

H.E. Abdullah Abdullah Discusses Peace Talks in Afghanistan

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Transcript

Nancy Lindborg:

Good morning, good afternoon, good evening, depending on where you're viewing this livestream. My name is Nancy Lindborg and I am the president and CEO of the U.S. Institute of Peace. And I know there are viewers joining us from all around the world. We're delighted to have all of you here with us today for a very timely and important discussion. We're honored to have with us His Excellency Dr. Abdullah Abdullah, who has taken time at this very critical moment in the Afghan peace process to share how he and the High Council for National Reconciliation are preparing for talks with the Taliban. After the keynote address, we'll have a Q&A session moderated by USIP's Vice President for Asia Dr. Andrew Wilder and we invite you to take part in this event by asking a question through the YouTube livestream in the comments section, and you can also engage with us and with each other on Twitter with today's hashtag #AfghanPeace.

At USIP, supporting a sustainable peace process in Afghanistan has been a core priority, and I'm encouraged that in recent months there has been progress towards direct inter-Afghan negotiations. At the same time, violence is rising to unprecedented levels, including increasing and quite disturbing numbers of civilian casualties. And there are other challenges: COVID-19 has exacerbated the struggles that Afghans face, including contributing to increased food insecurity and extreme poverty. But despite these challenges, developments over the past few weeks have created momentum to get the peace process to the essential next phase of inter-Afghan talks. This was facilitated in part by the signing of a political agreement between President Ashraf Ghani and Chairman Abdullah resolving disputes over the 2019 presidential election. So, as part of the agreement, Chairman Abdullah has been appointed chair of the newly established High Council for National Reconciliation, which will oversee the talks with the Taliban as well as Afghanistan's collective efforts on peace.

And with reports indicating that preliminary talks between the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and the Taliban could begin during the coming weeks, today's discussion could not come at a better time. We look forward to hearing Chairman Abdullah share with us how he, the High Council for National Reconciliation and the Afghan negotiating team are preparing for a truly historic moment. Chairman Abdullah Abdullah served as the chief executive of Afghanistan from September 2014 until March 2020. He also served as the first minister of foreign affairs of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan from 2001 to 2005. Prior to the formation of the Islamic Republic, Chairman Abdullah served in many capacities in the government of the Islamic State of Afghanistan, including as foreign minister, and he also served as an advisor to the mujahideen commander, Ahmad Shah Massoud. So, obviously many, many years of experience and so with that, we are delighted to welcome you to this program this morning, this evening. And I'm delighted to invite His Excellency Chairman Abdullah Abdullah to provide his keynote address. Thank you so much, Chairman Abdullah.

Chairman Abdullah:

Thank you, President Lindborg and USIP, for providing this opportunity. *Bismillah alrahman alrahim*. I appreciate the efforts by USIP and all our friends across the globe for joining us, this new age we have been on to share some thoughts about the opportunities and challenges for negotiations with the Taliban. I cannot emphasize more on the significance of the opportunity today and now, forty years after the start of the war and conflict in Afghanistan. Allow me first to acknowledge the millions of

Afghans who yearn for peace and who deserve to live in peace with honor and with their citizens' rights guaranteed under the law, after more than forty years of conflict, and to remember and salute the tens of thousands who have fallen or continue to be victims of anti-peace entities and terror groups. I also want to pay tribute to the men and women from across the world, Americans in particular, who paid the ultimate price, either served or are currently serving their nations with honor as part of post 9/11 mission. Twenty years later, there are many lessons to be drawn from the past. Afghans and Americans share a unique history, but our bonds during the last chapter of the Cold War, when Afghans resisted a devastating invasion and then again, in our fight against international terrorism, which continues to this day became stronger. Today, we are taking stock of good and bad of the past forty years or four decades and look at the road ahead. We are at the threshold between a unique opportunity for peace that is being defined as we speak or continuing the war, the cost of war, the agony of war. With this clarity, into the future and given our geography and existing threat assessment, it's not just about Afghanistan. It's also about the stability, connectivity, security from far east to Europe and beyond. The threat of terrorism has receded in some ways but has taken on new forms in other ways. As far as preparations for the talks are concerned, we decided in the summit, the public of Afghanistan together with President Ghani, that we put no pre-conditions for the start of negotiations and our negotiating team is well prepared to start negotiations at any time.

