

# What Follows a Cease-Fire? Local Security Arrangements in a Postwar Afghanistan

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**Summary:** A comprehensive national cease-fire is a core demand of the Afghan government and indispensable to any Afghan peace agreement. The security arrangements that follow any cease-fire, however, will have immense implications for the larger peace process and Afghanistan’s future generally. Many from both the Afghan government and the Taliban say each side should “control its own areas” immediately after fighting formally stops. One can draw various models for such a system from other post-conflict countries; all require funding, oversight, agreed ground rules and—most importantly—mutual political goodwill to succeed. If the United States and its international partners want a cease-fire to hold, and eventually give way to a normal security architecture in Afghanistan, they need to begin planning now for the significant and years-long funding and diplomatic attention such arrangements will require.

As the political process for Afghanistan unfolds, critical and difficult questions regarding implementation will arise. Prominent among these are the issues surrounding a comprehensive nationwide cease-fire, which has long been the most urgent demand of the Afghan government and other stakeholders loyal to the current republic. If such a cease-fire does take hold, immediate questions will arise over what follows—who controls what territory pending the completion of a larger political process, and what local security arrangements will be in place during that period? Accordingly, this paper considers the following questions:

1. What are the options for local security in the wake of a cease-fire?
2. What international contribution can reasonably be expected to support such arrangements?
3. How do these arrangements relate to larger security force reform?
4. How can likely risks be mitigated?

In the wake of any settlement in Afghanistan, most issues of “security” will be internal, either related directly to the core issues of the ongoing Taliban-led insurgency, splinter groups, other militants not aligned with the Taliban or local actors fighting to preserve political and/or financial power and resources. Direct threats from foreign militaries will not be the major driver of security requirements. Thus, immediately after a political settlement, Afghanistan is likely to require less a provision of security guarantees against external threats, and more a network of internal interim security arrangements that create the time and space for the implementation of a phased reform of the national security apparatus and the key political steps of the peace process. Generally speaking, and in the Afghan context, the goals of Afghanistan’s security posture following a settlement should include the following:

- Suppress Taliban splinter elements (any that reject a settlement)
- Suppress any others who violently reject a settlement
- Protect individuals from conflict-related reprisals
- Suppress Islamic State group-Khorasan (ISIS-K) and other transnational terrorist elements
- Protect the population from criminal activity

For the purpose of this paper, “local security arrangements” refer to those security provisions that are delivered, in part or in whole, by national forces, external peacekeeping forces or otherwise insurgent, irregular or militia-type elements that are distinct from the national security forces. These arrangements could be negotiated either locally or nationally, depending on the characteristics of the larger peace process, but it is likely that different areas of Afghanistan will require different solutions. This paper does not consider longer-term issues of amnesty, transitional justice, or disarmament and demobilization, all of which would also need to be considered as part of any comprehensive accord.

The precise nature and configuration of various arrangements that might follow a cease-fire is to be determined by the parties to the negotiation, but it is useful to outline a few broad options that could be viable in Afghanistan. A few of these, none mutually exclusive, include:

- **Freeze in place.** Many Afghans, from both the republic and Taliban sides, argue that following a cease-fire, government and Taliban forces should each retain responsibility for the areas they control for an interim period. Though this might be the most straightforward option, it would likely involve a dizzyingly complex mapmaking exercise, in which negotiators define the boundaries of those areas controlled by each side. The deep disagreements between the United States and Taliban regarding permissible forms of violence under their February 29, 2020 agreement demonstrate how easily ambiguous security arrangements can jeopardize the larger peace process.

Such an exercise would also risk hardening boundaries between the two sides, even if the original intent is to eventually integrate them. Since most former combatants would remain

armed and organized, this approach would also introduce new risks of violence and criminality. If the sides reach agreement, though, it could be the simplest interim solution.

Any area that does not fall under the clear control of one side or the other would be subject to local arrangements, agreed to by and within communities, where the U.S. government would support, in principle, any such local provisions that do not otherwise conflict with the broader requirements of U.S. policy.

One appeal of such an arrangement may be that it could be self-policing, amounting to temporary “self-enforcement” by the Afghan parties. In other words, it may be the least bad option if the international community lacks the appetite to invest significant resources in a guarantor force. Still, any such freeze would benefit from active and direct international support at the local level—at minimum a continuation of financial support for government units, and, potentially, a capability to help finance compliant Taliban units. As a variant, an arrangement that is predominantly enforced by Afghans on the ground could include a supplemental role for some form of credible third-party (non-U.S., non-NATO) peacekeeping force to monitor the arrangement.

- **Hybrid force.** Afghan government and Taliban forces could integrate in some fashion, either in contested areas or everywhere. There are many possible models within this category alone, from joint patrols (with fighters and/or commanders drawn from both sides) to parallel forces (e.g., insurgents populating the local police but not the army). One complication for Washington is that a hybrid force would mean U.S. security assistance would go to former Taliban fighters. This is a likely reality under any scenario in which there are security assistance provisions post-agreement but might be especially direct and visible under this option.

As with the “simple freeze” option, the hybrid force would likely also require some form of international arbiter that the United States may or may not need to staff, but would almost certainly need to fund in some measure. Such a model might require a more extensive third-party peacekeeping force based on the challenges of forming and supervising such joint units.

