



Heart of Asia Society

د آسیا زره ټولنه - جامعه قلب آسیا

TALIBAN PRISONER RELEASE AND REINTEGRATION: A PILOT STUDY

Fabrizio Foschini, PhD
Senior Research Fellow, Heart of Asia Society

Charlotte Maxwell-Jones, PhD
Research Director, Heart of Asia Society

Heart of Asia Society
March 2021

For more information on this publication visit www.heartofasiasociety.org

**Published by the Heart of Asia Society (HAS)
Kabul, AFGHANISTAN**

Copyright 2021 Heart of Asia Society Organization

Limited Print and Electronic Distribution Rights

This document and any trademark(s) contained herein are protected by law. This representation of HAS intellectual property is provided for research, academic and noncommercial use only. Unauthorized posting of this publication online is prohibited. Permission is given to duplicate this document for personal use only, as long as it is unaltered and complete. Permission is required from HAS to reproduce, or reuse in another form, any of its research, dialogue or other documents for commercial use. For information on reprint and other permissions, please email info@heartofasiasociety.org.

HAS's publications do not necessarily reflect the opinions of its partners, clients, or sponsors.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	1
INTRODUCTION	2
OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGY	3
BACKGROUND TO THE PRISONER EXCHANGE	5
SOCIOECONOMIC PROFILE OF RELEASED PRISONERS	5
PLACES OF ORIGIN AND THEIR CONFLICT HISTORY	5
AGE AT DETENTION AND TIME SPENT IN JAIL	6
EDUCATION, PROFESSION, FAMILY STATUS	7
CURRENT SITUATION AND FUTURE PLANS	7
PRESENT WHEREABOUTS OF THE PRISONERS	7
ASSISTANCE RECEIVED AND ECONOMIC SITUATION	8
PRISONERS' ATTITUDES TOWARDS THE TALIBAN AND THE GOVERNMENT AFTER RELEASE	10
INSTRUCTIONS BY THE TALIBAN AND PLANS FOR THE FUTURE	12
OPINIONS ON THE PEACE PROCESS	15
THE DOHA AGREEMENT	15
THE AFGHAN PEACE NEGOTIATIONS	16
DEMOBILIZATION AND RECONCILIATION	18
CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS	20

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This paper presents the findings of a pilot study conducted by the Heart of Asia Society investigating aspects of the social and economic reintegration of the Taliban prisoners released in the spring and summer of 2020. In-depth interviews with a sample of 37 released prisoners provide a glimpse of some of the economic, social, and political challenges encountered and will guide a further scaled-up study to be conducted in the coming months. The 5000+ Taliban prisoners released by the Afghan Government represent the first instance of large-scale prisoner release in the past two decades, albeit agreed to for the purpose of facilitating the start of the Afghan Peace Negotiations (APN). Exploring the resources and risks they have encountered provides insight into the potential challenges of more comprehensive efforts at prisoner exchange.

The sample, too small to provide statistically meaningful results, nevertheless provides insight into released prisoners from throughout the country, primarily the South, and from a range of education and economic backgrounds. Interviewees were imprisoned anywhere from several to a dozen years and were arrested at a wide range of ages, including some arrested while they were under 18. Due to sampling methods, all interviewees contacted in this study were, at the time of the interview, staying at home, away from the battlefield, purportedly at the instruction of the Taliban, given directly or through intermediaries. About a third claimed they were not and had never been affiliated with the Taliban. Of those who openly were, most were willing to return to the field if asked. About half of those questioned lived in Taliban-controlled areas at the time of interview, half in Government-controlled areas, with the latter more frequently reporting harassment and feeling unsafe.

Most prisoners received some form of monetary compensation from the Afghan Government at the time of release, and many reported receiving support in money or goods during imprisonment, with some reporting Taliban support for their families, though this was largely mentioned as a form of support more likely to occur with higher ranking inmates. Beyond the disbursement of a lump sum upon release to a significant portion of prisoners, no standard system for Taliban assistance during or following prison terms could be discerned. Many prisoners self-reported poor economic circumstances for themselves and their families, including not only the loss of wages but loss of land while they were in prison. Released prisoners reported poor treatment in prison and, a common complaint, lack of medical care, resulting in what many of them spoke of as chronic medical issues at the time of contact.

Overall, most of the released prisoners interviewed in this pilot study support the US-Taliban agreement and the ongoing talks in Doha, with a number of justifications presented, some harkening back to early Islamic parallels. Interviewees criticized not only the Afghan Government, but also the Taliban, typically for perceived lack of assistance or support during or following imprisonment, and only occasionally for their negotiations with the US or the Afghan Government. Most interviewed stated some openness to amnesty for Afghan Government forces following a peace deal, with the noted exception of the Afghan Local Police (ALP). Many interviewees cited issues of personal enmity, corruption, and abusive behavior among the ALP and singled them out as a group that would pose a danger to peace at the community level.

Of particular concern are the younger demographic of prisoners, those who were arrested when young and spent much of their coming-of-age in prison, leaving them without the social and economic skills to survive as non-combatants. Among preliminary recommendations that can be made from this small sample size would be focused attention on the psychosocial welfare of this younger demographic.

INTRODUCTION

As the Afghan Peace Negotiations proceed haltingly, the fate of thousands of armed opposition fighters and Government security forces, including those belonging to the less institutionalized units, hangs in the balance. What will become of them once the need to disarm, de-mobilize, and/or integrate these forces clashes with continued personal enmity, reduced economic opportunities, and less international monitoring? Prisoners of war, both of the Taliban and of the Afghan Government, are particularly vulnerable to social and economic hardship. The Heart of Asia Society has conducted a pilot study to investigate issues related to the social and economic reintegration of released prisoners. This pilot project, testing both the accessibility of key informants and their willingness to discuss the issues at hand, will lead to a geographically broader study aimed at actionable recommendations to prevent the mutual prisoner release from becoming a source of new conflicts and violence.

OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGY

Spring and summer of 2020 saw the largest mutual release of prisoners in the recent history of the Afghan conflict, when more than 5000 Taliban prisoners were exchanged for over 1000 Government forces and civil servants captured by the Taliban.¹ This prisoner release has largely been seen through the lens of the peace process, for which it served as one of the key preliminary steps. Some stakeholders in the international community considered the release an enabler in bringing the Taliban to the table and allowing negotiations with the Afghan Government to start. During the six-month period of release arrangements, many observers overlooked that it also constituted an important phenomenon in its own right: a numerically sizeable and politically highlighted early instance of amnesty and attempted reintegration of former fighters into Afghan society – the sort of process that Afghanistan will potentially witness on a larger scale in the wake of a peace agreement.