With so much negative news around lately, let me start with some positive news that I hope is a sign for more to come. A few hours ago, Gandhara News Service reported that in interviews across the country with recently freed Taliban prisoners and Afghan government soldiers, most have expressed desire to live peacefully with their families. My message to the Taliban is: a few may decide to join other fighters but that's not the right decision. The collective call of the Afghan people and majority of the Afghans for peace should be embraced by all of us. And both sides now have to remove the remaining obstacles and move towards talks and an intra-Afghan outcome that takes all our realities into account.

The current opportunity, why I call it an opportunity because majority of the Afghans are supportive of the peace efforts and also all our partners, led by the United States, but other partners as well, are supportive of the peace process. The character of the opportunity for starting a peace process is historically unique. It's not perfect nor will it be an easy exercise. We need to be realistic about our means, the deep divides, the anger and hurt that needs healing, the political roadblocks, the opportunistic and the spoiler behaviors, as well as expectations and shared interests. A key challenge will be to keep the process inclusive, representative and focused, yet flexible, and always seeking solutions and compromises at each step leading to realistic outcomes that all Afghans can own. The peace dividend also has to be worked out and discussed with all internal and international stakeholders, while we need to make sure that our country is no longer going to be a... the staging for international terrorism. At this stage, we are working on an integrated roadmap that can energize the process and keep us on track by addressing the prerequisite conditions agreed to by various stakeholders. They include: the more obvious goal of releasing the prisoners, which has taken place in the past few days and weeks, and hopefully, it will be completed soon; getting the technicality sorted out to have negotiating team for talks, as I mentioned, our team is ready; maximizing the impact of violence reduction measures and addressing COVID-19 needs true healthcare services; key demands of the Afghan public across frontlines; keeping the region constructively engaged; and preventing spoilers from derailing or stalling the momentum that has been created. Since we all agree that there is no military solution, the current mutually hurting statement is unsustainable given the number of factors at play inside the Afghanistan, in the region, and with other global priorities, like the pandemic or the upcoming American elections, we have no option, but to aim for talks leading to a political settlement that can be owned and embraced by Afghans across the social and political spectrum.

Let me clearly say that there is no justification, religious or political, for the staggering loss of Afghan lives across the battlefields, in our villages, towns, cities, in the valleys, deserts, in road checkpoints or in our mosques or even hospitals. Some food for thought from somebody who has been intimately involved with Afghan affairs since its young ages, since my youth, I'm reminded constantly that just Kabul or downtown Kabul or a small elite with specific priorities with whom foreign and government officials usually interact, this is not the whole Afghanistan. That's why I always try to detach myself from any bubble and try to understand the vast and complex reality, the demographic facts, the role of youth, the women, but also large in the small communities, in the villages, across our diverse landscape. If you are to come up with an inclusive and comprehensive peace settlement, we need to talk, listen, negotiate, compromise, and come up with a common implementable and acceptable end state that involves different layers that represent all key sites, including women, youths, and victims of war and is not seen as a threat to any external powers.

We have a choice: either to make this process easy and less painful for our people and others or more complicated than it is by dragging it and adding to the pain, loss of lives, poverty, and cost. It's also an economic and security choice. We can reduce the costs while reducing the level of violence, displacement, migration and managing the threat of terrorism and illicit activities, or keep the fire burning and cope with the fallout of more war at a time when there is resource scarcity, a pandemic and other preoccupations on the global radar scheme. This is a process with many variables and layers. It is tied to the U.S.-Taliban deal, which means, with political decisions in several capitals as well as the situation on the ground where people die, and territories are contested. It has historic Afghan roots, but it's also connected to our region and geopolitical and geo-economic interests. It has important humanitarian and stability component. Finally, there are values, ideas and rights involved that need a deep discussion within a traditional Afghan and scholarly Islamic context. This is why it is not and cannot be a one man or one faction endeavor. It requires broad political will, engagement, consultation, coordination and action.

