakistan and Afghanistan that killed dozens of soldiers,

civilians, and militants.²⁹ Qatar helped mediate a ceasefire that eventually ended the fighting. However, tensions reignited in late February 2026 when Pakistan carried out air strikes across Afghanistan, including in Kabul. The Afghan Taliban responded with its own cross-border attacks against Pakistani military outposts, prompting Pakistan's defense minister to claim that the two sides were in "open war" and that the Taliban had turned Afghanistan "into a colony of India."³⁰ Despite several rounds of talks during March and April between Pakistan and the Taliban, the fighting continued. In late April, the Pakistani military carried out strikes in Kunar province, including at a university in the provincial capital of Asadabad.³¹

The United States shares Pakistan's goal of convincing the Taliban to crack down on TTP terrorists and supports Pakistan's efforts to destroy TTP infrastructure, equipment, and bases in Afghanistan.³² U.S. officials have a strong interest in ensuring Pakistan remains a stable country and in seeing the TTP—a dangerous and deadly organization with links to al-Qaida that



Afghan protestors holding Taliban flags march during a demonstration amid the ongoing conflict with Pakistan in the Faizabad district of Badakhshan province on March 6, 2026. Fifty-six Afghan civilians were killed in late February and early March 2026 during cross-border clashes between Pakistani forces and the Taliban regime. (Omer Abrar/AFP/Getty Images)

threatens the Pakistani state and regional stability—decimated. The Taliban’s hosting of TTP terrorists means the Taliban could also be designated under UN sanctions, covering al-Qaida and its affiliates, for its role in facilitating the TTP’s deadly attacks in Pakistan in 2025.³³

Meanwhile, India is cozying up to the Taliban as part of a strategy to undermine Pakistan’s regional influence and deny it strategic depth in Afghanistan. The Taliban Foreign Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi visited New Delhi in a week-long trip in October 2025. The Indian government came under fire when it initially denied female journalists access to a press briefing of the Taliban foreign minister. This caused a backlash among India’s press corps and opposition politicians, who argued the government’s decision was anathema to Indian democratic principles and traditions of press freedom, prompting the government to organize a second press briefing for the Taliban minister, at which several female journalists appeared in front-row seats.³⁴

Pakistan’s frustration with the Afghan Taliban over its support for the TTP and strengthening relations with India has led the Pakistani government to support hosting anti-Taliban opposition leaders for meetings in Islamabad. Last fall, Afghan opposition leaders attended a two-day conference in Islamabad titled “Toward Unity and Trust” that was hosted at the South Asia Strategic Stability Institute. While Pakistan may be increasingly eager to open its doors to the anti-Taliban opposition, several well-known opposition figures are wary about working with Pakistan, given Islamabad’s long history of coddling the Taliban. While it is noteworthy that Pakistan is increasingly willing to put both military and political pressure on the Taliban to try to shape its decision-making, many Afghan opposition leaders view Pakistan’s actions against the Taliban as a tactical way to try to convince it to crack down on the TTP. These opposition leaders see little opportunity for political alignment with Islamabad and believe strongly the people of Afghanistan must be the primary authors of any political process.

Insights from Other International Peace Processes

UNDERSTANDING AFGHANISTAN'S HISTORY IS an essential frame of reference for those seeking a stable and just end to decades of violence, but analyzing other complex peace processes around the world—for example in Colombia, South Africa, and Syria—may yield valuable insights. Lessons learned, whether positively or negatively, are potentially applicable in areas relating to women, civil society, and political unity.

