



CREATIVE



The Reintegration of Taliban Fighters into a Market-Based Economy in Afghanistan

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Executive Summary

As peace talks continue to bring the 18-year war in Afghanistan to an end, experts are discussing how to transition armed insurgents back into society.

Once an agreement is reached, approximately 3.2 million Afghans (including refugees, displaced persons and former fighters) will need to be incorporated into communities, the political process and the formal economy. Of that total, about 2 percent are Taliban fighters.

Though relatively few compared to other populations, current and former fighters deserve attention as they have the potential to be either peace enablers or spoilers. Unlike other Afghans, the Taliban pose a disproportionate threat to peace as they could remobilize, shift alliances to other violent extremist organizations that did not sign an agreement or engage in criminal activities.

Their demobilization would come at a time when Afghanistan's war-torn economy could be described as sluggish at best and the critical factors required to encourage foreign and domestic investment in job creating continue to be elusive.

Since September 11, 2001, four attempts have been made to disarm, demobilize and reintegrate (DDR) insurgents in Afghanistan. Unfortunately, their success was marginal as they did not adequately account for economic, social, community or political aspects of reintegration. These issues remain salient.

This paper unpacks these complex challenges, offering an overview and analysis of previous reintegration initiatives—including shortcomings and best practices that should be considered for upcoming efforts—and offers a view of stabilization and DDR as a policy tool rather than a programmatic option.

Simultaneously, policymakers need to focus considerable attention on youth—both youth who are former fighters and those who are

at-risk. Unemployment for Afghans ages 15 to 24 is more than 30 percent, and each year another 400,000 youth enter the job market. This makes them particularly prone to recruitment into armed groups and militias.

This notion of preventive DDR is followed by a set of five practical recommendations to advance a peace process with, and the reintegration of, the Taliban.

Recommendations include:

1. Incorporate social, community, psychosocial and political aspects into a holistic DDR approach;
2. Develop a working assumption that there may be a stigma associated with previous DDR attempts in Afghanistan and analyze how this can be overcome;
3. Utilize information counseling, referral services and interim stabilization measures from the DDR toolbox to facilitate space for political dialogue until economic opportunities expand;
4. Consider incentives for Taliban and illegally armed groups that include public and security sector integration alongside efforts to expand economic options where powerful and influential fighters become economic titans; and
5. Consider reintegration options that ensure family members of the Taliban are incorporated into reintegration plans as an outcome of negotiations through government-friendly policies.

Among all the actors involved in the war in Afghanistan and the peace discussions, the U.S. Government is well placed to marshal the economic resources and political clout required for another DDR initiative to take place in line with its national and strategic policy goals prioritizing economic growth and reintegration of current and former fighters in Afghanistan.

Introduction

The reintegration of these former fighters into Afghanistan's formal economy is one of the most critical elements needed to ensure peace.

As promulgated in its Stabilization Assistance Review, the United States is strengthening the link between defense, diplomacy and development (the 3D approach) by more carefully calibrating under what conditions certain types of assistance can be offered. This includes promoting private sector investment.¹

This shift toward a market-based economy as a stabilization anchor departs from previous reintegration efforts where the market was synonymous with international aid, which was largely humanitarian and focused on early recovery. It was not sustainable.

A market-based economy calls for job creation in urban, peri-urban and rural areas based on private sector investment, building marketable skills among potential employees, promoting entrepreneurship and improving value chains. In order to encourage domestic and foreign investment, a plan also requires competent government operations that offer rule of law, adequate public services, public safety and transparent operations.

