

10 December 2009

## **ECUMENICAL BRIEF ON CANADA'S ROLE IN AFGHANISTAN**

For presentation to the House of Commons Special Committee on the  
Canadian Mission in Afghanistan (AFGH)

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### **1. INTRODUCTION**

In recent months, the calls for a political settlement to end the war in Afghanistan have become more insistent, and the need for reconciliation within Afghanistan, a country torn by decades of war, has also been raised with new urgency. The Churches welcome these developments and wish to draw further attention to the urgent need for diplomacy to end the war, and for reconciliation to help heal physical, social and political wounds. The energetic new pursuit of both will enhance Canada's contribution to peace and justice in Afghanistan.

Diplomacy to end the war and reconciliation at the sub-state level suggest complex, multi-dimensional, and inter-related processes. Sustained efforts in regional diplomacy, national political negotiations, demobilization and reintegration of combatants, transitional justice, inter-communal conflict resolution, community peace building, and governance reform from local to national levels are necessary. We call on Canada to focus on two priorities: first to encourage the international community to give significant new attention to diplomatic efforts to end the war (while Afghans need to forge the details of a durable peace, the pursuit of a political settlement cannot be left solely to the Government of Afghanistan); second, to support Afghans in implementing participatory reconciliation programs and responsive governance at district and local levels.

Our reflections on these matters, at this significant time in Canada's relationship with the peoples of Afghanistan, are linked to the immediate aftermath of September 21, 2001. The Canadian Council of Churches then wrote to the Prime Minister in support of Canadian and international efforts "to bring to justice all those who commit terror and other crimes against humanity," but also to warn that "the early characterization of the response to the terrorist attacks on the United States as 'war' misrepresents the nature of the challenge." Then, on October 12, 2001, just five days after Western military intervention, church leaders wrote an open letter to Canadian Parliamentarians calling on Canada to promote efforts "to demilitarise the international struggle against terrorism." The letter emphasized the urgency of effective counter-terrorism strategy but expressed the fear "that the military attacks on Afghanistan...could seriously undermine the international community's efforts, both to bring those responsible for the September 11 attacks to justice and reduce the incidence of terrorism in the future."

By 2007 it was confirmed that the military campaign had not brought any of the perpetrators of terrorism against North America to justice or brought sustainable security to the people of Afghanistan. The churches wrote to the Prime Minister to “urge that every possible effort be made to seek negotiated solutions” to the war. They insisted that “this should include discussions with Taliban insurgents willing to participate in peaceful negotiations,” and encouraged “Canada to dedicate more of its efforts and financial resources to diplomacy in Afghanistan and the surrounding region.” Since then another two years of war have passed. The insurgency has continued to build, the security conditions for Afghans have continued to deteriorate, and attacks on civilians have continued to escalate with a disturbing number of them dying at the hands of US and ISAF<sup>1</sup> forces. As Canada considers its role in Afghanistan up to and following 2011, we believe it is critical that new efforts in sub-state reconciliation and peacemaking diplomacy be pursued.

## 2. RECONCILIATION AT SUB-STATE LEVEL

### 2.1. *What is Reconciliation?*

The term *reconciliation* – as it is used in international agreements, Afghan policy frameworks and in Canada’s priorities – is often vague and lacking clear objectives. Canada has a stated priority to *facilitate Afghan-led efforts toward political reconciliation*, but the quarterly reports indicate that implementation of this important priority is a difficult challenge. The range of Afghan and international activities under the banner of reconciliation suggests that it is a multi-faceted process requiring complementary efforts in regional diplomacy, political negotiations, demobilization and reintegration of combatants, transitional justice, inter-tribal conflict reduction, community peacebuilding and governance reform from local to national levels. We have not attempted a more focused definition of reconciliation, especially in the intricacies of the Afghan context; however, a more effective Canadian effort will have to be founded on clearly defined steps or activities. Furthermore, inclusive partnerships with Afghan groups will be essential. Given this complexity, we suggest a starting point that recognizes the critically important need for reconciliation work at district and local levels.

### 2.2. *The Local Context Matters*

In his report to the Security Council in September 2009, the UN Secretary General (UNSG) reported that every presidential election candidate referred to the need for reconciliation. Further, he suggested that, “establishing a coherent National strategy must be the priority of the new Government.”<sup>2</sup> This echoes earlier UNSG reports concerning the lack of progress on reconciliation strategies.<sup>3</sup> These

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<sup>1</sup> International Security Assistance Force.