Colombia: Colombia's peace process—in the negotiation, agreement, and implementation phases—incorporated significant layered opportunities for women's advocacy in five areas: numbers of women at the negotiating table; written commitments to women's rights in the peace agreement; exclusion of sexual violence from amnesty agreements; women serving in the judiciary; and women's leadership in the community, according to a UN Women report.³⁵ Colombian women engaged in various peace process formats as experts, advisors, and victim's rights advocates. They constituted about a third of the peace negotiation participants.³⁶

Although women were numerically underrepresented at the peace table itself, according to a 2016 study by the U.S. Institute for Peace they had considerable influence through a gender subcommission and thematic and drafting working groups.³⁷ At a community level, efforts to make peace meaningful for women was built on the existing quadrennial “local development plans” drafted by community groups, which are routinely adopted as government policy. Even before the final agreement was signed in 2016, women had been using these development plans to incorporate localized versions of international norms, such as the “Women, Peace, and Security” agenda.³⁸ In 2020, according to a 2025 study, local groups in one province adopted plans that drew on the goals of the peace agreement, including leadership training for local women, protection programs for women human rights defenders, and monitoring committees to make sure that legal and other remedies regarding violence against women were being carried out.³⁹

South Africa: Immediately following the 1990 political breakthrough in South Africa with the declared end to apartheid, destabilizing violence threatened the negotiations that were

intended to usher in a majority-rule government. Showing the utility of targeted and sporadic intervention by “apolitical” actors, leading figures within the church and business communities overcame their own divisions and held high-level meetings. They saw themselves as uniquely able to speak on behalf of the general population, which sought prosperity, peace, and justice and determined that their combined influence could get the attention of political leaders representing all points of the ideological and racial spectrum. Urging political actors to put the country first, the business-church coalition helped create a National Peace Accord (NPA) with rules for political discourse.⁴⁰ The NPA was adopted in late 1991, creating a “peace infrastructure” of committees and monitors at national, regional, and local levels to manage disputes and structures to address issues of historical impunity. Thanks to this intervention, political negotiations continued, despite the violence and historic animosities, leading in 1994 to South Africa's first free and universal elections and Nelson Mandela's inauguration as president.

Syria: The Syria peace process offers insights for Afghanistan's proposed political dialogue in two ways: the importance of engaging potential external spoilers and the need to be ready for unexpected, sudden opportunities. Key nations that had played spoiler roles at various points in Syria's conflict were brought to the table in the Astana, Kazakhstan-hosted, Russia and Türkiye-dominated talks from 2017–2024. This process was not well regarded at the time, especially because Russia's preference for President Bashar al-Assad clearly hindered a negotiated settlement. However, a report published by a prominent Washington-based think tank in March 2025 noted that the last Astana process meeting was the day before Assad's flight from Syria and that the participants' consultations in that moment (and acceptance of the results) helped prevent a war “of all against all.”⁴¹

Once the end came for the Assad regime, disparate opposition groups had to immediately form part of, support, or oppose a new government. While there was a largely peaceful transitional process, some have alleged that the caretaker government has squandered opportunities to break a cycle of excluding some groups from power and to prioritize “genuine reconciliation and engaging the public as authors rather than subjects of Syria's future.”⁴² Understanding the possibility of sudden reversals of fortune for the authorities should spur appreciation for having solid principles and mechanisms for consultation in the Afghan context.

U.S. Policy Recommendations

The United States, in close coordination with the UN, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, and regional and European stakeholders, must closely monitor events in Afghanistan. While the United States faces several competing national security priorities—the war against Iran, the conflict in Ukraine, and strategic competition with China—it cannot afford to ignore developments in Afghanistan. With increasing repression of women and girls, the proliferation of international terrorist groups inside the country, and expanding indoctrination of Afghan youth in the Taliban’s extremist ideologies, the United States risks repeating its policy failure before 9/11 and facing a future terrorist disaster if it simply looks away from the deteriorating situation in the country.

To spur an inclusive political dialogue in Afghanistan that will help lead to a more stable and prosperous Afghanistan that is inhospitable to terrorist movements, the United States must:

Maintain a policy of nonrecognition of the Taliban.

