CURRENT SITUATION

Afghanistan has entered a pivotal but highly uncertain time. As all parties recognize that a military solution is not achievable, increased war fatigue has shifted Afghan and international attention toward a possible political settlement to the ongoing 18-year war. Grassroots peace movements and a three-day cease-fire between the Afghan government and the Taliban in June 2018 demonstrate Afghans’ widespread desire for sustainable peace. Despite some promising developments, many issues lay ahead that must be resolved before a sustainable peace process can be undertaken, and numerous spoilers could possibly derail this process.

President Trump’s appointment of Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad as the special representative for Afghanistan reconciliation in September 2018, and a series of negotiations between U.S. and Taliban representatives, have heightened anticipation that a breakthrough could be at hand, though vital negotiations among Afghans on ending the war and mapping the country’s political future have not yet begun. Concern is also spreading about what sacrifices peace might entail.

The security situation has worsened in recent years, with rates of civilian casualties reaching record highs in 2018. A flawed and contested parliamentary election in October 2018 and uncertainty around the presidential election in September 2019 have furthered political instability. The humanitarian situation also remains dire, as the possibility of a prolonged drought and other resource scarcity issues threaten greater levels of displacement and human suffering.
USIP supports the U.S. and Afghan governments’ current efforts to establish a sustainable peace agreement and reduce drivers of violent conflict. Through our field office in Kabul, USIP works with institutions across Afghanistan to strengthen the rule of law, promote good governance and credible electoral practices, and reduce violent extremism. Our pathbreaking peace education program provides Afghan youth with the peacebuilding and conflict resolution skills needed to resolve everyday conflicts in their communities. The Institute’s efforts in Afghanistan include:

**Support to the Afghan Peace Process.** Supporting a successful and sustainable Afghan peace process is a top priority for USIP. The Institute helps key parties define and determine the potential substance of a political settlement. This includes high-level consultations with a range of top Afghan and international stakeholders. USIP also promotes grassroots peacebuilding to engage all levels of Afghan society, using district-level projects to discover what local leaders, women, and youth groups want from a peace process and then training them to assist and empower stakeholders to negotiate effectively to advance their interests. USIP is also facilitating regional dialogues on how Afghanistan’s neighbors can engage in supporting Afghan stability.

**Teaching Peace and Conflict Resolution in Afghan Universities.** In Afghanistan, violence that makes national and international headlines often begins with small, community-level disputes. USIP has partnered with universities in Kabul, Herat, Nagarhar, Khast, Kapisa, and Kandahar provinces to teach peacebuilding and conflict resolution. In early 2019, the Afghanistan Ministry of Higher Education announced that the peace education curriculum would be offered as a for-credit course in all Afghan Universities during the next school year. In addition, USIP is developing an extended online course in peacebuilding and conflict resolution in Dari and Pashto, which will be made available in the fall of 2019 to key Afghan stakeholders. A micro-version of the course will also be made available as a free resource.

**Informing Policymakers and the Public through Research and Discussion.** Through our in-house expertise and broad network of international and Afghan partners, USIP publishes research—including field studies—to inform policymakers and peacebuilding practitioners on the key topics related to peace and conflict in Afghanistan, including the underlying drivers of conflict, peace negotiations, security, the economy, and politics. In Washington, USIP convenes Afghan and U.S. officials, scholars, and practitioners for high-level meetings, dialogues, and public discussions.

**Consolidating the Rule of Law and Access to Justice.** USIP has been working since 2002 to strengthen the rule of law in Afghanistan by identifying peaceful means of dispute resolution, developing partnerships between state and community actors, and improving access to justice. We’ve conducted rule of law research and pilot projects across all regions of Afghanistan, with past and current projects spanning 18 provinces. Thematic areas include community court observation, women’s access to justice, legislative monitoring, and constitutional analysis.