

An Afghan Futures Report

By D3 and ACSOR-Surveys



Afghan Attitudes towards Negotiations and Reconciliation with the Taliban

For nearly a decade, the Afghan government and the international community have been attempting to end the country's long-running conflict through a peace agreement with the Taliban. These efforts have met with little success: violence continues and, despite meetings between Taliban and Afghan government representatives in Pakistan and China in 2015,¹ a negotiated settlement remains far off.² Despite frustration with the Afghan government, the Taliban remain unpopular with the Afghan people and, while willingness still exists to make concessions in exchange for a peace agreement, support for such concessions has been steadily falling.

Taliban Seen as Less Moderate as They Gain Strength

For the first time in the Afghan Futures Survey series, a majority of Afghans feel that the Taliban are gaining in strength: the 2015 survey found that 52 percent believe the Taliban have gained strength over the past 12 months, 23 percent feel they have grown weaker, and 24 percent think their strength level has stayed the same. This represents a noticeable increase from the November 2014 survey, when only 34 percent perceived the Taliban to have gained in strength over the previous 12 months.

It is not difficult to see why most Afghans believe the Taliban have been growing stronger: 2015 has seen the worst civilian and ANDSF casualties in Afghanistan since the international intervention in 2001, and the Taliban have gained control of territory in the Northern provinces where they previously had relatively little presence. The Afghan military and police had difficulty holding on to rural district centers during the summer fighting season, and October 2015 saw the Taliban's greatest success since their fall from power in 2001: the capture of Kunduz. The ANDSF was able to regain control of the city with NATO air and ground support after several days, but the speed with which the city fell, the difficulty that the ANDSF had in taking it back, and the Taliban's coordination of simultaneous attacks and road blockages in neighboring provinces,

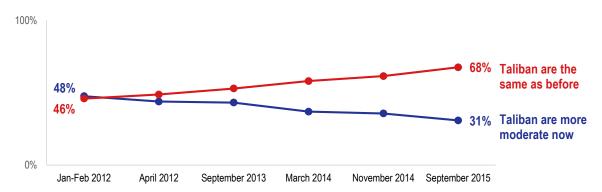
¹ Khan, Ismail. "Afghanistan and Taliban to Hold Second Round of Talks, Pakistani Officials Say." *The New York Times*, July 28, 2015. Accessed October 28, 2015.

 $http://www.nytimes.com/2015/07/29/world/asia/afghanistan-and-taliban-to-hold-second-round-of-talks-pakistani-officials-say.html?_r=0.$

² Winterbotham, Emily. "Afghanistan's Peace Process: A Long Road Ahead." *The Diplomat,* July 20, 2015. Accessed October 30, 2015. http://thediplomat.com/2015/07/afghanistans-peace-process-a-long-road-ahead/.

showed a high level of skill and sophistication, which delayed ANDSF reinforcement and resupply.³ Although this event happened after the conclusion of the 2015 Afghan Futures fieldwork, the stage had been set long before and the dynamics that led to it were well in progress: the Taliban had spent the previous six months of the summer fighting season securing a foothold in the rural districts around the city, largely surrounding it.⁴

Afghans have become less likely to perceive the Taliban as more moderate.



As the Taliban gain in strength, Afghans are less likely to see them as more moderate: 31 percent of respondents expressed this view in 2015, down from 36 percent who felt this way in November 2014, and down sharply from the 48 percent who believed the Taliban were becoming more moderate in 2012. It may be that as the Taliban make territorial gains and more Afghans are able to see their presence and actions firsthand, the actions of its fighters make it more difficult for Afghans to believe that it has become more moderate. The decentralized Taliban command structure in the absence of Mullah Omar's authority may be allowing younger, more radical junior commanders to undertake extreme and violent actions that alienate a population which might otherwise be sympathetic, or at least willing to compromise, and make concessions to bring the long decades of war to an end. Also, a more successful, resurgent Taliban may see less incentive to moderate itself in order to gain public support when they have achieved more through offensive action.

³ Rubin, Alissa J. "Afghan Forces Rally in Kunduz, but Fight Is Far From Decided." *The New York Times*, October 1, 2015. Accessed October 28, 2015. http://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/02/world/asia/kunduz-taliban-afghanistan.html.

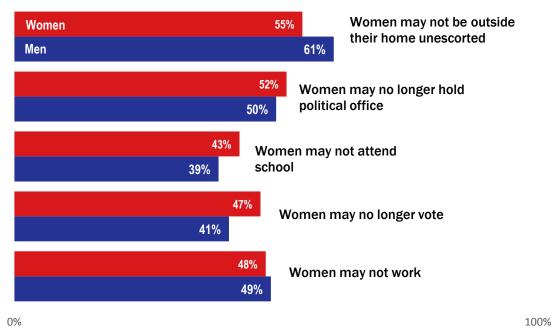
⁴ Ali, Obaid. "The 2015 Insurgency in the North (3): The fall and recapture of Kunduz." www.Afghan Analysts.org. October 16, 2015. Accessed November 1, 2015. https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/the-2015-insurgency-in-the-north-3-the-fall-and-recapture-of-kunduz/.