One somewhat successful model for direct U.S. involvement comes from the disputed territories in northern Iraq’s mixed Arab-Kurdish regions. After a series of Arab-Kurd crises, U.S. forces in Iraq from 2009-11 helped broker a hybrid security model in which U.S. forces, the Iraqi Army and Kurdish Peshmerga forces collocated and shared security duties across the belt of disputed areas. This arrangement helped tamp down the Arab-Kurd violence that had proliferated in 2008-9. An example that broadly fits this category, but does not involve U.S. forces, is in northern Mali, where the 2015 Bamako Agreement established a system whereby U.N. peacekeepers supervised joint patrols between government and insurgent forces. The arrangement initially yielded modest success, tempered by the fact that the two belligerents

fought elsewhere and tended to withhold their best weapons and other capabilities from the shared patrols.<sup>1</sup>

- **Up-front restructure.** The Afghan government and Taliban could agree to address a comprehensive reform of the security forces early on in the peace process with the aim of further professionalizing the existing force and allowing former Taliban fighters early entry into the country’s largest employer. In theory, this could shorten, though not eliminate, the window of time during which temporary local arrangements are necessary. In reality, the restructuring would require a nontrivial transitional interval, which would still require interim security arrangements—likely some version of one of the options above.

A proper restructuring would probably be the most stable option once achieved, and in some ways it would continue efforts that Afghan President Ashraf Ghani and others have already made to root out militia influence. It would be a particularly fraught time- and labor-intensive undertaking at the beginning of a peace process. This option would likely require sustained and substantial training and advisory assistance from U.S. forces.

## **Additional Considerations on the Ground in Afghanistan**

Any of the abovementioned options to build on a cease-fire will encounter foreseeable implementation challenges. Among these are that, first, security needs will vary significantly in different parts of Afghanistan. The more complicated and centrally directed the scheme, the harder it will be to account for the many local variations in the configuration and management of violence across the country.

Second, any settlement will confront potential spoilers. Beyond the risk that the parties to the conflict themselves will spoil the peace, a danger with ample historical precedent is the existence of third (or fourth) parties to the conflict—in Afghanistan’s case, likely the Islamic State or other armed groups that are not party to a settlement. The incentives for such “spoiler violence” increase as the political process unfolds and certain factions inevitably see their interests as threatened. Moreover, the lack of trust at this delicate stage of the process makes it difficult for parties to agree to disarmament, which can lead them to seek external security guarantees. Standing militias ostensibly allied with the government may also pose a spoiler risk. Such forces could prove less likely than other entities to splinter, and may seek to formalize at least temporary control over certain areas.

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<sup>1</sup> For more on the 2015 agreement and its security provisions, see, for example, Pellerin, Mathieu. 2020. “Mali’s Algiers Peace Agreement, Five Years On: An Uneasy Calm.” International Crisis Group, June 24. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/sahel/mali/laccord-dalger-cinq-ans-apres-un-calme-precaire-dont-il-ne-faut-pas-se-satisfaire>.

Third, implementers of any arrangement should seek input via a forum for public dialogue. This should be true of any key provision in a peace deal, but local security arrangements would likely be especially dependent on the broad acceptance of local populations.

Fourth, as referenced above, is the risk that security arrangements could prove unexpectedly durable. Any arrangement should, therefore, be temporary in nature, and include an explicit path toward normalization according to a nationally agreed standard. In other words, while it may be tenable during a transitional period for the Taliban or other groups to maintain security in the areas they control, by the end of a peace process all areas should be under the control of a single—if heterogeneous—national authority.

## **Additional Considerations for the United States**

Most options to consolidate and sustain a cease-fire involve some kind of implementation force. It is unlikely that a large international force could be fielded, however—much of the international community suffers from Afghanistan fatigue and has other priorities, and continued U.S. “enablers” (a term referring to functions like close air support, logistics and casualty evacuation, which Afghan and international forces often depend on the U.S. military to provide) might not be allowed by the peace deal.

More modest options, however, might be plausible. As one example, an international monitoring and reporting entity could organize fusion cells in different regions of Afghanistan, manned jointly by some combination of Afghan forces, the Taliban, militia elements and multilateral forces. In such a scheme, NGOs and citizens could feed reports that would then be channeled to regional and national political authorities for enforcement.

Even if the U.S. and/or allied troop commitment is minimal or nonexistent, a settlement and associated cease-fire would only be likely to succeed with continued and significant international financial assistance (e.g., salary support). This will require advance preparation in Western capitals in anticipation of a complex, potentially fast-moving set of security needs after any Afghan settlement takes hold.

Most importantly, this preparation includes laying the groundwork for sustained financial contributions to a post-settlement Afghanistan. There is little evidence that the financial costs of the Afghan engagement weigh heavily on U.S. public opinion, particularly given the nature of deferred “contingency” funding for these expenditures. The financial burden of Afghanistan would be sharply reduced under any conceivable post-agreement arrangement relative to current levels of spending. That said, history suggests that support in Congress will generally remain tied to overall troop deployment levels, which will inevitably decline as the process unfolds. It is thus imperative to prioritize congressional engagement (as well as public messaging) now, with a central message that continued financial assistance is a prerequisite to successful peace in Afghanistan. Congress and the interagency

must also consider how best to manage funding in the absence of a U.S. troop presence (e.g., through a U.N.-managed trust fund).

**A final thought:** Afghanistan’s international backers will need to be prepared to direct financial and other support toward controversial recipients if a peace process is to succeed. Many would object, understandably, to former Taliban fighters receiving U.S. funding or training. The U.S. government’s longstanding Afghan partners may try to minimize the presence of former Taliban fighters in government or security positions. Excluding them, however, would maximize the risk of former fighters reverting to violence or joining new extremist groups. The U.S. government will need not only to tolerate a Taliban presence in the security forces, but to embrace and potentially even encourage it—in part through such security assistance as the United States provides.

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### **About the Authors**

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