...I think the microphone was not on for a second, I'll go through the paragraph.

This is why it cannot be a one man or one faction endeavor. It requires political will, engagement, consultation, coordination and action. The process will also need to go through phases and each phase has its own give and take to facilitate transitions and forward mobility that can be verifiable and implementable. Following the political agreement signed in May with President Ghani, I have been busy taking practical steps to open lines of communications, consulting with key stakeholders, and strengthening the consensus that is needed and coordinating with internal and external actors. However, not everything rests in our hands, even though it has been agreed that the High Council for National Reconciliation is the vehicle through which we are going to bring all the elements together and define the policy lines for implementation. Failing to do so will further weaken the hands of those who believe in an inclusive, united, pluralistic and value-based end state.

Within the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, we have come to a conclusion that we should present a unified voice for in support of peace and also preserving the values, which our people have been sacrifices for it. Ready to start talks, ready to start compromises, ready to move forward for an end state which works for all, a country which lives in peace within and without, unified, democratic and respects the rights of its own people. We need to be nimble by responsibly moving the process forward, while we need to be focused and prepared to defend the values that matter the most to the plurality of our people. Now that the peace process has been initiated, we need to remind ourselves that there is no going back. We need to work together, Afghans with Americans, our partners, our neighbors, to fight for a just peace and durable stability.

I'll stop here to engage in discussions, and I thank you again for the opportunity.

Andrew Wilder:

Chairman Abdullah, thank you very much for your informative remarks and for taking the time to join us today. I wish we could be hosting you in person at USIP, but the silver lining of these virtual events is that we have a much larger global audience. I'm going to start off with a few questions and then we'll open it up and take questions from the hundreds of individuals watching online today. As Nancy Lindborg mentioned, we invite all our viewers to take part in this discussion by asking questions through the YouTube comments sections and you can also join the discussion with us as well as with each other on Twitter by using the #AfghanPeace. As Nancy mentioned and as you also mentioned, this discussion comes at a critical time for Afghanistan.

Given the reports of shockingly high reports of increases in violence even in the last week, a devastating pandemic adding further misery and hardship for millions in Afghanistan, but also the uncertainty about the timeframe for U.S. troop presence withdrawal. But at the same time, as you mentioned, it's a time of opportunity, I think it sounds like we might be closer to intra-Afghan talks than ever before and with it the hope that there would at least be a reduction in violence and the start of difficult negotiations to end the four decades of conflict in Afghanistan.

To Chairman Abdullah, you've long, as Nancy mentioned in her introduction, been involved Afghan war, politics and diplomacy from a young age as an advisor to Ahmad Shah Massoud during the resistance to the Soviet occupation during the 1980s, during the civil war of the 1990s and then as the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan's first foreign minister and then most recently, for six years as the chief executive. You've seen many ups and downs and, given Afghanistan's history, maybe more downs than ups but I'm wondering, if you look back over the last four decades of which you were an active participant in Afghanistan's history and again, how would you characterize this moment, you touched a bit on it in your remarks just now but again if you could give us a little bit more information on how you would characterize this specific moment in Afghanistan's history?

Chairman Abdullah:

Well, you mentioned yourself about the challenges that the country is faced with; at the same time, we are faced with an opportunity. The opportunity is that I'm here as a citizen and also as a chairman and I've worked in the government in the past and working together with the government today for pursuit of peace process, I see that there is an opportunity. The people of Afghanistan, the absolute majority of the people of Afghanistan want a peaceful settlement. Four decades of war does not mean that we cannot solve it. It should compel all of us to look back and come to a conclusion that there is no military solution for the war and that takes more than one side. At the same time, I do have concerns, well, I'm optimistic that once as Afghans we get across the table and raise the issues, very difficult issues, which we have fought over for many years now and also look at the suffering of our people and the continued suffering of our people, I see an opportunity there. But there is a thinking in the other side, and hopefully that's not the case, that the youth groups may withdraw, and we may not have to come to a settlement and we might overcome by force, that will be a mistake, a great mistake. That will be another missed opportunity for the Afghans in the same way that in [the] 90's we could not make peace within the country. There were a lot of factors, but at the same time, we missed out an opportunity and then we were witness to another two and a half decades of war. So, I hope that nobody will make that mistake, but there is no doubt that extremely challenging time, lots of hopes for the people, lots of concerns as well, not only in terms of the continuation of the war, but the people are also concerned what happens to their rights, what happens to their liberties and so on and so forth. But meanwhile, there is a lot of support for the peace process and inclusivity right from the beginning to the end is important and critical.