The primary attention the process itself has received, especially inside Afghanistan, is linked to concerns of the Afghan Government and the public that the mass release of Taliban prisoners could negatively impact the security situation. In particular, the process has been criticized for the lack of transparency regarding who was released and guarantees sought by the Afghan Government and civil society that they would not go back to the battlefield. A Presidential decree on the prisoner release issued on March 10, 2020² stated that: biometric data of all prisoners were being taken; the prisoners would have to sign a written commitment not to return to the battlefield; and the age, health conditions and remaining prison term would be used as criteria for selection. The legality of whether or not these prisoners return to fighting is on shaky ground, because the US-Taliban agreement of February 29, 2020 that made provisions for this prisoner exchange did not mandate that they become non-combatants, and promises they may have signed, as per the presidential mandate, would be under an authority that these prisoners may not recognize as legitimate.³

Despite attempts at transparency, little information on the number and rank of the released prisoners has been made available, and public concerns remain about the profile of the prisoners that were released and where they could fit in Afghan society once out of jail. This

¹ The Taliban provided a list with 5000 names of prisoners to be freed; however, this was initially rejected by the Government, which freed prisoners according to its own criteria. Matters came to a head when the Government announced having released the full 5000, but the Taliban urged the release of another 400 who were present in their list. This request was accepted after a long impasse, so the total of prisoners who have been exited from Government jails far exceed the original 5000. While the Taliban freed approximately 1000 prisoners they had held, the Afghan Government has argued that half of these so-called prisoners were civilians and were not on the list they had given to the Taliban. From a statement by National Security Council Spokesman Javid Faisal. <https://8am.af/national-security-council-the-taliban-have-not-released-government-prisoners-according-to-the-list/>

report gives the results of a pilot project aimed at bridging the gap in knowledge about the release of Taliban prisoners by looking at the first major instance of return to civilian life (for those abiding by the terms of the agreement with the Afghan Government) of former combatants. How the release has been effected and the success of reintegration attempts will determine the political and social value of the process, beyond its significance for the peace negotiations.

This paper evaluates:

- the potential impact of the release process on local communities in terms of political balance and conflict management at the micro-level;
- its grassroots influence on the national peace process, as a way to appease disenfranchised individuals, families, and communities; and
- the need for assistance programs aimed at economic, health, psychosocial, and vocational support for ex-prisoners.

A limited sample of 37 released prisoners was interviewed using structured questionnaires composed of open and closed questions. Interviewees were identified using local networks of journalists, civil society, and local leadership contacts known to the research team. Because of the sampling methodology and limitations in accessing released prisoners, the sample studied included only prisoners still residing at home, not those who had returned to the battlefield. Interviews were conducted over the phone by a team of Afghan researchers in August and September 2020. The project originally meant to approach ex-prisoners from selected districts across the country, however, because the interviews occurred shortly after the prisoners' release and, due to time constraints and the difficulties in contacting prospective interviewees, it was not always possible to reach subjects from the chosen districts,⁴ so the respondents' geographical background is more varied than originally devised. As a potential follow-up to this pilot study, it could be useful to select some areas for which this project provides clusters of interviews, such as in Farah, Herat, Helmand, or Kandahar and assess the situation and perspectives of the interviewees in the broader context of their home communities and after more time has passed since their release.

This report provides the basic social background of the released prisoners and explores their current situation and the types of cultural, economic, security, and political challenges they face for successful reintegration in society. Analysis of in-depth interviews offers insights about their perspectives on society and politics and can help determine the future role they are likely to play at local and national levels. The former prisoners could become key influencers for whole communities, in positive or negative terms, with respect to their attitudes towards the peace process and the prospects of reconciliation and future stability at local and national levels.

² Various sections of the decree have been made public on Twitter by the Presidential Spokesman: <https://twitter.com/SediqSediqi/status/1237458170815098891>

³ A *Foreign Policy* article citing portions of an unpublished report by Michael Semple and Felix Kuehn claimed that the majority of freed Taliban prisoners returned to fighting. This reflects an interpretation of the report, which detailed a sample size of 108 prisoners, and is not statistically meaningful in a population of over 5000. Because this Heart of Asia Society study was not able to read the original report by Semple and Kuehn, it does not incorporate this interpretation of their findings but notes its appearance in the public discourse. Lynne O'Donnell, "Defying Peace Deal, Freed Taliban Return to the Battlefield," *Foreign Policy*, September 3, 2020. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/09/03/defying-peace-deal-freed-taliban-prisoners-return-battlefield-afghanistan/>; see also the full text of the public portion of the US-Taliban agreement at <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Agreement-For-Bringing-Peace-to-Afghanistan-02.29.20.pdf>.

⁴ A bias to be considered when analyzing the sample is that the interviewees were able to contact mostly those prisoners who did not rejoin the fighting and did return to their districts of origin to stay at their family home.

BACKGROUND TO THE PRISONER EXCHANGE

After a negotiating process that lasted more than 18 months, the US Government and the Taliban signed an agreement aimed at cessation of hostilities in Doha on February 29, 2020.⁵ The agreement provided for a phased withdrawal of foreign troops over 14 months and for the removal of the Taliban from the United Nations and US sanctions lists, conditional upon Taliban compliance with a number of conditions. These include their commitment to counter-terrorism policing to prevent international Jihadi groups from operating within and from Afghanistan and engaging in peace negotiations with the Afghan Government which would include in their agenda a permanent ceasefire and a political roadmap to peace before the withdrawal is completed. The release of up to 5,000 Taliban and up to 1,000 Government prisoners featured prominently among the main points of the agreement and was understood by the Taliban to be a pre-condition necessary to the start of negotiations with the Government. Initially to be undertaken by the start of the APN on March 10, the process was delayed, and eventually completed in September 2020.⁶

From the beginning, the Afghan Government expressed dissatisfaction with the inclusion of prisoner release in the US-Taliban agreement without its direct participation and tried to set its own terms for the release of prisoners, announcing the criteria of age, health, and remaining prison sentence, which did not completely correspond to the list prepared by the Taliban. Moreover, it initially announced that only 1500 prisoners would be released prior to the start of negotiations, and asked the Taliban to commit to a ceasefire or at least to a reduction of violence in order for the gradual release of the remaining 3500 to continue.⁷ After a long stalemate on the issue, a major breakthrough happened only after the Taliban declared a temporary ceasefire over Eid al-Fitr 1441/1399 (May 23-26, 2020). In the following weeks, the process gathered momentum and the Government released the bulk of the prisoners. After mid-June, however, the Government again slowed the pace of prisoner release, accusing the Taliban of increasing attacks and not freeing a comparable number of Government prisoners.

The Afghan Government was under pressure by civil society groups, concerned both that the release could lead to increased levels of violence and also that many perpetrators of war crimes could escape their sentences. In particular, the release of a last batch of 400 high-profile prisoners accused of major crimes proved controversial, and objections were raised by some international partners. However, after a Loya Jirga on August 9-10, 2020 was convened and decided to release prisoners, the Government accepted the decision and proceeded with the release.⁸

5 "Afghan conflict: US and Taliban sign deal to end 18-year war," *BBC News*, February 29, 2020. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-51689443>; "U.S. Signs Peace Deal With Taliban After Nearly 2 Decades Of War In Afghanistan," *National Public Radio*, February 29, 2020. <https://www.npr.org/2020/02/29/810537586/u-s-signs-peace-deal-with-taliban-after-nearly-2-decades-of-war-in-afghanistan?t=1610032554284>.