These form part of the U.S. Government's Country Development Cooperation Strategy² and are reinforced by the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR), which notes that increased capac-



ity of the Afghan economy, private sector growth³ and the reintegration of the Taliban and their families corresponds to a decrease in the risk of terrorist attacks on American soil.⁴ This is echoed in the Integrated Country Strategy, which links peace with the Taliban to decreased safe havens for terrorism and a burgeoning economy.⁵

Consistent with DDR theory, the reintegration of former Taliban is an acute issue. On the one hand, this theory contends that all persons are deserving of reintegration support (the maximalist development view). On the other hand, fighters are treated differently because they represent a security risk to a fragile peace that must be addressed (the minimalist security focus).⁶ With some 60,000 Taliban fighters⁷ in play, a shift toward market-based approaches and private sector investment in Afghanistan—without consideration for the social, community and political reintegration needs of former Taliban fighters—may fall short of both

the minimalist security view of DDR and the maximalist development approach.

Today, with more than 50 percent of Afghan districts contested by the Taliban and other anti-government elements,⁸ economic development is inextricably linked to governance issues. Taliban fighters are constituent stakeholders in Afghanistan's political makeup and can either derail the peace process or help it succeed. In the previous Afghanistan Peace and Reconciliation Programme, "Taliban fighters and leaders, previously siding with armed opposition and extremist groups, [are invited] to renounce violence and join a constructive process of reintegration."⁹ The Afghanistan Peace and Reconciliation Programme referred to the Taliban as "brothers."¹⁰

In September 2018, President Ashraf Ghani said that the largest challenge to a peace settlement was attending to fighters and their "networks" and the provision of licit economic opportunities.¹¹ He noted two months later at

1 Stabilization Assistance Review (SAR) – "Stabilization Assistance Review (SAR). A Framework for Maximizing the Effectiveness of U.S. Government Efforts to Stabilize Conflict Affected Areas." 2018. Page 8.

2 United States Agency for International Development (USAID). "Country Development Cooperation Strategy (CDCS) FY 2019-2023." September 2018. Pages 2, 35.

3 Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR). "2019 HIGH-RISK LIST." March 2019. Page 7.

4 Ibid, page 4.

5 Integrated Country Strategy – "(ICS) Afghanistan," September 2018. Pages 2-3.

6 Piedmont. Page 9.

7 SIGAR, pages 4, 47.

8 CDCS, page 15.

9 ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF AFGHANISTAN - National Security Council D&R-Commission. "Afghanistan Peace and Reintegration Programme." April 2010. Page 3.

10 Ibid, pages 6, 21, 32.

11 Bilde. "There's an Illusion that Streets in Germany are Paved with Gold." September 6, 2018.

a U.N. conference in Geneva that Afghanistan is “open for business...Afghanistan needed to focus on ‘market building,’ with individual entrepreneurs forming creditworthy companies that could build value chains...”¹²

The best proximate tool the international community has for this type of reintegration is nested within DDR programming. For a stable peace, Taliban must be reintegrated and be able to participate in a market economy.

Violent Extremism, Prevention, Youth and Economic Opportunities in Afghanistan

Youth deserve special attention in concert with any effort to reintegrate Taliban into a market-based economy. Chronic unemployment, prevailing under-employment coupled with the poor social status of youth makes them particularly prone to recruitment into armed groups and militias, putting them at increased risk for violent extremism.¹³

Developing a reintegration program for former fighters that includes absorbing them into a market-based economy could serve as a platform to address the needs of at-risk youth—thus eliminating the need for future DDR-type efforts. The notion of positioning DDR as a preventive tool was first advanced in 2015 to mitigate mobilization, remobilization, and offer political accommodations with Afghanistan Peace and Reintegration Programme.¹⁴

Notwithstanding the need to address urban

employment, the clear risk posed by the lack of durable employment in the formal economy and the risk of youth joining insurgencies speaks to the need for economic growth and the potential heightened risks in peri-urban and rural areas.

A study in Sudan from 2015 to 2017 makes this evident. While economic opportunities are not primary motivating factors for violent extremist association, the Sudan study found that poverty and economic deprivation are nonetheless key drivers toward affiliation with these armed actors.