Andrew Wilder:

Thank you, my next question comes back to the issue of violence and you talked about, quite rightly, there is no excuse for violence; now, yet despite the initial hopes that reduced levels of violence would be sustained following the ceasefire over Eid in late May, the violence has ramped up dramatically across the country even just during the last week as we approach talks. The Afghan National Security Council's spokesperson announced last week, it was the deadliest for Afghan security forces in nineteen years with 422 Taliban attacks in 32 provinces killing 291 ASF members and wounding 550 others, and those are shocking statistics. I was wondering if you could say a bit about how talks can proceed with such high levels of violence and what can be done to ensure that the current spike in violence doesn't derail the talks?

Chairman Abdullah:

That's a serious challenge, the continuation of the level of violence that we have been witness to, especially in the past few weeks, we have communicated through different channels to the Taliban to our partners and different countries which have leverages that we are serious in pursuit of talks and also preparing the ground for negotiations and also expediting the exchange of prisoners, in spite of the challenges which were involved in it. At the same time, the continuation of the current level of violence—which is not justified at all—it makes the people worried and extremely concerned that where are we leading if there are steps taken in order to build confidence and to facilitate for the start of the negotiations, while the level of violence has increased, increasingly, that makes the political environment very difficult. I hope that everybody gets that message and that puts our seriousness in pursuit of peace process into tests and the aim is that we should achieve peace and security for all Afghans and should live in peace within and without. We should show signs of seriousness right from the beginning and this is the time for it.

Andrew Wilder:

Thank you. I wanted to move on to getting to intra-Afghan negotiations. I mean, a few weeks ago, there were reports that intra-Afghan talks may start by the end of June. With less than a week left in June, that now seems maybe unlikely, but could you tell us when you think intra-Afghan talks might begin, what is delaying them, and how specific obstacles in the intra-Afghan talks, in the path of the intra-Afghan talks will be resolved? And I think in particular, to address, you talked about the prisoner issue, which we know is one of the real significant obstacles in getting to talks. If you can give us a status update on the release of Taliban prisoners, but also whether the Taliban are holding up on their end of the bargain to release ANDSF prisoners. And then secondly, more specifically, what is the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the ability of negotiating teams to travel and negotiate in person?

Chairman Abdullah

As far as a prisoner's release is concerned, 75% of the, from the list the Taliban have provided to us, have been released and also a few hundred from the list that we had provided to the Taliban of our own security forces, those also have been released. A Taliban team, a technical team, which is working on the issue of prisoners in Kabul currently, and working together with our own team in order to expedite the process and then comes the, there are no other conditions or preconditions. This was one of the things that Taliban were emphasizing that the up to 5,000 Taliban prisoners needs to be released before the start of negotiations and we are very close to that. At the same time, the technical issues of getting there, sending teams there, the Taliban team are in Doha, the requirements of having the people tested

here, the negotiating team, there continue, as we get closer to the date, the negotiating team have been tested and that will be repeated before their departure towards Doha as well, should it happen.

At the same time, as I mentioned earlier, reduction in violence. Where does it get us if the current level of violence continues in the same way as it is? And then the people leave Kabul in order to start talks, but with the news of hundreds of people being killed recently as a result of violence, including civilians. That will not be a good environment for the start of negotiations. While we have not put preconditions for the start of the talks, we think that it's also for the other side to look at it as it is. If we are to solve this issue, permanently forever, and reach a peaceful settlement, we all need to take steps that shows and proves that we are serious. So, the technical issues will be there. COVID-19, it will not be like normal. When people leave here for two or three first days, they need to communicate virtually before their test is negative, again in Doha. So, there are those sorts of technical issues, which are involved, but we can use the time either virtually, and later on, face to face, talks with the Taliban. And we are prepared for that conditions, and our team is prepared at the moment.