6 Mujib Mashal and Fatima Faizi, "Afghan Peace Talks Set to Begin as Prisoner Swap Is Nearly Done," *New York Times*, September 3, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/03/world/asia/afghanistan-taliban-prisoners.html>

7 Ehsan Qaane, "Taliban Prisoners Release: Are the latest proposals legal?" *Afghan Analysts Network*, March 15, 2020. <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/reports/war-and-peace/taliban-prisoners-release-are-the-latest-proposals-legal/>

8 "Loya Jirga Approves Release of 400 Taliban Prisoners," *TOLU News*, August 9, 2020. Concerns about the prisoner release were also raised by the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission in March and July of 2020. See "Letter to the U.S. , Taliban and the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan," March 2, 2020 and, "Prisoner Release and Human Rights: Need for Clarity and Consistency from all Parties," July 18, 2020, <https://www.aihrc.org.af/home/press-release/8933>. Among other concerns, AIHRC has stressed the rights of families to independently pursue charges against those released.

Among the Government's concerns, one took precedent: prisoners were seen as a rare asset that forced the Taliban to talk to the Afghan Government – for the first time an official Taliban delegation visited Kabul to discuss the issue – something they had consistently refused in the past. Their release risked depriving Kabul of its only leverage over the Taliban, when the Government had not yet brought the Taliban firmly to the negotiating table.

On the Taliban side, the release of these so-called “political prisoners” had been one of their consistent requests since the first attempts at negotiation. They presented it as a success reaped from their agreement with the US, but downplayed any independent role of the Afghan Government in the exchange of prisoners. Despite this, the Taliban agreed to meet the Government in what was to be the start of the Afghan Peace Negotiations as soon as the last six high-profile Taliban prisoners were flown to Doha, to be put under house arrest there.⁹ By then, reports about the return of a sizeable number of the released prisoners to the frontline had already become more than anecdotal.¹⁰

SOCIOECONOMIC PROFILE OF RELEASED PRISONERS

Places of origin and their conflict history

Interviewees were from a range of Afghan provinces: 6 from Helmand, 5 from Kandahar; 1 from Zabul, 6 from Farah, 3 from Herat, 4 from Maidan Wardak, 3 from Ghazni, 1 from Kabul, 3 from Nangarhar, 1 from Laghman, 1 from Paktia, 1 from Paktika, 1 from Khost, and 1 from Faryab. The geographic distribution partially reflects that of the prisoners released during the exchange: their provinces of origin represent the 14 provinces from which most of the prisoners included in the list of 5000 prepared by the Taliban came. The provincial break-down of the list prepared by the Taliban features significantly high percentages of prisoners from the southern and southwestern provinces of Kandahar, Helmand, Farah, and from highly-populated provinces such as Nangarhar. Comparatively few prisoners come from the northern provinces of Afghanistan; the list reflects the Taliban movement of nearly a decade ago, when their presence and recruitment in the North was less active than today.¹¹

The South of Afghanistan, where the Taliban movement first originated in the 1990s, was among the first parts of the country to witness a resurgence of armed opposition after 2001 and logically accounts for the majority of the Taliban prisoners in Government jails and thus of those released. Parts of Kandahar, Helmand, and Zabul, where the core leadership of the movement are from, have been for long periods under the control of the Taliban, and this has contributed to the strength of the Taliban networks in this area and has facilitated adhesion to the militancy by many younger recruits.¹²

⁹ Hamid Shalizi and Abdul Qadir Sediqi, “Prisoners sought by Taliban on flight to Doha, peace talks this weekend,” *Reuters*, September 10, 2020. <https://www.reuters.com/article/afghanistan-taliban-talks/prisoners-sought-by-taliban-on-flight-to-doha-sources-say-paving-way-for-peace-talks-idINKBN2612G8?edition-redirect=in>

¹⁰ Lynne O'Donnell, “Defying Peace Deal, Freed Taliban Return to the Battlefield,” *Foreign Policy*, September 3, 2020. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/09/03/defying-peace-deal-freed-taliban-prisoners-return-battlefield-afghanistan/>

¹¹ The criteria employed by the Taliban to prepare the list of prisoners have not been officially disclosed; an Afghan analyst who has been in communication with Taliban middle-ranking leaders during the process told Heart of Asia researchers that the Taliban provincial fronts have been asked to send their candidate names to the core leadership, and that relevant factors included time spent in jail, strategic importance, the military record of single prisoners, and their connection to the leadership.

¹² Carl Forsberg, *The Taliban's Campaign for Kandahar, Afghanistan Report 3*, Institute for the Study of War, November, 2009. http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/The_Talibans_Campaign_For_Kandahar.pdf



The West presents a more varied history of conflict. Farah province saw an early spillover of Taliban activity from neighboring Helmand and easy gains in terms of territorial control due to its remoteness and isolation; currently, only a handful of town centers are held by the Government.¹³ Herat province presents a highly varied scenario; Shindand district, for example, has for a long time been the only major foothold for the Taliban in the province, but even then, the reason locals side with the Taliban has roots in local family feuds and competition for power in the Herat arena, not necessarily ideology.

Central areas of Afghanistan, in particular, parts of Maidan Wardak and Ghazni provinces, have also been Taliban territory from an early stage of the conflict. Conflict in the East and South-East has been influenced disproportionately by the frontier with Pakistan. The two regions have developed their peculiar Taliban political networks, co-opted by the core Kandahari leadership into the movement. In particular the most prominent faction among those from the South-East, the Haqqani network, has come to play a pivotal role in Taliban expansion to other areas of Afghanistan as well as in the movement's national and international politics.¹⁴ The activities and propaganda of ISK in the East – an area already influenced by some very radical strains of Salafi preaching – has added a new layer to the conflict there.

Progress made by the Taliban in the northern regions of Afghanistan, in terms of military activities and also taking control of large swaths of territory thanks to increasing support among disenfranchised communities, has considerably broadened the ethnic base of the movement, previously made up almost solely of Pashtuns.¹⁵ Despite the fact that by now a significant number of Taliban fighters come from a different ethnic background, Pashtuns still represent the bulk of the movement and its leadership. All former prisoners interviewed for this project were interviewed in Pashto.

Age at detention and time spent in jail

Respondents were between 19 and 75 years of age, with a mean of 31, relatively evenly split in three age groups: under 25 (10 respondents); between 25-35 (17 respondents) and over 35 (10 respondents). The mean age at the time of arrest is 25 years. With a few outliers in their forties and a very senior man in his seventies, half of the respondents had been jailed by the time they had turned 21. In particular, three interviewees were arrested when still underage. Two of them claimed to have had no contact with the Taliban at the time of arrest. One, who spent over five years in jail, stated he gave a false confession under torture. The other, who was underage when detained and spent almost a decade in jail, hinted at having joined the Taliban while in prison. On average, prisoners spent 6 years in jail, with terms ranging from a minimum of 2 to a maximum of 12 years. Those who spent more than a few years in jail were transferred to various prisons in Afghanistan, usually serving the first part of their terms in provincial prisons before being moved to more central jails like Pul-e Charkhi and Bagram.

13 Thomas Ruttig, "Why Farah? A short history of the local insurgency (II)," *Afghan Analysts Network*, June 7, 2018. <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/reports/war-and-peace/why-farah-a-short-history-of-the-local-insurgency-ii/>

14 Jeffrey A. Dressler, *The Haqqani Network: From Pakistan to Afghanistan*, *Afghanistan Report 6*, Institute for the Study of War, October, 2010. http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Haqqani_Network_0.pdf

15 Antonio Giustozzi and Christoph Reuter, "The Insurgents of the Afghan North," *Afghan Analysts Network*, May 5, 2011. <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/special-reports/the-insurgents-of-the-afghan-north/>

Education, profession, family status

In view of the large number of respondents who were detained at a young age, it is no surprise that many of them gave their occupation at the time of arrest as students. Fourteen of them stated they were full-time students, including one self-identified member of Hezb-e Islami. Another seven were working in addition to their studies. Six respondents were working solely as farmers or in animal husbandry. Three were shopkeepers, two laborers, one a real estate dealer, one an imam and three were either jobless or did not specify.