Washington must lead international efforts to continue to refuse concessions to the Taliban such as diplomatic recognition, unfreezing Afghan assets, or lifting sanctions on Taliban leaders, until the Taliban demonstrates concrete, verifiable, and sustained reversal of its systematic violations of the rights of women and girls, particularly by fully restoring their access to education, employment, and public life.⁴³ The question of the future of women in Afghanistan is directly related to the question of Islamist radicalism in the country and whether terrorist movements will thrive in the country.

Work within the UN Security Council to pressure UNAMA to support an Afghan national dialogue.

Washington should lead an effort to ensure the quarterly Security Council reviews of UNAMA include reporting on the establishment of an Afghan political process that accords with the *Report of the Independent Assessment Pursuant to Security Council Resolution 2679*, which calls for “a national political dialogue that reflects the views and participation of all Afghans” that leads to “predictable governance based on the rule of law” protecting the rights of all its citizens.⁴⁴ The council should require reports on benchmarks that demonstrate that UNAMA is supporting such dialogue, ensuring inclusive and meaningful participation both inside and outside the country, and simultaneously suspending the Doha and Mosaic processes with the Taliban.

Provide structured support to Afghan civil society and opposition forces to help them map their areas of agreement on future governance.

The United States and other members of the international community should support a framework for mapping and internal consultations among Afghan stakeholders. They can do so by funding, protecting, and amplifying platforms to facilitate discussion among the various opposition groups, offering incentives such as high-level diplomatic engagement with these platforms and urging them to solidify areas of commonality and cooperation.

Catalyze dialogue with nonpolitical sectors of Afghan society, particularly the youth.

Considering lessons from the South African and Colombian peace processes regarding the vital role of youth, business, community councils, and religious communities in establishing conditions for peaceful political dialogue, Afghan political and civil society leaders and the international community should engage with these sectors within Afghanistan.⁴⁵

Find new ways to work with Pakistan on Afghanistan.

Considering that Pakistan’s policies are significantly changing toward the Taliban, U.S. officials should examine areas of convergence and how the two sides might cooperate toward mutual objectives of an Afghan government that provides for its people economically and is strongly motivated to reject extremism. For example, Washington can incentivize Pakistan to support peaceful anti-Taliban opposition groups, media, and other individuals and protect them from deportation and even help to fund conferences and meetings of these groups inside Pakistan. U.S. officials should also explore working with Pakistan within the UN sanctions committee on al-Qaida through UN Security Council Resolution 1989 to designate the Taliban for hosting and supporting the TTP. The United States and Pakistan could also cooperate on initiatives to support Afghan women and girls, such as through advocacy for improving access to education and holding high-level meetings in Pakistan that highlight the Taliban’s gross violations of the human rights of women and girls.

Conclusion

THE TALIBAN'S TOTALITARIAN POLICIES and intransigence on issues related to the human rights of women and girls as well as its continued support for extremist ideologies and terrorist movements is leading the country down a dangerous path that will almost inevitably impact the United States and its citizens, either through the destabilization of its nuclear-armed neighbors or by inspiring global terrorism. It is imperative for the United States to take a leading role within the international community to foster a broad-based political dialogue in Afghanistan. This will require unifying the opposition forces and pressuring the Taliban through all available forms of sanctions, financial monitoring regimes, and nonrecognition.

Meaningful coordination and collaboration among international and regional actors to avoid fragmented, competing, or contradictory approaches is essential. External actors must carefully assess whether their policies, partnerships, funding decisions, and diplomatic engagements unintentionally strengthen exclusion, undermine local ownership, empower the Taliban, or create further fragmentation.

While the Taliban appears politically entrenched in the country for the foreseeable future, persistent international policies that apply pressure on the regime can over time lead to fissures in its leadership and cracks in the system that eventually give way to other political forces. Ultimately, it is up to the people of Afghanistan themselves to find their way to a peaceful, inclusive dialogue process, but the actions of the international community will also have a major impact in determining whether and how quickly such a dialogue comes about.

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