<sup>2</sup> Report of the Secretary General to the Security Council, 22 September 2009. p. 5 (pt. 21)

<sup>3</sup> In Sept. 2007 the UNSG cites *inadequate progress* on the Action Plan for Peace Reconciliation and Justice (pt. 13) and in Sept. 2008 he noted *limited political support* for the Action Plan (pt. 48). The Action Plan, it should be noted is an internationally sanctioned element of the Afghanistan Compact – In a letter to a [Canadian church community](http://www.crcna.org/site/uploads/uploads/ccg/ccg_mackay_resp_0407.pdf) ([http://www.crcna.org/site/uploads/uploads/ccg/ccg\\_mackay\\_resp\\_0407.pdf](http://www.crcna.org/site/uploads/uploads/ccg/ccg_mackay_resp_0407.pdf)) Canada indicated that it is committed to the full implementation of this Action Plan.

recognitions at the level of high diplomacy suggest serious challenges to reconciliation initiatives in Afghanistan.

The UN mission in Afghanistan is formally mandated to promote “national reconciliation and rapprochement throughout the country.”<sup>4</sup> In a report prepared for the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs the Chr. Michelsen Institute (CMI), explains that this mandate was difficult from the beginning. The structuring of the Bonn conference as a “meeting of victors” hindered prospects for inclusive political dialogue and “grand bargain negotiations”.<sup>5</sup> Michael Semple explains that, in the escalating insurgency, the Government of Afghanistan (GoA) is not “an inclusive, accessible national authority” but “is now clearly a party to the conflict.”<sup>6</sup> Therefore, in the current environment, reconciliation via political negotiations is difficult. At the same time, the “lack of sustained commitment to reconciliation on the part of the Government of Afghanistan and its Western backers” has serious consequences: “a disastrous escalation of the conflict, increased questioning of the basis of international engagement in Afghanistan, and a loss of hope that the fall of the Taliban regime might mark the return of peace to Afghanistan.”<sup>7</sup> We will return to the focus on high-level political negotiations in Sections 3 and 4; the focus here is the need to reshape the reconciliation agenda in Afghanistan at the sub-state level.

It is well understood that the insurgency is not a monolith. According to Semple’s research it is a series of “commander solidarity networks” loosely united in opposition to the current governing regime.<sup>8</sup> These networks command legitimacy and familiarity in their localized spheres of influence and are known to provide security, kinship and economic opportunity to members. By contrast, the Afghan state is considered remote and unreliable. NATO and the UN have affiliated with the formal institutions of the national Government, most of which have significant limitations “in an environment where all the real Afghan business is conducted through informal networks.”<sup>9</sup> Semple’s emphasis on a deeper understanding of local context and the weaknesses of the Afghan State echo a diverse range of analysis on transitional justice and community peacebuilding.

The International Center for Transitional Justice (ICTJ) has an extensive history of supporting reconciliation and human rights around the world. ICTJ played a significant role in the public consultation process that led to *A Call for Justice* – the precursor to the Action Plan for Peace, Reconciliation and Justice (APPRJ), the primary transitional justice strategy adopted by the GoA and its international partners in the Afghanistan Compact. ICTJ’s most recent report to the UN Human Rights

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<sup>4</sup> S/2002/278, para 94 (b).

<sup>5</sup> CMI, *Conciliatory Approaches to the Insurgency in Afghanistan* (2009), p. 3, p. 5.

<sup>6</sup> Michael Semple, *Reconciliation in Afghanistan*. The United States Institute of Peace Press, 2009, p. 3. This study is based on the Author’s interactions with Afghans involved in the insurgency in the course of his work as EU special representative for Afghanistan, 2004-2007

<sup>7</sup> Semple, p. 5.

<sup>8</sup> Semple, p. 33.

<sup>9</sup> Semple, p. 34.

Council (May 2009) notes that existing transitional justice and reconciliation strategies have been centralized, with limited reach to a broad spectrum of Afghan peoples and regions.<sup>10</sup> In a more extensive study ICTJ Afghanistan staffers Sari Kuovo and Fatima Ayub are blunt about this centralization trend:

Encouraging the conditions for peace within a multi-ethnic society, scattered over a vast territory and with long traditions of insular local governance, should focus not only on elite leadership and on a supposed center of power, but on consultation, participation and sustainable policies of decentralization.<sup>11</sup>

Given this reality Kuovo and Ayub state that international actors “need to conduct more rigorous political analysis focused on local contexts and to find ways to support an Afghan-owned state-building process within ... networks of patronage and loyalty.”<sup>12</sup> This reflects Semple’s reflections on the significance of *commander solidarity networks*.

An extensive security survey conducted by Oxfam International in Afghanistan also indicates the significance of local context for conflict analysis. They found that the causes of disputes and insecurity in communities surveyed were diverse, including: conflict over land and water, family and tribal grievances, the presence of Taliban, warlords and criminal elements, international forces, Afghan security forces and government officials. Their research ultimately suggests that “there is no single major threat or cause of conflict, and that to be effective, measures to address these threats must be relevant to local circumstances.”<sup>13</sup> However, the majority of peacebuilding efforts (including ANDS, APPRJ and the PTS<sup>14</sup>) are national in scope with little reach and relevance at local levels. “Top-down approaches are by themselves inadequate without parallel nationwide peace work at a ground level. Moreover, insecurity in Afghanistan often has local causes.”<sup>15</sup> Given this, Oxfam urges attention to the local peacebuilding resources available in the traditional *Jirga* and *Shura* systems.