Ten released prisoners did not complete any schooling. This group includes, predictably, some of the most senior ones, including two with a nomadic background, a community whose members face even more hurdles to education than the average rural Afghan. Most of those who did not study were not completely illiterate, and some have privately read religious books. Although sometimes it was difficult to differentiate between religious studies carried out individually or in an educational institution, one of the respondents studied in a madrasa, without ever attending state schools. Others received a mixed education, in their words coupling “religious and modern education”: they studied at least some grades in state schools before enrolling in a madrasa. Seventeen of the released prisoners attended state schools; of them, eight began high school and two began university.

The marital status of respondents is fairly split, with 19 married and 18 unmarried. A number of prisoners were married hastily upon release or soon plan on marriage, perhaps as a means of solidifying their familial and community connections; four of them had married within one month of being released from prison, and three more were to be married soon. In one case the groom is marrying his long-time betrothed after years spent in jail, but for others, families hastily arranged for their sons to get married as soon as they returned home. Other ex-prisoners said they could not afford the expense of marriage: a respondent from Faryab stated that he had been engaged but could not complete the marriage upon release because of his economic problems, while another from Nangarhar commented on the grim prospect of facing marriage expenses while still having to repay debts of several million Afs that his family incurred during his detention.

CURRENT SITUATION AND FUTURE PLANS

“Those people that had been freed from the prison, they are special people for the Islamic emirate. They are very respected, and they are considered as special mujahidin.”

“The governments in Afghanistan are like this. They need you until you are in their line. When you get disabled or when you die or when you get imprisoned, then they will not care about you.”

~ released prisoners

Present whereabouts of the prisoners

One of the results of the Taliban’s military progress and assertive control of territory in recent years has been to increasingly accentuate the distinction between areas controlled by the Afghan Government or the Taliban. This phenomenon has important consequences for the situation of released prisoners. Of the 37 released prisoners interviewed, 18 were living in Taliban-controlled areas, 17 in areas under the control of the Government, and 2 in contested areas. The majority of the released prisoners interviewed went back to live at their family home in their district of origin, in compliance with their agreement with the Afghan Government and the instructions issued by the Taliban. Some prisoners mentioned

being out of their home district or planning to leave it because of economic reasons such as labor opportunities or seasonal change of residence. Most of the prisoners who mentioned the possibility of work-related changes of residence denied any contact with the Taliban.

A few respondents mentioned relocating with or without their families to areas they deemed safer. A former Taliban commander from Helmand moved with his family to a Taliban-controlled area shortly after his release from jail. He reported it was difficult to live in Government-controlled areas because of the surveillance and recurrent questioning by the National Directorate of Security. A respondent from Farah, who said he was arrested when working as a laborer in the provincial capital and claimed to have joined the Taliban once in prison, moved to rural Farah province soon after his release to avoid the risk of a second arrest and brutal treatment at the hands of the local authorities. Several other ex-prisoners mentioned their desire to move to Taliban-controlled areas or their readiness to do so if their relations with the Government authorities, currently quiet, become tense.

Assistance received and economic situation

At their release, prisoners received limited standard amounts of assistance. The Afghan Government gave each prisoner 5000 Afs, the equivalent of 65 USD, in order to cover travel expenses to their homes. Some prisoners received an additional 8000 Afs by Hezb-e Islami, while the major financial aid to the released prisoners was a sum of supposedly 50,000 Afs provided by the Taliban.¹⁶ Almost half of the prisoners stated they had not received the money promised by the Taliban. Two-thirds of those who had not received the cash handouts denied ever being part of the Taliban.

The Taliban faced problems delivering cash handouts to prisoners in Government-controlled areas, especially to those residing in villages. One respondent from Nangarhar gave this reason for not having yet received the promised aid; another received a phone call and had to go to a mosque in a provincial city to meet the Taliban emissary with the money. A respondent from Helmand said that the assistance was not delivered in a transparent way by the Taliban and that many released prisoners without strong connections inside the movement were dispossessed of their share of assistance in favor of other, more powerful members. This contradicts remarks by other respondents that the Taliban extended periodic assistance to prisoners or their families after assessing their economic situation. Purportedly, only the neediest among them would receive benefits; however, several self-declared Taliban members concurred that the assistance was not made available to everybody. Some commented that the Taliban cannot financially support all prisoners, as they themselves are dependent on economic support from others.

Regarding assistance by the Taliban during detention, there was no standard system in place. Only ten of the respondents had received some form of assistance, either money or medicine forwarded to them in jail or financial support to their families; in many cases the delivery of this support had been sporadic. The family of one militant received regular payments of 5000 Pakistani rupees for the length of his detention, despite being locally prominent and arguably not particularly needy. A young prisoner from Wardak said the Taliban helped his family only two or three times. A respondent from Faryab explained that the Taliban covered expenses for the prisoners' necessities in jail, but would not extend other help to their families, despite the area being very poor. In the South, prisoners reported fixed deliveries of support during religious festivals: Taliban prisoners would receive 3000 Afs for Ramadan and their family a sheep for Eid al-Adha. Two members of Hezb-e

¹⁶ This was most often paid as 100,000 Pakistani Rupees, corresponding to around 47,000 Afs.

Islami reported receiving from the Taliban a sum of around 5000 Afs a single time towards the end of their imprisonment.

Assistance to prisoners inconsistently depended on their level of affiliation to the movement, the assessed economic situation of their families, the personal attention of their unit and front leaders, and the jail in which they were held. Some provincial jails offered a more permissive environment for the Taliban to communicate and support prisoners compared to others (i.e., Helmand and Kandahar compared to Herat). In Bagram, assistance from the outside is reportedly almost absent, either because it was materially difficult or because it was less useful: in most prisons, prisoners purchase and cook their own food, while in Bagram they cannot purchase extra items and are provided food and necessities by the prison authorities.

Financial support by the Taliban was deemed insufficient by many respondents, the exception being those who appeared the most ideologically committed to defending the movement's strategies or who admitted enjoying a reasonably good economic situation at home, or both. Some complained about the use of the Pakistani currency; others deemed the overall assistance received insufficient to cover the expenses incurred by families who had a working-aged member of the household imprisoned for many years. One former prisoner mentioned debts of around 400,000-500,000 Afs accumulated during his almost ten-year term in jail. The debts incurred by another, who rejects links to the Taliban and said he did not get their assistance, amounted to 1 million Afs. Another, a veteran militant who had spent over ten years in prison claimed he spent nearly 2.5 million Afs to bribe the judge to commute his death sentence to a prison term. Altogether, around half of the interviewees claimed they had a weak economic situation. Respondents said that prisoners who spent many years in jail often had to sell their lands and properties or incur debts that are now proving hard to pay back. Some prisoners also complained about the lack of possibility in some jails, in particular Bagram, to carry out paid work (mainly producing handicrafts) in order to support the families back at home.

