CURRENT SITUATION

In February 2020 the U.S. and the Taliban signed an agreement that paved the way for the first direct talks between the Taliban and representatives of the Afghan republic since 2001. This nascent peace process has sparked hope for a political settlement to the four-decade-long conflict, although slow progress and increasing levels of violence threaten to derail the process before it gains momentum. The security situation throughout the country remains dire, with high levels of violence against civilians and Afghan security forces even as the Taliban have refrained from attacking U.S. forces.

Afghan political unity remains fragile. Most Afghans overwhelmingly want peace, but also want to preserve the current constitutional system that includes democracy, personal freedoms, a free media, and women’s rights. The Taliban have said little to reassure citizens that their views have changed from the extreme restrictions they brutally enforced in the 1990s.

The ongoing insurgency compounds myriad other challenges that make Afghanistan one of the most fragile states in the world. COVID-19 has caused both humanitarian and economic hardships on top of already severe poverty, food insecurity, and climate vulnerability. A successful political settlement of the conflict leading to an inclusive and sustainable peace is the surest path to addressing these deep-rooted challenges.

USIP’S WORK

The congressionally mandated Afghanistan Study Group—co-chaired by former Senator Kelly Ayotte, Ret. General Joseph Dunford and Nancy Lindborg—was launched in April 2020 by USIP. In February 2021 the group delivered its final report and recommendations.
USIP has been working on the ground in Afghanistan since 2002 and has maintained an office in Kabul since 2008. Today, our top priority is to promote an inclusive and sustainable peace process that leads to an Afghanistan that is stable and does not present a terrorist threat to the United States or others. USIP does this by implementing top-down and bottom-up initiatives to identify key issues that need to be resolved and then providing options to address them. In Washington, USIP supports the U.S. government through policy analysis that draws from our work on the ground in Afghanistan and comparative lessons from managing conflicts around the world.

**USIP’s specific Afghanistan programs include:**

- **Top-down support to the Afghan peace process:** The Institute conducts research and dialogues to help parties to the conflict define and determine the potential substance of a political settlement during the complex and rapidly evolving peace process, as well as to strategize and prepare for negotiations. This includes high-level consultations with a range of top U.S., Afghan, and international stakeholders, with an emphasis on supporting Afghan women leaders.

- **Empowering local peacebuilders and activists:** For a peace process to be sustainable, it must be inclusive and representative. USIP works in Afghanistan with local partners at the grassroots level to empower and equip peacebuilders at all levels of society, including women and youth, with the skills and resources to engage in direct action for peace and to advance their interests through dialogue and nonviolent strategies.

- **Teaching and practicing 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 10 provinces to develop and teach peacebuilding and conflict resolution courses to students. The coursework is paired with student-led Peace Clubs, which put the lessons into practice through community and campus engagement that promotes peaceful co-existence. USIP’s peace curriculum was adopted by the Ministry of Higher Education in 2019 and is used in all public universities. Additionally, USIP recently launched an extended online course in peacebuilding and conflict resolution in Dari and Pashto.

- **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 to inform policymakers and peacebuilding practitioners on 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 is an essential forum for policy discussions that convene Afghan and U.S. officials, scholars, and practitioners for high-level meetings, dialogues, and public events.

- **Building the rule of law and increasing access to justice:** Since 2002, USIP has worked to strengthen the rule of law in Afghanistan by increasing citizens’ knowledge about their rights and building stronger linkages between civil society groups and institutions that increase access to justice. USIP works with the Afghan attorney general’s office, as well as with local community actors, to monitor performance and reduce corruption. USIP has also enabled women to secure their legal rights by supporting public defender services and public interest litigation.