The distinction is not subtle. The study identified a positive correlation between poverty, first contact with a violent extremist group and then recruitment. In outlying states with poor socioeconomic indices, no less than 83 percent of persons exposed to a violent extremist group joined within six months. In some cases, the rate was 89 percent of persons joining within this period.¹⁵ When compared to the relatively educated and affluent Khartoum area, the rate drops by more than half to 41 percent, with 21 percent of persons taking 6 to 12 months to join and others taking years.¹⁶

The lessons from Sudan are important for Afghanistan as these same economic demographics may well correspond to its peri-urban and rural provinces.

In the event of a peace deal, it is estimated that up to 20 percent of Taliban are susceptible to Islamic State-Khorasan influence and recruitment for a multitude of reasons, including financial motivations. More dispensable foot soldiers will likely be drawn from areas where

persons are less educated and skilled,¹⁷ such as peri-urban and especially rural areas. Islamic State-Khorasan and related violent extremist groups’ recruiting needs for skilled labor that includes tech-savvy youth will likely come from urban areas like Jalalabad and Kabul.¹⁸ This places a premium on linking rural, peri-urban and urban market-based development for youth integration.

A reintegration effort for the Taliban that serves as a platform for youth must out-manuever the recruiting acumen of violent extremist groups by corresponding to marketable job skills. The imperative for former fighter reintegration and preventive modeling using the DDR toolbox should align with the Stabilization Assistance Review approach that positions defense and development in support of diplomacy.

Once a person joins a designated terrorist organization, the option to engage this person decreases considerably based on U.S. Government counterterrorism laws and relevant material support clauses. Therefore, preventative options must be secured to serve Afghanistan and U.S. mutual security interests.

In sum, the importance of coupling a peace agreement with the Taliban to economic growth driven by the private sector should not be understated. While it is fairly demonstrated that reintegration options should be blended between political, security and community trajectories, socioeconomic reintegration into a market-driven economy is essential for former fighters and to prevent new recruits.

12 Reuters, WORLD NEWS. “We’re open for business, Afghan president tells U.N. conference.” 27 November 2018.

13 CDCS, pages 13, 36.

14 Piedmont, Dean. “SSR 2.0 BRIEF: The Role of Disarmament, Demobilization & Reintegration in Countering Violent Extremism.” The Center for Security Governance. June 2015. Pages 6, 8.

15 UNDP. “Partnering Against Violent Extremism: Violent Extremism in Sudan – An Evidence Based Study.” 2017. Page 47. In the outlying states of Darfur, Gedaref, White Nile and Kassala, all of which have poor socio-economic and education indices, 83% of persons joining a VE group do so within six months of first contact. If we exclude Gedaref, we see a further increase (89%) in percentage of persons joining within this period. Survey results showed a clear criticality in timelines for intervention.

16 Ibid, pages 34-35.

17 Semple, Michael. “Countering IS-KP in Afghanistan: Concept.” Queens University, Belfast. Unpublished. 20 March 2019. Page 1-2.

18 Ibid, pages 1-2.



Options for Engagement

The proceeding sections of this paper recraft reintegration from a programmatic effort toward advancing a U.S. Government policy outcome with economic growth and private sector development as a pre-requisite.

In doing so, several identifiable steps should be taken to advance a reintegration initiative for the Taliban. These include:

First, engage in training programs that correspond to real markets;

Second, consider whether training programs, especially those associated with vocational training, are stigmatized based on previous experience since September 11, 2001, and thus create a barrier to markets;

Third, accommodate commanders and the political, security and economic levels commensurate with their position as both agent and spoiler; and

Fourth, address how to incorporate illegally

armed groups into value chains in a manner that removes them from the spoiler equation.

Typically, the international community's position on the Taliban has been against bringing them into the political fold. This is demonstrated through military campaigns carried out by coalition forces through the U.N.-sanctioned International Security Assistance Force, which is led by North Atlantic Treaty Organization.¹⁹ Interestingly, even when the Taliban were pressured to enter the fold, military campaigns were used as a coercive tactic. The suite of international support—including foreign aid, troop contributions and technical support—have been designed to incentive violence against the Taliban²⁰ to achieve a military and political victory. After 18 years, these tactics have not worked.