Another recurring assistance shortage identified by prisoners was the lack of medical attention by all parties involved in their imprisonment. Many complained of being in poor health mentally or physically, which they say was caused by abuse and the poor diet. Several lamented that nobody asked about their health problems and needs after release. Some highlighted the need for psychological assistance, especially for former inmates of Bagram, and the creation of shelters for ex-prisoners and dedicated health centers. Former prisoners living in Taliban-controlled areas in particular said they face a shortage of clinics and health facilities and have difficulty accessing those in Government-controlled areas because of security concerns.

Several prisoners expected that the Government would offer a package of assistance programs to the released prisoners or a monetary grant with which to start a new vocation.¹⁷ Some stated that if they were given the opportunity to work they would return to ordinary life and not rejoin the Taliban. These expectations were more common among those living in Government-controlled areas, but by no means confined to them. A respondent in a Taliban-controlled area advocated for vocational training and shelters to be made available to prisoners, either by the Government or by NGOs. Another ex-prisoner living in Taliban-

¹⁷ A few prisoners mentioned the existence of educational programs, based on what they term "modern studies," in some jails like Kandahar, Pul-e Charkhi and Bagram (when it was managed by the US). Although many interviewees reported that the Taliban prisoners were all busy studying during their detention, a majority participated in self-managed classes or individual study groups on religious subjects and did not avail themselves of the few vocational training programs offered.



controlled Farah, although expressing rather ideological opinions on political issues and deep resentment towards the Government, admitted readiness to accept Government help out of need. Others, however, had no expectations of Government assistance, based on their alleged experience of hostility and abuse at the hands of their jailers or drawing a difference between the current release of prisoners and previous releases that occurred in the past: “Prisoners had also been released in the past, among them there were some people that had been assisted by the Government. I do not think that they will assist the prisoners [now]. The reason they were freed is because they (the Government) were forced to release them.”

Irreconcilable ideological stances and bitterness over the past were common in prisoners who served long prison terms. A respondent from Ghazni rejected any assistance from the Government as too late and stated it was clear to him that the Taliban and the Government consider each other as only enemies.

Prisoners’ attitudes towards the Taliban and the Government after release

Many interviewees claim not to have been part of the Taliban at the time of arrest and to have been detained by mistake or framed by personal enemies.¹⁸ Excluding from this count two members of Hezb-e Islami, almost one-third of the respondents denied involvement with the Taliban prior to their arrest. At least one openly admitted he joined them while in jail, while others referred more ambiguously to such later contacts. A clear connection can be made between reticence to acknowledge affiliation with the Taliban and residence in Government-controlled areas. Of these twelve respondents, only four reside in Taliban-held areas.¹⁹ The others live under Government control or in contested areas, hence a potential reason for their cautiousness. On the other hand, of the twelve respondents living in Government-held areas who acknowledged having been part of the movement when arrested, four distanced themselves from the movement after their release: they said they had not been in touch with their former comrades, would not be ready to go back to battle even if called upon, and in some cases expressed criticism of the Taliban.

Criticism towards the Taliban often comes from disappointment over the lack of assistance to its imprisoned members, leading some to say that the movement is opportunistic and does not care for those members who are not useful to its purposes anymore. An educated ex-prisoner from Kabul claimed to be disillusioned with the Taliban because of their lack of support during detention and to have officially cut all relations with them upon release. In a few cases, instances of corruption among the Taliban ranks were reported. One ex-prisoner from Helmand denounced corrupt practices in the movement, such as the distribution of desert tracts of land in Helmand to rich and powerful members of the movement over poorer and less influential members, or their interference in hiring processes for schools and clinics in their territory, to have clients or relatives hired.

Criticism is much rarer from those prisoners who returned to live in areas under Taliban control. The majority of respondents who acknowledged links to the Taliban expressed

¹⁸ Another criterion reportedly considered by the Taliban leadership when drafting the list of prisoners to be released was the opportunity to free people wrongly accused of being Taliban and hence unjustly imprisoned, per confidential conversation with an Afghan analyst, September 2020. This could be considered a propaganda tool employed by the Taliban to appear to be redressing the wrongdoings of the Government in front of local communities; nonetheless common sympathizers or non-members could have actually been included in the list.

¹⁹ Moreover, one of the four was a drug smuggler, who in his own words, “are like brothers to the Taliban and also come under the category of Taliban cases.”

feelings of belonging to the movement and of loyalty to its leadership. Many of them voiced gratitude to the Taliban leaders for having pursued and achieved their release. Some interviewees displayed strong ideological commitment and obedience to the Taliban movement, espousing Taliban unity and its control of its members. The prisoners' sense of belonging to the Taliban was probably enhanced by public recognition of their services by leadership; one prisoner mentioned that freed prisoners enjoy an exalted status from the Taliban point of view, being considered "special mujahedin."

When it comes to interaction with Government institutions, the majority of the released prisoners stated they would not approach them for help. Even when not ideologically opposed to the idea, those living in Taliban areas stated concerns over risks of moving in Government-controlled areas. One respondent from Helmand stated that he wanted to get an ID card (he claimed that his arrest had been due to failure to produce one at a checkpoint), but that he feared arrest again if he travelled to the city. Another, from Farah, said he refrained from going to Government areas in adherence to the rules of the prisoners' exchange that require prisoners to stay home: he feared that the Government would blame the Taliban leaders if his presence there was reported. A young respondent from Farah said he was not going to Government-controlled areas because prisoners had not been issued guarantee letters and did not trust the Government's commitment to its promises. Another, from Zabul, felt confident traveling to the bazaar despite contrary advice by his relatives, because he did have letters of release.

Taking part in political processes such as elections was excluded by many on the basis of the Taliban's stance on this issue; some added that they would participate if ordered to by the movement's leadership. Others, even some who say they had cut relations with the Taliban, said they would not participate in elections while the system is in its current state, citing lack of transparency and legitimacy. The Helmandi respondent mentioned his desire to get an ID card, recognizing its value as the national document, and said he would take part in elections and other political activity, provided these are, "based on Sharia and Afghan traditions and culture." Prisoners connected to Hezb-e Islami were more inclined to participate in electoral processes.

Some respondents with affiliation to the Taliban said they were considering other political platforms, including one who argued that given the degree of local support enjoyed by his extended family, he may present himself as a candidate in future elections. He also reported (unsubstantiated) receiving many visits from senior Government officials since his release. Prisoners living in Government-controlled areas like him, apart from a few cases of stated ideological rejection, were more likely to engage with state institutions.

Several respondents mentioned the tight control they were subjected to by local security forces, who they said were suspicious of the respondents' continued collaboration with the Taliban. Only around one-third of those living in Government-controlled areas reported feeling threatened by security forces or experiencing abusive behavior since they had been released, but news of other prisoners being targeted countrywide had created anxiety. Despite the likelihood that part of this news is propaganda, former prisoners walk a narrower path than ordinary Afghans with regards to falling out with security forces. A respondent from Kandahar who lives in a Government-controlled area complained that the provincial government is notorious across Afghanistan for decisions based on personal motives. He claimed that if he merely forgot to properly greet somebody in his village, that person could make up fake reports about him and bring him to the local government's attention, who in turn could do whatever they want to him. He expressed feeling safe at the time of the interview but planned to relocate to Taliban-controlled areas if the situation becomes tenser.