Fewer Afghans are Willing to Make Concessions to Taliban

Although the Taliban are seen as becoming stronger, attitudes against them appear to be hardening and fewer Afghans indicate that they are willing to make concessions for a peace agreement. While most Afghans remain willing to make concessions to the Taliban in exchange for peace, support for concessions in exchange for an end to fighting has fallen from the highs found in September 2013, and for the most part remains at levels similar to what they were in late 2014.

Respondents were asked about their willingness to accept various limitations on women's rights in exchange for a peace agreement with the Taliban. The percentage who would be "very" or "somewhat" willing to accept a peace agreement between the government and Taliban under which women were not allowed outside of their homes unescorted has fallen from 65 percent in late 2014 to 58 percent in fall 2015. Support for an agreement under which women are not allowed to attend school fell to 41 percent in the 2015 Survey, down from 46 percent in November 2014, and down further from 53 percent in September 2013.

Women are more likely than men to accept certain limitations on their rights in exchange for a peace agreement with the Taliban. There were also noticeable differences in the share of the population that would be willing to accept an agreement under which:

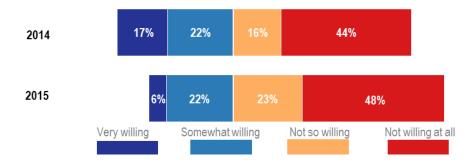


Women remain more willing than men to accept some limitations on their rights in exchange for a peace settlement with the Taliban: women were slightly more willing than men to accept an agreement under which they would not be allowed to attend school or vote, while men were more willing to accept an agreement under which women would not be allowed to leave their home unescorted. Support for an agreement under which women would not be allowed to leave their home was highest overall, while support for an agreement under which women could not attend school was lowest.

Willingness to make other concessions to the Taliban has been falling since the early waves of the Afghan Futures survey series: as of September 2015, 67 percent of Afghans support allowing the Taliban to hold political office if they agree to stop fighting, down from a high of 75 percent in 2012. Support for allowing the Taliban to join the ANDSF as part of a negotiated peace agreement has fallen sharply, from 59 percent in late 2014 to 45 percent in September 2015, with a majority now unwilling to make this concession (53% "not so willing" or "not willing at all"). Support for such concessions varies widely among the country's major ethnic groups: among the country's four largest ethnic groups, Pashtuns are most likely to support negotiating a settlement that allows the Taliban to hold political office (73%), while Tajiks (65%), Hazaras (57%), and Uzbeks (56%) are less likely to support such an agreement.

Support for ceding control over certain provinces to the Taliban has also fallen: only 28 percent would now be "very" or "somewhat" willing to make such a concession, compared with 39 percent who were willing in November 2014. Seventy-one percent are less willing, with 48 percent not being willing at all. Willingness to allow the Taliban to hold political office as part of a peace deal remains higher, with 67 percent feeling that the government should negotiate an agreement in which they are allowed to hold office, though support for this has fallen from a high of 75 percent in April 2012.

Willingness to cede control over certain provinces to the Taliban has dropped.



Afghans Continue to Prefer Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (GIRoA) to Taliban

Although support for the government has fallen somewhat, Afghans continue to prefer that the country be ruled by the current government rather than the Taliban: 86 percent prefer the government to the Taliban, down from 92 percent in the 2014 Survey. There has been a small rise in preference for Taliban rule, which now sits at 6 percent, up from 4 percent at the end of

2014, but the basic fact that the vast majority of the Afghan people prefer the current government over a return of the Taliban has not changed.

While the Taliban's battlefield gains and leadership transition do not appear to have secured them much public support, they also do not seem to be bringing a negotiated peace any closer. Previous surveys in the Afghan Futures series have also revealed a dynamic in which the majority of the Afghan public is growing less willing to make concessions to the Taliban in exchange for a peace agreement. This may reflect frustration with the peace process, but it may also be an indication that these trends are creating a dynamic whereas the Taliban gains territory and inflicts everhigher casualties, the Afghan public will become less willing to negotiate with them or to support government efforts to reach a settlement. Neither a negotiated settlement nor an outright victory by either side appears likely in the short or medium term, and Afghanistan's long conflict seems likely to continue for many years to come.

Methodology

Afghan Futures is self-funded by the Afghan Center for Socio-Economic and Opinion Research (ACSOR-Surveys), a D3 Systems, Inc. subsidiary. Results are based on in-person interviews conducted in Dari and Pashto among a random national sample of 2,066 Afghan adults from September 15-20, 2015. For more information please see the full methodology report at www.d3systems.com.