Instead, the international community needs to move in the opposite direction where “foreign powers would create incentives for power-sharing and demilitarization...abandoning the narrative of the Taliban as the enemy.”²¹ It

can be expected that the United States would lead the charge and will benefit from operationalizing the Stabilization Assistance Review's 3D approach by purposefully calibrating and leveraging its good offices diplomatically, continuing support to the security sector and increasingly guiding development efforts toward a private sector market-driven economy.

A reintegration model must occur horizontally and vertically in economic, political and security spheres for commanders, rank and file, defectors, illegally armed groups and the Afghan citizenry. This would likely include power-sharing arrangements whereby “demilitarized” Taliban fighters enter government ministries.

Two previous initiatives attempted this process. The 2004 Commander Incentive Programme—which was created to offer former leaders of armed groups an opportunity to obtain sustainable employment on par with their previous leadership roles—sought to leverage the influence of these former leaders to promote peace. The 2005 Disbandment of Illegally Armed Groups by the U.N. demobilized 245 former commanders in two months, of which 105 sought elected office that same year. Unfortunately, these programs could not handle some powerful and influential commanders,²² meaning they needed to be accommodated in government and the public sector. Their integration into the security sector is ongoing in the current settlement.

Expanding these efforts to include Taliban, and even the senior commanders of illegally armed

19 ISAF has a peace-enforcement mandate under Chapter VII of the UN Charter with its mandate promulgated and directly related to 9 UN Security Council Resolutions – 1386, 1413, 1444, 1510, 1563, 1623, 1707, 1776 and 1833. Notably, However, ISAF is not a UN force, rather a 'coalition of the willing' comprised of 40 nations contributing to ISAF. NATO's mission in this regard was created in accordance with the Bonn Conference of December 2001 with tasks are detailed in a Military Technical Agreement of January 2002 between the ISAF Commander and the Afghan Transitional Authority. <https://www.nato.int/isaf/topics/mandate/>

20 The United States Institute for Peace (USIP): “SPECIAL REPORT: Summary Perspectives on Peace from Taliban Areas of Afghanistan.” NO. 449 | May 2019. Page 10.

21 Ibid, page 10.

22 Report of the Evaluation of DDR and CIP in AFGHANISTAN – Part 3. Findings, Lessons Learned & Recommendations. “Qatra darya meshad – One drop at a time makes a river - Collecting one gun at a time makes peace.” “Some khans are powerful, some are not. The political reality in places like in Bakhdasahn, Jawzjan, Herat, Kandahar is that certain khans are commanders with political and military support too powerful for the government or DIAG to tackle head on. So, we have to find a way to bring them into the peace process through political or other methods because breaking the bonds is not realistically possible. Thus, Ismail Khan of Herat is now a minister in the government, while Gul Agha Sherzai has been moved from Governor of Kandahar to become Governor of Nangahar. Foreigners complain, but Afghans have to live with real policies and realpolitik, and with their influential neighbours Iran and Pakistan (and Russia and China and India).” September 2007. Page 24.



groups, could enhance the informal power-sharing that exists by allowing commanders to allocate patronage, provide a deterrence to rivals and contribute to electoral processes.²³ This all assumes that financial management of public and security sectors would be paid for by national revenues as private sector investment increases and that a culture of the rule of law and accountable governance sets in.

Negotiations currently reflect a top-down approach among the Government of Afghanistan, international stakeholders and the Taliban. While national in scope, incrementally working toward a peace may be more advantageous as economic growth, at best, will occur in a phased manner. A minimum requirement is confidence by the private sector and direct foreign investment that translates into secure, sustainable profits.

Supporting reintegration frameworks could be an optimal opportunity to pursue top-down and bottom-up approaches in tandem. Taliban-controlled areas can be transformed into peace zones by commanders where locally

agreed ceasefire agreements between rival groups, i.e. other Taliban or illegally armed groups, take root. This will facilitate the freedom of movement of goods, and people.²⁴ This could translate into economic inclusion zones and draw other armed elements into similar arrangements while fostering private sector investment.