Assessments of reconciliation initiatives from CMI, Semple, ICTJ and Oxfam reach similar conclusions: to date, efforts for negotiations, demobilization of combatants, and transitional justice have been largely restricted to the national level with little substantive reach to district and local contexts. Canada’s efforts to facilitate *Afghan-led* reconciliation will benefit from attention to sub-national conflict analysis and reconciliation possibilities.

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<sup>10</sup> ICTJ-Afghanistan Submission to the Universal Periodic Review of the UN Human Rights Council 5<sup>th</sup> Session, May 2009. Pt. #5.

<sup>11</sup> Fatima Ayub, Sari Kuovo “Righting the Course? Humanitarian intervention, the war on terror and the future of Afghanistan.” *International Affairs* 84: 4 (2008), p. 656.

<sup>12</sup> Ayub and Kuovo, p. 656.

<sup>13</sup> Matt Waldman “Community Peacebuilding in Afghanistan: The Case for a National Strategy” Oxfam International (2008), p. 12.

<sup>14</sup> PTS – the National Commission for Peace and Reconciliation or *Programme Takhim e Solh* (Dari), is the program for surrender and demobilization of insurgents.

<sup>15</sup> Waldman, p. 3.



### 2.3. *Current Prospects for Reconciliation*

Canada has demonstrated some recognition of the need for Afghan-led reconciliation efforts at the local level. Recent quarterly reports indicate consideration of support for the Independent Directorate of Local Governance (IDLG). The GoA has identified IDLG as the lead agency for reconciliation. Canadian officials have indicated to the churches that support for the IDLG is recognition that Canada is well positioned to assist reconciliation through local governance. This is a sensible vision that resonates with the consensus among many analysts (as above) that the local and district contexts matter deeply for peace in Afghanistan. Thus, it is important to probe the prospects of IDLG and other reconciliation initiatives at the local and district level.

Obstacles to past reconciliation initiatives (APPRJ & PTS) are related to a lack of inclusivity of all people groups, and a degree of centralization that does not account for local perspectives. Presumably then, IDLG efforts to establish district Social Outreach Councils (SOCs) have the potential to address these concerns. However, as Canada's quarterly reports imply, IDLG potentials are yet to be realized. Detailed analysis from CMI indicates that pilot project SOCs have been found wanting in terms of inclusivity and local sensitivity.

Initial reports suggest that the concept (IDLG SOCs) has several limitations. The process of selection (by the sub-national administration and the local communities) makes the SOCs appear as yet another central government structure that may undermine or compete with genuine community-based structures. The members of the pilot SOCs in Wardak, for example, were from the minority Hazara population and resided in Kabul. Critics, therefore, call for building on what is already on the ground instead of creating new and possibly parallel organizations.<sup>16</sup>

The instability of the 2009 election period has stalled substantive development of the IDLG, as well. The struggles of IDLG documented by CMI and others<sup>17</sup> echo concerns surrounding earlier reconciliation programming. Therefore, Canadian policy makers should be wary of proceeding with support for IDLG until the documented concerns are addressed.

The profound significance of better understanding and programming at the sub-national level is recognized by General McChrystal in his assessment report to the Obama Administration. McChrystal calls for a new mission approach with a *significant magnitude of change*.<sup>18</sup> Under that frame of change, he affirms much of what has been learned about inclusivity and local sensitivity:

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<sup>16</sup> CMI, p. 6. A thorough analysis of IDLG is provided in a background to the main report. It concludes that the Wardak pilot "experiment has been somewhat less than successful." (p. 20)

<sup>17</sup> ICTJ too has expressed grave concerns about social outreach programming supported by Canada, the US and the UK: "All internationals involved in Afghanistan should ... strongly reconsider their support for the Social Outreach Program unless strong oversight of its funding and operations is instituted." (pt. # 19)

<sup>18</sup> General Stanley McChrystal, "COMISAF's Initial Assessment," August 30, 2009. p. 2-1.

- The lack of personal and economic security, general mistrust of the GoA and a perceived lack of international respect for Afghan culture are *as great a challenge* as the insurgent threat.<sup>19</sup>
- Traditional governance structures have been under-supported, and this leaves communities vulnerable.<sup>20</sup>

In light of these realities, one of McChrystal's four suggested pillars for the mission is this: "ISAF will place support to responsive and accountable governance, including sub-national and community governance on par with security."<sup>21</sup> This suggested pillar falls in the context of McChrystal's identification of broader NATO and US counterinsurgency and anti terrorism objectives. Those objectives certainly require inclusive dialogue with Afghan peoples, and a full consideration of their impact on sustainable peacebuilding. A related dialogue in ISAF member states is also important. Churches, for example, have concerns about the primacy of anti-terrorism objectives as identified by the Obama administration and other NATO partners. A mission framed around human security for the peoples of Afghanistan would be a more robust foundation for McChrystal's clear interest in civilian protection.