Sometimes a less intrusive presence of Government security forces reminded former prisoners of past hardships or abuses and weighed heavily on their mental health: a resident of Helmand, who has worked as the imam of the village mosque since his release, stated that the mere sight of the Government security forces made him sick, although they do not bother or harass him. He said that the local police chief had gone so far as to visit him privately and offer his services to him in case he needed anything, but that this visit had served only to make the memories more acutely painful. He stated a desire to move to an area controlled by the Taliban to ease his psychological problems.

Some ex-prisoners living in Taliban-held or contested areas, but who deny ever being part of the movement, such as the (self-reported) convicted drug-smuggler or more senior prisoners, stated they would travel to Government-controlled areas (the nearest city) for their needs.

Ultimately, the will and ability to engage with Government institutions depended much on the local alignment of political elites and the existence of blood feuds between prisoners or the local Taliban groups and prominent members of local institutions, in particular the local police (ALP).²⁰ For many prisoners, a private or family feud with local rivals enlisted in the ALP or other security forces meant that no rapprochement to the Government could be achieved, and could lead them to rejoin the Taliban.

Instructions by the Taliban and plans for the future

One of the major concerns connected to the prisoners' release was the possibility that large numbers may return to fighting, despite a Taliban guarantee to the Afghan Government (not part of the US-Taliban agreement) that this would not happen. Given the varied reasons that could have brought an individual or family to side against the representatives of the Afghan Government at the local level, the risk is high that neither Government nor Taliban political leadership can control the fault lines of local competition and ensure that prisoners find going home desirable and safe. Another potential motivation to return to fighting is economic: many prisoners could be unable to find an alternate source of income, due to lack of job skills, lack of local networks, or bias.

In May 2020, the head of the Taliban Prisoners' Affairs Commission, Nooruddin Turabi, issued a guidance statement widely circulated among released prisoners and their communities with instructions to remain at home until further notice, explicitly instructing them to not return to fighting. The ex-prisoners were allowed to engage in professions considered licit by the Taliban in order to provide for their families and encouraged to pursue education they had interrupted. The instructions received by the freed prisoners – which reportedly included specific cautions such as not posing for pictures with weapons or not talking on

²⁰ The Afghan Local Police (ALP) was established in 2010, building upon and systematizing previous local defense and community militia experiments, and it counted at its height over 30,000 members countrywide. Funding for the ALP program has ended in October 2020 and plans for the dissolution of the unit are currently being implemented, amidst much uncertainty as to the fate of the former militiamen and the impact their disbandment will have on local security. (Kate Clark, "Disbanding the ALP: A dangerous final chapter for a force with a chequered history," *Afghan Analysts Network*, October 6, 2020. <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/reports/war-and-peace/disbanding-the-alp-a-dangerous-final-chapter-for-a-force-with-a-chequered-history/>); Meanwhile, rumors have spread about new government-sponsored projects for arming militias in provinces such as Kapisa. ("Militia Armed in Kapisa's Nejrab District: Local Officials," *TOLO News*, September 8, 2020. <https://tolonews.com/afghanistan/militia-armed-kapisa-s-nejrab-district-local-officials>) Although these claims have been rejected by the Ministry of Interior, there remains the difficult knot of preventing the Taliban from taking over larger swaths of rural Afghanistan and avoiding the creation of paramilitary forces difficult to monitor and discipline and which often end up increasing the polarization of rural communities between pro-Government and pro-Taliban camps.

the phone with active Taliban – urged them not to endanger the fate of other prisoners yet to be released: these were the last batches of high-profile Taliban prisoners to be released only between mid-August and mid-September.

Despite initial reporting²¹ corroborating the commitment of the Taliban to keep released prisoners from the frontlines, anecdotal reports of ex-prisoners returning to the fighting started to emerge even before the end of the release process.²² Afghan Government sources have claimed estimates of several hundreds of ex-prisoners re-joining the Taliban ranks, including many that have since been killed in battle.²³ However, the majority of the interviewees denied that freed prisoners participated in recent fighting. Some dismissed it as Government propaganda, arguing that the intensity of the fighting was unrelated to the prisoner release, as proven by the evident increase in violence prior to the release. Others claimed that the Taliban has sufficient recruits and thus no need to deploy the prisoners on the frontlines: a respondent boasted that youth from his area of Faryab province were, “fighting over their turn to go to the fighting.”

Several prisoners, however, said that a number of prisoners had either rejoined the fighting or were contemplating it. Some predicted that the majority would end up on the battlefield again. Three respondents, respectively from Nangarhar, Kandahar and Helmand, spoke of significant numbers of prisoners who had already taken up arms again, arguing that prisoners were forced to do so in self-defense, because the Government, instead of offering support through educational or job opportunities, was harassing them. They also claimed that some ex-prisoners had been re-arrested or killed during night raids. Others portrayed returning to battle as a consequence of personal enmities driving antagonism with local authorities or of personal economic problems. A few mentioned specific cases of acquaintances who had left soon after release to return to fighting. A respondent from Helmand mentioned two friends who had been released alongside him: he stated that one had left his village and returned to the fighting ranks out of “boredom and unhappiness,” and the other had to rejoin because he was indebted to someone and involved in a blood feud related to a land dispute. The interviewee himself had also approached his former front leaders saying that he wanted to come back to them, but in his case, they referred to the guidance from the political leadership and told him to stay home.

Most of the prisoners interviewed, except for several living in Government areas or disconnected from the Taliban, confirmed receiving instructions when still in jail or soon after release, directly or through intermediaries. Most did not state an immediate intention to rejoin the fighting, but added that they were ready to resume fighting if ordered to do so by their leaders. Only a few former prisoners openly stated they did not want to go back to fighting. When discussing the topic of the return to fighting, there is an element of firm obedience to the instructions of the Taliban leadership, i.e., stressing compliance regardless of one’s feelings towards going back to the battlefield. This narrative was challenged only

21 Ajman Torman and Abubakar Siddique, “For Now, Fewer Former Afghan Prisoners Returning To The Battlefield,” *Gandhara*, June 23, 2020. <https://gandhara.rferl.org/a/for-now-fewer-former-afghan-prisoners-returning-to-the-battlefield/30685870.html>

22 Lynne O’Donnell, “Defying Peace Deal, Freed Taliban Return to the Battlefield,” *Foreign Policy*, September 3, 2020. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/09/03/defying-peace-deal-freed-taliban-prisoners-return-battlefield-afghanistan/>

23 Franz J. Marty, “What the Fate of Freed Taliban Prisoners Means for the Afghan Peace Process,” *The Diplomat*, October 20, 2020. <https://thediplomat.com/2020/10/the-fate-of-freed-taliban-prisoners-and-afghanistans-peace-process/>



by one younger respondent, released and now totally destitute and without prospects for employment, who said, “the Taliban are not telling you not to come [to the fighting], they are demanding it a lot.”

Some older prisoners, including those with comprehensive religious education or who spent over a decade in jail, said they felt the urge to fight jihad, either because of the ideological aspects of the struggle or to take revenge for what they suffered in jail. Some admitted asking the Taliban to be allowed to join the fighting ranks but were denied permission for the time being. One respondent conveyed a desire to return to the life of the militant, despite not having received economic assistance by the Taliban, having to face economic problems at home, and being advised by his own friends in the movement to look for a job instead. In his case, after more than a decade in jail, it appeared that militancy has become a central part of his identity.