A de-escalation model may incentivize Taliban commanders to use their influence and patronage systems to off-ramp fighters and develop local ceasefire arrangements. These could draw on all four previous DDR initiatives – the Afghanistan New Beginnings Programme, Commander Incentive Programme, Disbandment of Illegally Armed Groups and Afghanistan Peace and Reintegration Programme. Lessons from Afghanistan New Beginnings Programme, the most traditional of DDR efforts, include a phased and controlled release from the Taliban during demobilization. Responsible demobilization,²⁵ may be termed ‘repurposing’ and/or ‘decommissioning’ to preserve the integrity and dignity of persons leaving the Taliban. This may also minimize

the need for defections. A well-planned effort should ensure that the release of former fighters back to communities for reintegration occurs at a rate at which communities can absorb them economically.²⁶

As economic inclusion zones increase, utilizing the stratification and specialization of packages that were offered under Commander Incentive Programme may be useful. This may include absorption into security forces or the public sector, where qualified advanced business training is provided with salaries paid for interim periods. Retirement options could be considered.²⁷ The lessons from Disbandment of Illegally Armed Groups and Afghanistan Peace and Reintegration Programme are that the illegally armed groups (or the Taliban) cannot be coerced to comply with the rule of law; however, when they enter of their own volition, community-based reintegration options are well-suited to market-based reintegration.

Reintegration into the legal economy should be realistic and phased based on a long-term commitment to peace. Peace does not directly lead to decreased illicit trade. The peace agreement in Colombia in 2016 corresponds with increases in coca production, while poppy production in Afghanistan in 2017 hit record levels.²⁸ What we can discern is that effective reintegration could (i) provide economic incentives for preventing recruitment; (ii) encourage off-ramping rather than defections; (iii) provide security guarantees as a DDR precondition;²⁹ and (iv) pre-empt Afghanistan from becoming a narco-state.

23 USIP. Page 10.

24 Semple, page 3.

25 IDDRS. “Demobilization is the formal and controlled discharge of active combatants from armed forces or other armed groups.” Page 6.

26 This is referred to as ‘absorption capacity’ and should include social and political absorption capacity as well as socio-economic capacity.

27 Report of the Evaluation of DDR and CIP in AFGHANISTAN – Part 3. Notably, these options were evaluated as ‘partially successful.’ Additionally, options where monetary benefits are offered were criticized for being commander ‘buy-outs’ or ‘pay-offs.’ While this is in line with DDR minimalist theory referenced in this paper – the removal of former fighters from the security equation and eliminate them from being ‘spoilers’ these are not without risk. The point is that CIP has lessons for consideration. Page 23.

28 SIGAR, page 35.

29 Piedmont, 2015. The preconditions for DDR in a post conflict setting include (i) DDR occurring as a voluntary process (ii) with a minimum-security guarantee for all parties undergoing DDR, (iii) a legal framework that is (iv), usually enshrined in a comprehensive peace agreement. Page 2.

Key Considerations and Recommendations

This section provides a summation of key recommendations based on best practices and lessons in former fighter reintegration efforts globally and in Afghanistan. They should be considered when engaging diplomatically, formulating policies or developing programs for former fighter and returnee reintegration.

Recommendation 1 – *Defining reintegration*

U.N. policy places DDR squarely within a post conflict environment. This is clearly not the case in Afghanistan. All elements, social, community, psychosocial and political, should inform Taliban reintegration. This can be accomplished by aligning the U.S. Government and Creative Associates International's stabilization and DDR definitions as inherently political focusing on policy, rather than program outcomes.

Recommendation 2 – *On making assumptions*

Afghans have a rich history of DDR. The results are mixed; however, all stakeholders can likely agree that these have been 'cash cows.' International experience illustrates that DDRs can be manipulated by parties seeking to exploit the process and reap considerable financial benefits. Afghanistan is no exception. A working assumption may be whether there is a stigma associated with previous reintegration and DDR in Afghanistan, and how this can be overcome. DDR offers a plethora of technical and operational tools that will be useful for a Taliban peace and reintegration effort. These could inform increased oversight into processes such as eligibility and vetting that have been manipulated in previous efforts. Assessments and analysis should take these into consideration.