Specifically however, the *governance pillar*, as discussed by McChrystal, will demand reach beyond centralized institutions and a long-term and complex commitment. Given limited understanding in the international community of Afghan cultures and traditional authority structures, we have noted a need for detailed research at the community level. There is a serious requirement for an enriched understanding of the needs and challenges of reconciliation, and thus these research efforts to enhance understanding would themselves be an increment toward a renewed peacebuilding processes.

Such work will most certainly have diplomatic and political sensitivities. For one, the essential concept of *Afghan-led*, has thus far been defined by the GoA. Analysis of governance and state trends indicates that central government *leadership* has been weak throughout the history of Afghanistan:

Afghanistan even at its most developed stage, largely functioned only in urban centres, while in rural areas society was [still] traditionally organized in segmentary fashion and opposed to power and sovereignty.<sup>22</sup>

This suggests that *Afghan-led reconciliation* and governance must have strong district and local components. As such there is a need for dialogue with the GoA on developing an approach to *Afghan-led* reconciliation that accounts meaningfully for local perspectives.

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<sup>19</sup> McChrystal, p. 2-10.

<sup>20</sup> McChrystal, p. 2-9.

<sup>21</sup> McChrystal, p. 2-15.

<sup>22</sup> Andreas Wimmer and Conrad Schetter. *State formation first: Recommendations for reconstruction and peacemaking in Afghanistan*. Bonn: ZEF- Discussion papers on Development Policy, April 2002. p. 8.

Local perspectives and resources on peace and reconciliation have traditionally been found in *Jirgas*, *Shuras*, and from village Elders and religious leaders. Recent surveys by the Asia Foundation and the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission indicate a high level of trust and respect for these informal and traditional conflict resolution mechanisms.<sup>23</sup> CMI suggests that informal structures “represent an infrastructure of potential conciliation and, as such, require continuous investment and maintenance in order to deliver in the longer run.”<sup>24</sup>

Given the analysis of past and current reconciliation strategies, it is apparent that the potentials CMI points to are yet to be realized. Working with traditional and informal structures for reconciliation will undoubtedly present challenges:

- the practices and membership of *Shuras* are not uniform across Afghanistan; they can be authoritarian; they rarely include women and there is generally little formal training in conflict resolution.<sup>25</sup> That said, *Shuras* are undoubtedly trusted in communities.
- Informal structures and traditional authorities have been understood as competition for formal state structures like community development councils.<sup>26</sup>
- “A clear distinction needs to be made in Afghanistan between what was there before the war, when indeed ‘tribal and religious leaders created micro-societies that related to central and other powers on the basis of negotiation and patronage’, and what exists now.” Essentially, war has damaged traditional tribal capacities.<sup>27</sup> This again underscores the need for careful study directed towards the development of strategies that are based on the contemporary realities of Afghanistan.

The long-term investment and maintenance that sub-national reconciliation activities will require has significant implications for Canada as it considers the scope of its future responsibilities in Afghanistan. The cessation of a military mission in 2011 should be followed by persistent support for an appropriate Canadian presence in reconciliation and sub-national governance efforts. Given the fragility of current programming, the weaknesses of past approaches and the considerable challenges of working with local and informal structures, Canada will do well to encourage outreach, research and pilot projects that are part of the dynamic development of new local reconciliation efforts. Consultation with the GoA, its partners in Afghanistan, and organizations with a track record in sub-national and tribal outreach, as well as plenty of tea, will be essential going forward.

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<sup>23</sup> Waldman, p. 15.

<sup>24</sup> CMI, p. 13.

<sup>25</sup> Waldman, p.14.

<sup>26</sup> Susanne Schmeidl, *Pret-a-porter States: How the McDonalization of Statebuilding Misses the Mark in Afghanistan*. Berghoff Research Center for Conflict Management, 2009. p. 73.

<sup>27</sup> Schmeidl, p. 71.

### 3. THE DIPLOMACY IMPERATIVE

Indeed, for local reconciliation and conflict mitigation efforts to endure, they ultimately must have the benefit of a stable national context. Ending the war is obviously foundational to that stability; hence, the second element of the appeal from the churches is for Canada to mount a serious effort to promote diplomacy and negotiations aimed at ending the war.