Andrew Wilder:

Thank you. I think we're all learning that we can do much more virtually than we thought before. So, let's hope, including with negotiations. You had mentioned in your talk, also, the importance of keeping the process inclusive, representative, open and flexible. And I wanted to just come back to the issue of inclusion, because, as you know, studies have shown that peace processes that are not inclusive are more likely to fail. And I know that many Afghans, and in particular, women and minority groups, are concerned that the gains that have been achieved over the past 20 years will end up as concessions in a political agreement with the Taliban. So, what will you and the negotiating team and the High Council for National Reconciliation do to ensure that women and minority groups will be an integral part of the process and to protect the rights and gains since 2002?

Chairman Abdullah:

First of all, they will be a part of the negotiating team. While talking about the common values for the majority of the people of Afghanistan, men and women of the country, or for those, uh, values for the rights of the people, women's rights and in values which we have made sacrifices for. And also, in the leadership committee for the High Council for National Reconciliation and also in the General Assembly, we make sure that the women groups are inclusive of all sections of the society, including women and youth and minorities. And also, in the negotiating, down the negotiating table. I'm not in favor of, like, putting deadlines right from the beginning, but when we go there, Taliban will have their own issues, which they will be very tough on negotiating on them. We will have issues, which is a part of the rights of our people, and nobody will be, and we cannot achieve peace with sacrificing the basic and fundamental rights of our people. But at the same time, if you could get to a situation that, while we have different views and very different views. When I say different views, it's not like the difference between a nine and ten, it's uncertain issues that we are far apart. But we should be able to maintain the different views amongst ourselves, fight for it politically, not through violence, but at the same time, agree to live together, within a country, and make peace and rebuild our country. At the same time, I can assure you that the civil society is very active. While they are asking as anybody, any other group in the society in order to achieve peace, but at the same time, in working together with us, which we are working with them, but different groups they want to make sure that those, the negotiating team is inclusive, in terms of its composition, but at the same time, in terms of the pluralistic society that we have, and diversity and represent diverse views of our people, and at the same time, work for the interests of all Afghans. So those concerns are real. We hear it, this in and out, uh, and at the same time, we are engaging these groups within the country as well. And COVID-19 has[n't] made life easier for us.

Otherwise, part of my initial thinking was that, should we start, with my work, as the chairman of the council, we need to travel around the country and listen to the people, and talk to the people, assure them, and also learn from them, see how keen they are in their ideas for peace and a peaceful country. And at the same time, assure them that their fundamental rights will not be compromised.

Andrew Wilder:

Thank you. I've got one follow up question to that, and then I'll turn it over to, I'll start transitioning to questions from our audience. But you rightly pointed out, I mean, I think the pluralism, you know, on your side, I think the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan's negotiating team, you know, has the advantage of being more pluralistic, inclusive, and politically diverse, you know, representing the diversity of Afghanistan and its members. Whereas the Taliban pretty much have an all-male negotiating team that doesn't seem very necessarily inclusive and representative. But with this diversity, nearly by definition, you know, comes a much wider range of perspectives and issues. And I'm wondering how you and the High Council for National Reconciliation and the negotiating team will achieve consensus and maintain unity and talks with the Taliban. Just that tension between the advantages of being much more diverse and representative of Afghanistan on the Islamic Republic side, but also the challenges that brings in terms of the negotiating context.

Abdullah Abdullah:

We have a common goal. The teams all have a shared interest in pursuit of the peace process. That's one. And next to that is that there are, while, the team represents different political entities, civil society different walks of life, different ethnic groups in the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, but data present the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan in the values shared. So it will be also an opportunity for Taliban to see that people, which had different points of views at different times, different political stances, sometimes they are fighting against one another, but at the same time, they represent shared values for the country, and they have come together and they talk to us and they want to become friends, and also citizens working together for a peaceful Afghanistan. So, it will be an experience, a new experience for the Taliban as well. But nevertheless, I have no doubt in my mind that being diverse, still they do share values and they will be represented around the table.