Perceptions of threat either from state institutions or personal enemies play a major role in shaping the prisoners’ attitudes towards a return to the fighting. A Hezb-e Islami ex-prisoner (self-identified) complained of having to once again face the enmity of the same ALP members that had played a role in his arrest, due to an old family feud. Another prisoner, after spending more than ten years in jail accused of murder, has come out of prison to find that the blood feud had largely dissipated due to the death of others involved. However, he still feared an act of revenge and had therefore entrusted himself and his family’s security to the Taliban, asking the movement to solve the family dispute, as he did not trust the Government legal system. A prisoner in Kabul feared assassination attempts by his enemies, who he claimed were using their connection to the Government to have him monitored and harassed. His contingency plan was to leave the country.

Many freed prisoners complained of a dearth of economic opportunities, worsened in Government-controlled areas by the stigma attached to being a former Taliban prisoner. One respondent from Helmand reported regular verbal abuses, humiliations, and temporary detentions by the security forces manning checkpoints or patrolling the area. He also complained that they would not let him carry out his economic activities including animal husbandry or small wares sales. However, most respondents said they were not actively seeking jobs, despite urgent economic needs. Only the more educated respondents living in Government-controlled cities were in a position to look for a formal job, provided prospective employers do not reject them because of their militant past. Those with a farming background reported helping their families at home.

Many respondents report perceiving this as a temporary situation. Some said they were going to stay home until the Taliban asks them, “to join the fight again,” others until, “the results of the peace talks are clearer.” A common expectation of many respondents is a return to an active role in the movement, and to the social and economic benefits attached to it. For many who joined at a young age and spent many years in jail, militancy within the Taliban is the only career they can pursue that has some degree of advantage over their age peers; the years spent in jail constitute a sort of professional credit. Overall, released prisoners gave the impression of waiting for opportunities from the Taliban due to the lack of other viable options.

The emphasis many ex-prisoners put on completing their education is consistent with the guidance reportedly released by the Taliban Prisoners’ Affairs Commission, which aims to provide them with a prospective career in a future Afghanistan where, as they advocate, a purely Islamic system based on Sharia will be established. Many respondents expressed an intention to complete their religious education and become imams and teachers in madrasas, and several released prisoners have been appointed as imams in their villages

upon return, irrespective of these being in Taliban or Government areas. While not a well-remunerated job, it offers a dignified social status and the prospect of a more central role if a social order akin to the 1990s Emirate returns. Religious education, a key component of the Taliban identity since the movement's inception, provides an ideal tool for the leadership to strengthen motivation and cohesion among the ranks, for whom it represents not only an individual goal, but a means for social empowerment. As evident in the anti-Soviet war in the 1980s, investing in religious education reinforces ideological incentives for youth to join the jihad while also offering them the promise of enhanced social and economic status.²⁴

OPINIONS ON THE PEACE PROCESS

The Doha Agreement

The Doha Agreement signed between the US and the Taliban in February 2020 represented both a major political achievement on the international stage and, internally, a morale boost for the Taliban movement.²⁵ The released prisoners discussed it as key to ending their imprisonment.

From the point of view of the rank and file Taliban, the Doha Agreement has the merit of setting a milestone towards the final success of a long struggle, hence the attempts by the Taliban leadership to present it as a major achievement for the movement. Even those prisoners who did not trust the US to maintain its word on withdrawal argued that because other countries were witnesses to the Doha Agreement, the US would be bound to respect it. Many respondents praised the agreement for reducing the damage inflicted by the most substantial military threat to the Taliban troops, the US airpower, and discussed the immediate effects, such as reduction of airstrikes and raids by US forces, which relieved Taliban fighters and the population in areas under their control from considerable pressure.

Very few voices were critical of the Doha Agreement per se, although some respondents identified shortcomings in its successive implementation. Two respondents with similar profiles, young and relatively well-educated, criticized the prisoner release process for its delays, arguing that if it had been immediate and unconditional it would have been more effective at creating trust between the two sides. A lone exception comes from a former militant from Helmand who said he cut relations with the movement: his criticism of the Doha Agreement got as far as condemning the Taliban leadership for stopping attacks against US forces and continuing to shed Afghan blood.

Some respondents criticized the choice to make peace only with the “infidel Americans” and not yet with fellow Muslim Afghans. The majority expressed hope that following the challenge of negotiating a treaty with the US, finding common ground among Afghans would be feasible. This may represent a critical point, given its location at the juncture of two mainstream components of the Taliban ideology and narrative: the nationalistic one that gained traction after 2001, calling it the duty of all Afghans to fight against foreign invaders, and the original, and still central, call for implementation of strictly orthodox religious policies in the management of state and society.

²⁴ Edwards, *Before Taliban: Genealogies of Afghan Jihad*, Ch.6-7.

²⁵ The importance attached to the symbolic value of the Doha Agreement even more than its actual contents, however favorable to the Taliban, explains the emphasis by which the Taliban negotiating team argued for it to provide the basis for any negotiations with the with the Afghan Government during the preliminary stages of the Afghan Peace Negotiations in Doha in September-October 2020.



Feelings of hostility towards the US ran high among the more ideological Taliban respondents and those who claimed to have few or no links to the movement. Generally speaking, non-Taliban and those less sophisticated politically expressed resentment and distrust towards the US, while more educated Taliban assert a distinction between the US and the Afghan Government, which they call its “puppets.” When assessing the Doha Agreement, a nationalistic attitude prevails that prioritizes the removal of US troops as the first objective. In this, the prisoners’ opinions mirrored the Taliban narrative, which holds the Doha Agreement as a victory for all Afghan people.

Respondents saw the benefits of the agreement as outweighing the concessions or promises made by the Taliban. While some adopted a simplistic view of the agreement – for example, “The US accepted their defeat and gave a timeline for withdrawing,” – others discussed more sophisticated interpretations that would nonetheless allow one to see it as the first step towards a final victory over the enemy. One such interpretation is a comparison between the Doha Agreement and the 628 CE Treaty of Hudaibiyya between the early Muslim community in Medina and the pagan Quraish tribes of Mecca. The analogy was mentioned specifically by six interviewees, all ideologically-aware militants with either higher education or religious education, including one affiliate of Hezb-e Islami. This identification allows the Taliban to justify compliance with a treaty made with a non-believer enemy that includes difficult conditions. Specifically, the Hudaibiyya Treaty stipulated that those youth from Mecca who had joined the Muslim exile community without their guardians’ consent would be turned back to the Quraish, with no clause of reciprocity for Muslims who may have abandoned their ranks to revert to Mecca. The Taliban commitment to separate from other Islamist militant groups, including Al Qaeda, had the potential to create dissatisfaction and friction similar to that found among some of Mohammad’s (PBUH) followers in the 7th century CE. These six respondents, however, took care to explain how the Doha Treaty is only superficially demanding concessions from the Taliban and is ultimately in favor of their Islamic cause: according to them, an informed understanding of the agreement shows that it prefaces complete victory, parallel to the Treaty of Hudaibiyya.²⁶

The Afghan Peace Negotiations

The interviews were carried out before the start of the negotiations between the Taliban and Government delegations in Doha on September 12, 2020.²⁷ While Afghan Peace Negotiations were widely expected to happen, after an almost six-month delay, the timeline was uncertain. A vast majority of the respondents considered the APN a positive and necessary step.