#### *3.1 Deteriorating security and a hurting stalemate*

A broad range of authoritative voices testifies that the Afghan security situation is deteriorating. Those voices include the United Nations Secretary-General (UNSG). His most recent assessment reports “there has been an average of 898 [security] incidents in the first seven months of 2009, compared to 677 during the same time frame in 2008. Incidents involving improvised explosive devices have risen dramatically to an average of more than eight per day, 60 per cent higher than the average during the first seven months of 2008.”<sup>28</sup>

Gen. Stanley McChrystal, the new US and ISAF Commander in Afghanistan confirms the deteriorating security situation and describes the resulting loss of confidence in the Afghan Government: “The weakness of the state institutions, malign actions of power-brokers, widespread corruption and abuse of power by various officials, and ISAF’s own errors, have given Afghans little reason to support their government....This crisis of confidence, coupled with a distinct lack of economic and educational opportunity, has created fertile ground for the insurgency.”<sup>29</sup>

From NGS/CSO perspective Mark Sedra, Senior Fellow at the Centre for International Governance Innovation and an expert in security sector issues in Afghanistan, explains: “spiralling insecurity that is no longer confined to the Pashtun belt but spreading to previously stable areas of the country.”<sup>30</sup> And, at the level of Afghan communities research traces the significant extent to which insecurity is rooted in tribal rivalries and local power struggles that get drawn into the larger insurgency.<sup>31</sup>

These dire security conditions and the strengthening insurgency are background to the widely accepted judgement that the war will not be resolved by means of a military victory by Afghan and international

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<sup>28</sup> “The situation in Afghanistan and its implications for international peace and security,” 22 September 2009 (A/64/364-S/2009/475), paragraph 31.

<http://daccessdds.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N09/515/77/PDF/N0951577.pdf?OpenElement>.

<sup>29</sup> “Commander’s Initial Assessment,” 30 August 2009. Commander, NATO International Security Assistance Force, Afghanistan, and US Forces, Afghanistan. Available at [http://media.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/politics/documents/Assessment\\_Redacted\\_092109.pdf](http://media.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/politics/documents/Assessment_Redacted_092109.pdf).

<sup>30</sup> *Setting Out the Conditions for ‘Success’ in Afghanistan*, Foreign Policy in Focus, 28 October 2009. <http://www.fpiif.org/fpiftxt/6529>.

<sup>31</sup> Astri Suhrke, et al, *Conciliatory Approaches to the Insurgency in Afghanistan: An Overview*, CMIRreport (International Peace Research Institute, Oslo, and the Chr. Michelsen Institute, Bergen, 2009), p. 13. <http://www.cmi.no/publications/publication/?3266=conciliatory-approaches-to-the-insurgency-in>.



forces. It is a judgement confirmed by a growing list of analysts<sup>32</sup> and notably by the Prime Minister, who told CNN last March: “My own judgment is, quite frankly, that we are not going to ever defeat the insurgency.”<sup>33</sup> Experience also confirms that winning wars against insurgencies is in fact a rare occurrence.<sup>34</sup>

At the same time, there are equally persuasive assessments that the insurgents will be unable to overthrow the Government in Kabul and re-establish a Taliban regime. Harvard University’s Michael Semple told CBC news that “the thinking Taliban know they don’t have a hope... of achieving any kind of victory which they say they are fighting toward.”<sup>35</sup> While insurgents have the capacity to hold sway over much of the countryside, they do not have the capacity to capture and control the major urban areas. The German expert and diplomat with long experience in Afghanistan, Thomas Ruttig, reports that some Afghan Members of Parliament have received messages from some Taliban who recognize that there will be no military victory for them and that continuing war promises only “more futile bloodshed.”<sup>36</sup>

In other words, Afghanistan can be said to be in a hurting stalemate. All of the major contenders face the prospects of an ongoing war which, in the felicitous phrase of one analyst, they “can’t win, won’t lose, can’t quit, and can’t afford.”<sup>37</sup> At the very least, the current military prospects are for a very long war that will be increasingly damaging to the people of Afghanistan, increasingly difficult to sustain politically, and have minimal impact on global terrorism. As Semple explains: the Taliban, the US, and the Karzai government have one very strong interest in common, and that is to end the Western military presence in Afghanistan.

While the presence of international forces cannot solve the conflict, the testimony of many experts indicates that their absence would also be problematic. They do have a role in preventing a full decent

<sup>32</sup> For example, Matthew Hoh, the US State Department official who resigned to protest US military presence in Afghanistan, which he said is fighting on one side of a 35-year-old civil war, and that additional US troops would further fuel the insurgency. 29 October 2009 interview, the PBS Newshour. [http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/military/jul-dec09/hoh\\_10-29.html](http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/military/jul-dec09/hoh_10-29.html).

<sup>33</sup> “Canadian PM says Afghan war can never be won,” Reuters, 1 March 2009. <http://www.reuters.com/article/asiaCrisis/idUSN01339549>.

<sup>34</sup> Seth G. Jones and Martin C. Libicki, *How Terrorist Groups End: Lessons for Countering al Qaida*, RAND Corporation, 2008. [http://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/2008/RAND\\_MG741-1.pdf](http://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/2008/RAND_MG741-1.pdf).

<sup>35</sup> CBC, The National, 4 November 2009.