Andrew Wilder:

Thank you. I Now I'd like to start off with questions from the audience and maybe starting with two questions from the media, which I've got to lump together as they're both sort of regarding U.S. troop actions and the possibility of withdrawal. Courtney Kube from NBC asks, "Is the U.S. military doing enough to protect the Afghan security forces that continue to come under attack from the Taliban? Do you think they should be doing more? And if they're holding back, is it to salvage the peace process?" So that's the first question. And then the second one is from BBC's Pakistan-Afghanistan correspondent Secunder Kermani who asks, "The U.S.-Taliban deal makes clear a full withdrawal next year is contingent on the intra-Afghan talks beginning, but not concluding. Given those talks are likely to last a long time, are you concerned about the possibility of U.S. forces pulling out before you have reached an agreement with the Taliban? Wouldn't that severely damage your position in the negotiations?"

Chairman Abdullah:

In terms of U.S. presence in Afghanistan, and also U.S. command, General Miller, which is working with our defense and security institutions, they are working very closely together. They are mindful of the agreement signed between the United States and Taliban, in terms of the engagement of the U.S. troops in Afghanistan, and the conditions that it sets for it. At the same time, their cooperation continues. Our international partners are also concerned about the increased level of violence and we all understand that it puts on that question of sustainability of hoping for getting to the negotiating table. So, the level of cooperation is that, there are some restrictions currently, but if those conditions are not observed by all sides, especially Taliban, they will have to revisit what could be done in that, under those circumstances. But currently, we all jointly, are of the view, of a common view that the level of violence is increased and it's not good. But the cooperation between the U.S. troops in Afghanistan and our defense and security forces continues. In terms of a U.S. withdrawal, withdrawal date, the others, it is conditions-based. There are other conditions as well, including the presence of al Qaeda, ISIS and other groups, and the way to deal with it. And also, Afghanistan not being a base for terrorist groups, which poses a threat for our citizens, as well as our international partners. So, the presence of U.S. troops in Afghanistan are condition-based, and, hopefully, we all look at it as an opportunity, rather than taking advantage of it, when they signed an agreement and also expressed as willing to withdraw from Afghanistan when those conditions are met. We need to look at it as an opportunity for all Afghans, rather than trying to take advantage of it for the sake of one group. Hopefully that's not the thinking, with the Taliban. And also, the people of Afghanistan are also watching and are making judgements about our commitment. The people as a whole, well if you take the example of the prisoners exchange, as a whole, there were no protests against that. As such, there were concerns expressed about it, but if the same thing continues with the current level of violence, then the people will question us and put us under question. And also, in regard to the question of the U.S. withdrawal while the talks will continue, if we come to an agreement during the talks that, we will, and we show our commitment to concluding an agreement for the interest of all Afghans. And then, it's part of that agreement between the Afghans that we are, both sides are sure that the presence of the international troops will not be needed beyond a certain point while the United States will decide for itself. We can express our joint view, in that common view, and that will be a good sign and big progress, but most of these things will be tested as that talks start, and we are looking forward to that.

Andrew Wilder:

Thank you. I'm now going to ask you two more questions lumped together on sort of the issue of tradeoffs in a peace negotiation. Muhammad Tahir asks, "How do you envision the future of the current Afghan government under a peace agreement, as well as the role of the Taliban in the future administration?" And then relatedly, J.J. Bajer asks, "What compromises, with regard to the political system, is the Afghan delegation ready to make in order to reach a peace agreement?"

Chairman Abdullah:

Again, in regard to the earlier question, and I also mentioned in my remarks that there is no military solution, there were times that Taliban were in control of 90% of the country, but that didn't mean the end of war. Even if there is a premature U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, that does not mean that Taliban can take over the whole country. If there is one lesson in the past four decades, that should be that lesson. So, hopefully no sides are aiming for the continuation of the war. So, that's in regard to the earlier question. Coming to the current administration, the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, the government in the future, and the future of Taliban, the status in the future settlement, these are all issues that need to be discussed between both sides. What are the ways to achieve permanent status?