Recommendation 3 – *On market-based job creation*

Opportunity-mapping should align skills training programs with assessed market needs based on private sector growth and investment as opposed to post-conflict donor-funded aid programs. Interim stabilization measures that keep former fighters in holding patterns should be used to gauge the rate of release of Taliban members congruent with a community's marketable absorption capacity. This would also allow them to be monitored and paid while their reintegration is planned.

Recommendation 4 – *Consider commander incentives for Taliban and illegally armed groups*

Commanders need to be treated on political, security and economic levels commensurate with their power and influence by incorporating them into value chains in a manner that removes them from the spoiler equation. As illegally armed groups are excluded from a formal peace process, they need to be considered in the larger reintegration rubric in very much the same manner as Taliban commanders. Targeted commander incentives should include public and security sector integration alongside efforts to expand the economy and provide options for rank and file Taliban members. An assessment of the Commander Incentive Programme and Disbandment of Illegally Armed Groups should draw out lessons and practices, as well as identify dubious, or risky practices.

Recommendation 5 – *On a blended approach to reintegration*

The prioritization of former fighters and their families represent a disproportionate allocation of resources toward their reintegration as former fighters represent a disproportionate security threat to an Afghan peace. Addressing families could be 'low hanging fruit' that incentivizes Taliban to and at the peace table. These could conceivably be funded by Government of Afghanistan coffers that increase based on private sector revenues. Consider the suite of reintegration options that complement socioeconomic reintegration. These include social, psychosocial, community-based and political reintegration. Policy-friendly options could include education benefits for family, land entitlements and preferred access to training and micro-credit.

Conclusion

Each year, 400,000 youth come of age and need to enter the Afghan job market.¹ Under a peace agreement, the reintegration of former fighters, internally displaced persons and returnees numbering 3.2 million is onerous in the best of circumstances. Reintegration into the legal economy should be realistic and phased based on a long-term commitment to peace.

Representing only 2 percent of the envisaged caseload under a peace agreement, the 60,000 Taliban are an acute security threat. Given this threat, economic reintegration of groups like former fighters, commanders, and illegally armed groups is critical, alongside a blend of community-based, political, security, public and social reintegration options. The paper postulates that a peace settlement between the government and Taliban can be a force multiplier that helps resolve sub-national conflicts when blended with cogent and well-planned reintegration approaches that prioritize peri-urban and rural areas with high rates of return and appropriate levels of private sector investments.

The perennial conflict in Afghanistan has many lessons to share, among them is that the agents of war must have agency in order for peace to be achieved. In this regard, economic growth is an input to peace and a potential outcome of a peace agreement.²

The U.S. remains well placed to play a leadership role by marshalling the economic resources and political clout needed for this tectonic task. It has been fairly demonstrated that U.S. national and strategic policy goals are aligned behind this effort and approach. This is underpinned in the Country Development Cooperation Strategy, the Integrated Country Strategy, the U.S. President's South Asia Strategy³ and Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction report where economic growth and reintegration are new to the High-Risk List.⁴

While DDR programs have had sub-par performance since September 11, 2001, there are lessons of significant value that support the U.S. envisaged policy outcomes for a Taliban peace and reintegration effort. DDR is instructive here. Through a true 3D approach—defense, diplomacy and development—the United States can serve as a catalyst for economic growth for Afghanistan, reintegrating former fighters and senior Taliban, preventing renewed conflict, and helping to build a stable peace.

1 CDCS, page 14.

2 Ibid, page 30.

3 CDCS, page 2.

4 SIGAR, page 9.

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About Creative

Creative Associates International works with underserved communities by sharing expertise and experience in education, elections, economic growth, citizen security, governance and transitions from conflict to peace.

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