[http://www.cbc.ca/video/#/News/TV\\_Shows/The\\_National/World/ID=1319396838](http://www.cbc.ca/video/#/News/TV_Shows/The_National/World/ID=1319396838)

<sup>36</sup> Thomas Ruttig, *The Other Side. Dimensions of the Afghan Insurgency: Causes, Actors and Approaches to ‘Talks’*, Afghanistan Analysts Network, July 2009, p. 26. <http://www.aan-afghanistan.org/uploads/200907%20AAN%20Report%20Ruttig%20-%20The%20Other%20Side.PDF>.

<sup>37</sup> The phrase comes from A.J.R. Groom of the University of Kent, used in a context other than Afghanistan in a recent public lecture at the Centre for International Governance Innovation. A related paper, “Roadmaps after the ‘peace’,” was first published in Milica Delevic Djilas and Vladimir Deric (eds), *The International and the National*, Belgrade Centre for Human Rights, Belgrade, 2003,

into civil war.<sup>38</sup> In that sense, the presence of international troops should be understood as buying precious time in which to pursue a political settlement.

### *3.2. Towards negotiations*

We are pleased, therefore, that the calls for diplomacy and negotiations have become much more prominent and insistent in recent months. Last summer, not for the first time, President Karzai argued that more foreign troops would not bring peace and that other approaches are required: “We must engage in negotiations, bring back those Taliban who are willing to return, who have been driven out by fear and coercion and the mistakes we’ve all made. They are part of this country and must be called back... If Mullah Omar wants to come and talk, he’s welcome. It’s the desire we have and we should try for it. Without sincere peace process on all sides, matters will only get worse.”<sup>39</sup>

The negotiations to come will have to address a broad range of difficult issues, including: regional security dynamics, power sharing at national and district or local levels, agreed parameters for the protection of basic rights, and deepened support for reconstruction and peacebuilding. These are issues that cannot be indefinitely delayed in the futile hope that business-as-usual in a long, if not indefinite, war will somehow deliver more favourable negotiating conditions. We therefore recommend that the Government of Canada make the pursuit of peace talks a priority. Canada can urge the international community and the Government of Afghanistan to launch a sustained diplomatic initiative to reach out to disaffected communities in Afghanistan, to insurgents, and to states in the region with the objective of mounting and concluding negotiations to end the war and to preserve the basic rights of the peoples of Afghanistan.

## **4. HIGH-LEVEL POLITICAL SETTLEMENT**

### *4.1. Towards a comprehensive peace plan*

Gen. McChrystal’s report touches on the prospect of ending the war through negotiated reconciliation with insurgents: “Insurgencies of this nature typically conclude through military operations and political efforts driving some degree of host-nation reconciliation with elements of the insurgency. In the Afghan

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<sup>38</sup> “If NATO forces left Afghanistan, the most probable outcome would be an all-out civil war pitting the Taliban and their allies against a remobilized Northern Alliance. The scale of violence would almost certainly dwarf the relatively small-scale guerilla war now under way.” [Roland Paris, “In Afghanistan, one last shot,” *Globe and Mail*, 2 November 2009. <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/opinions/in-afghanistan-one-last-shot/article1348833/>.] Selig Harrison also warns of “an uncontrollable, ethnically defined civil war” if the transition to Afghanistan without US and NATO forces is not carefully managed. [Selig Harrison, “Ethnic hostility is a big, maybe the biggest, part of the Afghan war,” *Globe and Mail*, 2 November 2009. <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/opinions/ethnic-hostility-is-a-big-maybe-the-biggest-part-of-the-afghan-war/article1346221/>.]

<sup>39</sup> Karzai seeks negotiations with Taliban,” *IndianExpress.Com*, 19 July 2009. <http://www.indianexpress.com/news/Karzai-seeks-negotiations-with-Taliban/491338>.

conflict, reconciliation may involve [Government of Afghanistan]-led, high-level political settlements.”<sup>40</sup> It should be noted that the Bonn negotiations in late 2001 were intended to achieve such a high-level settlement and set the foundation for ISAF. The war that ensued is not a consequence of some parties to that agreement defecting from it, but of the fact that it never was a comprehensive, inclusive agreement involving all the key stakeholders.

Michael Semple, the former European Union special representative in Afghanistan confirms this assessment: “It is now widely understood that the Bonn Accords did not constitute a peace agreement. They needed to be supplemented by a strategic pursuit of reconciliation in order to bring all Afghan parties to the conflict into the peaceful political process.”<sup>41</sup> That “strategic pursuit of reconciliation” has certainly not happened – but it still must happen. Indeed, Afghanistan’s growing insecurity is confirmation that the post-Bonn political/legal order was certainly not inclusive and has not, therefore, earned the undivided loyalty of the Afghan population. The recent election process has only added to that failure.