What are the things that we need to do in the interim in order to get to a permanent solution? In all these things, rather than taking a firm position about it at this stage, these should be issues discussed around the table, between the Afghans, including the type of compromises that both sides need to be doing. If there was one lesson in the peace processes around the world, no peace process has succeeded with one side making compromises, and if there are compromises, these have to be on both sides for the sake of the common interest of the broader public in the whole nation. And that's what we are looking forward to. Certainly, there needs to be compromises as there is a need for changes in the system. Personally, I, myself in my political background, politically, I have fought for a different system of governments and for an amendment of the constitution, but I have fought for it peacefully and through peaceful means. So, if we could agree on the rules of the game, that we will not result to violence or see support from terrorist groups in order to achieve political objectives, but rather, fight for our ideas politically, that will be, I think, a turning point after four decades of war. But at the same time, I emphasized on inclusivity. When I say inclusive, it doesn't mean it has to be inclusive of, as here in Kabul, they are presenting the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, but not Taliban as a reality in the country. So, we believe in engagement and in interactions and working together. When we say inclusive, we say all in. We believe that all-inclusive and in Afghanistan, the political elite here, and also political forces, have shown that and also the recent agreement signed between us and the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, we had extreme differences, but at the same time, we didn't take it beyond a certain point. And then eventually, for the sake of the interest of the country, we signed an agreement. That's what we need to do to get it with the Taliban. When we say dignified peace, we said, it has to be dignified for the Taliban as well. When we say just peace. It's not just for us, here in Kabul, but for all those involved.

Andrew Wilder:

Thank you. Maybe related to that very specific question, Akbar Sari asks, "If the Taliban proposed an interim government, is the Afghan government prepared to accept it?"

Chairman Abdullah:

It looks hypothetical. Let's get to the negotiating table. Let's talk there. If they say an interim government for the sake of creation of an interim government, that has a different meaning. Let's get there, and everybody has to be free to raise any proposal, and we have to be flexible, uh, in our thoughts. But nothing should derail us from getting to a durable and lasting, achieving lasting, acceptable peace. When I say acceptable, again, I mean all of us, for all Afghans, including Taliban.

Andrew Wilder:

We have a lot of questions about the region and including, Jeff Brass asks, "How has the new phase of great power competition affected the peace process?" Other viewers have asked about recent discussions with Iran, and if you can address the role played by Pakistan regarding the peace process.

Chairman Abdullah:

Uh, I mentioned earlier that it's, while the consequences of the continuation of the situation in Afghanistan will affect everybody in the region and beyond at the same time, we are also being affected by global developments and relations between big powers, countries of the region and so on and so forth. So, I mentioned in my earlier remarks also to engage the region constructively, because if the country is, you mentioned the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, the Islamic Republic of Iran, both those

countries have leveraged some leverage over the Taliban. If those leverage are used in a constructive way, that will be helpful. Recently, there was a high-level delegation from the Islamic Republic of Pakistan led by General Bajwa. They promised their support, for achieving a peaceful settlement in Afghanistan. Those will be good messages and the right messages.

It needs to be given to all sides, but also to the Taliban in so to engage the countries of the region continued engagement. So, they not, they do not see peaceful settlement as a threat to themselves, but rather an opportunity for working together with a friendly Afghanistan, that is the aim and the focus of, our efforts. Nevertheless, in the calculation or in the calculus made by different countries, their relations with the United States is a factor, the relations between different countries of the region are factors, which they will consider back to another role here in Afghanistan, we need the support of everybody. Is everybody ready to support, or today there is support, what are their concerns? What are their legitimate concerns? What are their ambitions? What are their realistic expectations? What are their unrealistic expectations? Uh, so those are the things that we need to, we need to take into account while working together with our neighboring countries, to assure them that peaceful Afghanistan is in the interest of everybody.