The churches have repeatedly noted the importance of renewed political/diplomatic efforts to rebuild a basic national consensus in support of public institutions. Indeed, it is clear that the operational focus of the international community has been on militarily defeating those who feel themselves excluded and outside the Bonn consensus. The churches have also consistently made the point that a war to defeat those outside the national consensus is not only imposing extraordinary costs on the people of Afghanistan, it will end in failure. A long and bitter war makes it difficult to find a middle ground. William R. Polk, a prominent American academic and advisor to Democratic Presidents, has written an open letter to President Obama pointing out that when foreign forces exit a counterinsurgency war, “almost always, those who fought hardest against the foreigner take over when he leaves.”<sup>42</sup>

#### 4.2. *The inadequacy of cooption*

Most efforts to draw in excluded groups in Afghanistan have focused on cooption – essentially attempts to entice moderate Taliban and other insurgents to switch sides. Even for Taliban who may be inclined to seek an end to the war, current amnesty and demobilization programs are perceived as requiring straightforward surrender.<sup>43</sup> Limited cooption initiatives, as a Western diplomat has noted, “make reconciliation sound like surrender; where has that ever worked? What is required is structured

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<sup>40</sup> “Commander’s Initial Assessment,” 30 August 2009. Commander, NATO International Security Assistance Force, Afghanistan, and US Forces, Afghanistan. Available at [http://media.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/politics/documents/Assessment\\_Redacted\\_092109.pdf](http://media.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/politics/documents/Assessment_Redacted_092109.pdf).

<sup>41</sup> Michael Semple, *Reconciliation in Afghanistan*, United States Institute of Peace Press, 2009, p. 89.

<sup>42</sup> William R. Polk, “An Open Letter to President Obama.” *The Nation*, 19 October 2009. <http://www.thenation.com/doc/20091019/polk>.

<sup>43</sup> Thomas Ruttig, *The Other Side. Dimensions of the Afghan Insurgency: Causes, Actors and Approaches to ‘Talks’*, Afghanistan Analysts Network, July 2009, p. 25. <http://www.aan-afghanistan.org/uploads/200907%20AAN%20Report%20Ruttig%20-%20The%20Other%20Side.PDF>.

engagement with all Afghan communities, including the Pashtun and therefore representatives of the Taliban, around a new political project.”<sup>44</sup> At a time when the insurgency continues to be strong, simple surrender is unlikely to be a compelling option for very many of them. Cooption programs are essentially designed to support the military objectives of defeating the Taliban rather than establishing, and inviting them into, an inclusive political order. Furthermore, cooption or amnesty efforts have produced relatively few converts.

#### 4.3. Exploring Diplomatic Approaches

Political accommodation must ultimately be Afghan-determined, but not necessarily led by the Afghan Government. During the 2009 election campaign, for example, candidate Gul Agha Shirzai suggested engagement with Taliban elements could be done effectively through tribal leaders. “We have capable people who are patriotic, who can work on this and persuade the Taliban to come to talk.”<sup>45</sup> Engagement with insurgents to end the war is a difficult process of reaching out to those not necessarily interested in being reached, but analysts remind us that Afghan Taliban are in fact deeply embedded in Afghan society through family, tribal, political and other links.<sup>46</sup> They have a keen stake in the future of Afghanistan, and their integration into Afghan society means that “talking to the Taliban,” means also talking to traditional tribal leaders and communities to which they are linked.

The details or outcomes of any diplomatic process are certainly not ours to determine. Our purpose is to make the case for getting a process started, and to offer at least a few examples of the kinds of initiatives and approaches that lend credibility and urgency to the call for a diplomatic surge in and with Afghanistan.

The British writer on the Middle East, Patrick Seale, proposes “a dose of political shock therapy...in a bold attempt at a political settlement,” and envisions the US establishing a regional contact group “tasked with summoning a *loya jirga* in which all sides of the Afghan conflict – President Hamid Karzai, his Taliban and other opponents, as well as regional and tribal dignitaries – would be represented.”<sup>47</sup> The Afghan *loya jirga* would pursue an immediate ceasefire, he says, followed by negotiations toward a broader settlement and a decentralized form of government suited to Afghanistan’s regional and ethnic diversity. Some observers call for the convening of a Bonn II conference – one that involves the UN, key

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<sup>44</sup> Carlotta Gall, “As US Weighs Taliban Negotiations, Afghans Are Already Talking,” *New York Times*, 11 March 2009. <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/03/11/world/asia/11taliban.html>.

<sup>45</sup> Carlotta Gall, “As US Weighs Taliban Negotiations, Afghans Are Already Talking,” *New York Times*, 11 March 2009. <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/03/11/world/asia/11taliban.html>.

<sup>46</sup> Thomas Ruttig, *The Other Side. Dimensions of the Afghan Insurgency: Causes, Actors and Approaches to ‘Talks’*, Afghanistan Analysts Network, July 2009, p. 31. <http://www.aan-afghanistan.org/uploads/200907%20AAN%20Report%20Ruttig%20-%20The%20Other%20Side.PDF>.

<sup>47</sup> Patrick Seale, “Finding an Exit from the Afghan Trap,” *Agence Global*, 23 October 2009. <http://www.agenceglobal.com/article.asp?id=2168>.



world powers, front-line states, and all the key Afghan stakeholders<sup>48</sup> in order to pursue a new comprehensive peace agreement.

Another example comes from a group of Taliban leaders, who had “reconciled” with the government and settled in Kabul but maintained links with other Taliban senior leadership. In 2008 they put forward a 7-point program that they said had been tested with the top Taliban leadership. They envisioned a staged process: 1) the Afghan government convinces the international community that the war cannot be won militarily; 2) begin contacts between the involved parties, focusing on confidence-building measures such as agreements to end attacks on civilian infrastructure, the release of some Taliban prisoners, and for all operations of international forces to be approved by the Afghan government (including house searches, arrests, etc); 3) a *jirga* to work out a peace plan; 4) UN and Islamic Conference support for round table talks with appropriate security guarantees for the Taliban participants; 5) the de-blacklisting of insurgent leaders and agreement on a ceasefire; 6) establish a commission to organize a *Loya Jirga*; 7) the *Loya Jirga* acts on decisions reached in the roundtables and ends the war.<sup>49</sup>

The current fighting stalemate and the deteriorating security conditions make the pursuit of a political settlement a matter of some urgency. While the outcome cannot be predicted, in any diplomatic initiative negotiators can expect that Afghans will overwhelmingly welcome sustained efforts to end the war through negotiation. However, they are unlikely to support elite efforts to cut deals that will compromise the rights they gained in the new, post-Taliban constitution.

## 5. Recommendations

In counseling Canadian promotion of Afghan reconciliation efforts, we affirm the fundamental principle that reconciliation, both at the sub-state level and in pursuit of a high-level political settlement, be Afghan-owned and led. But we do not assume Afghan-led to mean led by the Government of Afghanistan. The Afghan Government and its supporting international forces have been drawn into an entrenched civil war. The Government of Afghanistan must therefore be part of reconciliation efforts, but not the manager or custodian of the process. Part of the responsibility of the international community is to work with Afghans in and beyond the government to develop a trusted process through which reconciliation and negotiation efforts can begin.

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<sup>48</sup> Robert Dreyfuss, “How to Get Out,” *The Nation*, 21 October 2009. <http://www.thenation.com/doc/20091109/dreyfuss>.

<sup>49</sup> Thomas Ruttig, *The Other Side. Dimensions of the Afghan Insurgency: Causes, Actors and Approaches to ‘Talks’*, Afghanistan Analysts Network, July 2009, p. 28. <http://www.aan-afghanistan.org/uploads/200907%20AAN%20Report%20Ruttig%20-%20The%20Other%20Side.PDF>.



*In general we therefore:*

1. Welcome the coming shift in the Canadian mission away from its current military-centric focus; and,
2. Encourage ongoing economic support for Afghanistan as fundamental to human security and to support reconciliation and negotiation processes.

*In support of reconciliation efforts at the sub-state levels, we note that:*

3. There is a growing consensus that civilian protection is a key priority for the UN and NATO missions in Afghanistan. The churches affirm this consensus and urge Canadian policy makers to establish human security, rather than anti-terrorism and national security, as a foundational objective for our work in Afghanistan.
4. Up to and following 2011, under an ongoing reconciliation priority, Canada should support outreach, research and pilot projects that are part of, and designed to support, the dynamic development of new local reconciliation efforts. This will include appropriate dialogue with the Government of Afghanistan, collaboration with organizations with a demonstrated Afghan record of support for local governance and peacebuilding activity, and openness to work with traditional and informal authorities at local and district levels.
5. The Independent Directorate of Local Governance is struggling to develop inclusivity and responsiveness in reconciliation programming. As part of its efforts under the reconciliation priority, Canada can urge resolution of the documented concerns about the IDLG.

*In support of Diplomacy and Political Settlements, we note that:*

It is not for churches in Canada to prescribe either processes or outcomes for efforts toward a national political settlement in Afghanistan. Nevertheless, it is our urgent plea that diplomatic efforts be undertaken to ensure that processes are in fact developed and that they provide for the kind of inclusive dialogue and negotiation needed to deliver genuine and lasting benefits to the people of Afghanistan:

6. We especially call for a Canadian diplomatic surge to persuade the international community to encourage and support Afghans in intensified and persistent dialogue or engagement efforts toward a sustainable political settlement.
7. We also encourage the Government of Canada to appoint a special envoy on Afghanistan, with a mandate to pursue new diplomatic efforts toward a political settlement to end the war.

In short, we encourage Canada to mount a peace mission and to accord it the same level of political energy and commitment, along with requisite material support, as has been accorded the military mission to date.