Andrew Wilder:

Thank you. Um, we have several viewers who are asking about yours and president Ghani's respective roles in the peace process. Hammad Muhammadi, for example, asked, "Who has ultimate decision-making authority when it comes to decision making related to peace and what happens if the President does not agree with the decision made by the HCMR?"

Chairman Abdullah:

The council will be inclusive. It will not be like just my self-appointed people. It will be inclusive. It will be diverse, and represent all walks of life, including the president of the country, which is currently the president of Afghanistan. And, so when I emphasized on the issue of inclusion, that was one of the issues related to that, the ultimate decision would be the people of Afghanistan, the Council, present the voices of the people of Afghanistan, Islamic Republic of Afghanistan altogether. And it will be eventually it will be collective decision. And I don't think that that somebody will be against peace, how we can achieve it, what will be the future of the country, what then we have diverse views. So currently we are working closely together in order to give more credibility to our efforts, and the peace process. Our determination is to continue in the same way with the same spirit and then all of us at one state will be tested, how serious we are when it comes to our political will and eventually it will be a collective decision.

Andrew Wilder:

Thank you. Um, we only have five minutes left, so I guess try to squeeze in a couple more questions. The next one is many peace negotiations include special arrangements for individuals who have personally suffered in the war. [Viewer] asks, "How are the families and victims of the war be represented in the peace talks?"

Chairman Abdullah:

Yeah, just recently, I was having discussions and consultations with Human Rights Commission of Afghanistan, and one of the points that they were assessing, which I was in full agreement with them that the voices of the victims of the war should also be the presented how we do it. We agreed that we will have a technical group working together in order to help and contribute with the negotiating team

directly, as well as indirectly and representing the voices of the victims. Talking about the victims, today, as we speak, we have a few more casualties as a result of the continuation of the war. Of course, the biggest service to the families of those victims and to the broader nation will be to find a settlement, but at the same time, as I mentioned, having the technical group working with us to represent, the voices of the victims is in our agenda.

Andrew Wilder:

Thank you. And here we have a question from Doug Rendell. One core issue that the peace process will have to confront is that the Taliban reject the idea of a republic and the government insists on continuing a republic. Will this disagreement derail the talks immediately, and is there a compromise possible?

Chairman Abdullah:

Permanent status, how it will be decided? What are the steps beforehand? What is the agenda of the first...? Those are all issues to be discussed around the table. As I mentioned, eventually, one person, one vote, I don't think that Taliban will reject in that one of the core values of, the public. Again, I'd be hesitant to draw conditions before the start of the negotiations, but at the decisions on those issues, will depend on the political will of both sides. I don't think that there is, there is any, other viable solution, but one person, one vote, and this is universally acceptable.

We have to choose the destiny but how to do it. We have to get things started. What are the topics that you need to address at the beginning, for example, continuation of the same level of violence would it help the continuation of the talks in negotiations? Certainly not. So, it will be for the team to prioritize issues in the agenda and address it accordingly. And this will be a difficult topic, perhaps the most difficult topic—when to address it, how to address it, how to find a solution acceptable for both sides. This will depend on the ability of the negotiating teams.

Andrew Wilder:

Thank you very much. I'm afraid we've run out of time. So apologies to all of those of you who have submitted questions that we didn't have time for, but in closing out again, like to thank His Excellency Chairman Abdullah, you know, for taking the time to join us today and to thank all of you out in the cyberspace for joining for this timely and really important discussion. I think it's been a rich discussion, both the challenges and opportunities, to achieving peace in Afghanistan. I can assure you, Chairman Abdullah, that supporting peace efforts in Afghanistan has been one of USIP's top priorities, and we are committed to doing whatever we can to support efforts, to help achieve and inclusive and sustainable peace in Afghanistan. I would like to end by wishing you and your team every success in your efforts to bring an end to over four decades of war and suffering in Afghanistan. So, with that, thank you once again.

Chairman Abdullah:

Thank you, all your colleagues, and to the participants from around the world. And I hope that our, the collective efforts will lead to peaceful, unified, Afghanistan. Thank you.