Many respondents stated that among Afghans there would be no problems reaching an agreement, and that without foreign interference they would be able to make peace;

²⁶ Two years after Hudaibiyyah, Mohammad (PBUH) was able to conquer Mecca without major military engagements; in the short-term, the Treaty of Hudaibiyya led to a reduction in violence and allowed Muslims to go on pilgrimage to Mecca. Interestingly, the analogy with the current situation may work better from a military point of view, rather than as a comparison of the treaties’ contents: the early Muslims, after successfully raiding the pagan Meccans and resisting the latter’s attack on Medina, were not ready to move onto offensive siege warfare against Mecca. The reference to Hudaibiyya could aptly serve the Taliban leadership to reassure their rank and file that victory is near, despite the still unlikely possibility of the Taliban being able to conquer and hold major cities.

²⁷ For a broader analysis of the Taliban attitude towards the peace process: “Taking Stock of the Taliban’s Perspectives on Peace,” *International Crisis Group*, Report No 311/Asia, August 11, 2020. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-asia/afghanistan/311-taking-stock-talibans-perspectives-peace>



their emphasis was most often on sharing the same religion and culture, sometimes a shared exhaustion with the conflict. Only a few expressed concern for obstacles to the peace process coming from the Government. An ex-prisoner from Faryab stated that, following long-established traditions of respect for authority enshrined in the Quran, the base of the movement would accept any decision made by the leadership – in fact, many prisoners were keen to extoll the steadfast obedience of Taliban fighters to their leaders. However, at least in one case, this idea of obedience was more conditional to the Taliban leadership’s adherence to its ideological values: a young militant stated, “They are our leaders. In the past, they were our leaders and as long as they walk the path of Allah, we obey them. If they forget about the path of Allah and his Messenger, then we are also responsible.”

Another young ex-prisoner felt the potential negotiations exposed as false by what he claimed was the Government’s previous characterization of the Taliban as merely “Punjabis” (i.e. Pakistanis, and thus not legitimately representative of a section of the Afghan population): “With regards to the intra-Afghan talks, I would say that the Government people are now sitting with those people that they have considered Punjabis for the last 20 years. This means that now that the Government side is weak then they are talking to Afghans [Taliban], but when they were not weak then they considered the Afghans [Taliban] as Punjabis. I do not know whether I should call this intra-Afghan talks or talks between Afghanistan and Punjab.”

Former prisoners who had cut relations with the Taliban expressed concerns about the possible sabotage of peace efforts by neighboring countries. A resident of Kabul stated that peace depended on support from neighboring countries, but feared that some neighbouring countries may not see peace in Afghanistan serving their interests. Another prisoner from Helmand recalled how at previous stages of the Afghan conflict, peace efforts had failed because of meddling by foreign countries. He cited the negotiations between Najibullah and the mujahidin, “in which those countries were involved as they are involved now and plunged Afghanistan in a fire which is still burning and we are still suffering from.”

The fear of foreign interference was raised with regards to the possibility of a ceasefire. Some respondents, including a few hardline ex-prisoners, considered general ceasefire a priority, saying it should be the first item discussed. Others predicted – too optimistically, as events since the prisoners’ release have shown – that even without a ceasefire, reduction in violence would last as long as negotiations were going on. Despite saying that discussing conditions for a ceasefire was a priority, because, “everything here is, as people say, poisoned with the gun powder,” an ex-prisoner who spent most of his teenage years in jail held more pessimistic views about chances for success on this: “The Taliban will not accept a ceasefire. There are other things behind it and there are other circles behind it,” pointing to the role of foreign countries in the conflict. He concluded that a ceasefire could only occur after concessions had been made by both sides that would isolate de facto Taliban-held areas from Government territories and freeze people’s movements across them until a final peace agreement had been made.

Respondents considered honesty the most important requisite for the negotiations. One of the ex-prisoners from Kandahar identified what he thought was a Taliban red-line: in regard to recognizing the Afghan Government, he said had the movement been ready to do so, they would not have gone through two decades of struggle and sacrifice. The ideological dimension of the struggle as experienced by many respondents was apparent by the frequent rejection of the Government as embodying an insufficiently Islamic political system and the need to replace this with the establishment of a ‘truly Islamic system’ based on Sharia. Some mentioned this as the primary goal of the Taliban struggle, as well as the ultimate solution for an end to the conflict.



Some ex-prisoners offered perspectives about the possible end-state of the peace process. One advocated for a single Islamic system in which Western-style democracy would not be accommodated, as it is not suitable to Afghan traditions and culture. A young ex-prisoner described the future government as one, “in which Islam has a higher position, Quran is ruling, and Sharia is implemented.” Another respondent from Nangarhar said that civil society activists, the Constitution, and the Republic have no place in Islam. He said that the Taliban want a strict implementation of Sharia, in order to punish adulterers, consumers of alcohol, etc. He claimed to have been disgusted seeing such sinners spend only a few years in Pul-e Charkhi and be set free, still criminals in front of God. He himself candidly admitted to having bribed judges in order to convert his own death sentence into a 20-year prison term.

A few additional militants, including one affiliated with Hezb-e Islami, label those working with the Government as “hypocrites.” However, interviewees stopped short of saying that Government employees were not Muslim, as this would amount to takfir, or declaring someone an apostate, which is officially not part of the Taliban religious praxis. Respondents more frequently singled out specific units or individuals inside Government security forces as unacceptable.

Demobilization and reconciliation

Demobilization and reconciliation are points of concern. Respondents expressed similar assuredness that co-existence of security forces and Taliban would be possible thanks to the bonds of nationality and religion. This confidence appeared largely derived from semi-official narratives of discipline and patriotism among the Taliban, and runs counter to the economic and social motivations to re-join the fighting previously expressed by the same prisoners. In a few cases, interviewees gave sobering answers, mentioning the difficulty of returning to ordinary life after the treatment they received in Government institutions or that ex-prisoners, without specific orders to the contrary from their leaders, would resort to acts of revenge.

The memory of the 2018 Eid ceasefire, which saw the Taliban visiting urban centers and spontaneous manifestations of happiness and brotherhood between them and urban populations, and to some extent Government security forces, was still very much alive in the minds of the Taliban, although almost all respondents were in prison at the time and their knowledge of the event was indirect. Several respondents, however, referenced this as an example of how easily fighters from the two sides would be able to live together once leaders from the two sides make peace.

Interestingly, no respondent called for the total disbandment of Government security forces. Rather, views were expressed, including by many of the most committed Taliban, about the need to keep the current security forces in service of the country. One said, “Our army should not be destroyed, in order for our nation to be protected, and the nation should protect the Afghan soil from other countries.” Several ex-prisoners commented negatively on abusive behavior by individual members of the security forces, but only one spoke against them collectively, characterizing them as criminals.

Some interviewees, in particular some with a religious education, felt that the current security forces only required reforms, including adjustments in terms of ideology and symbols, rather than changes to their organization and structure. Most respondents envisioned the Taliban ‘mujahidin’ joining the latter at the end of the peace process, tacitly acknowledging the current structure of the Government security forces as a

viable model and recognizing the provisional nature of their own military set up. This acceptance, however, is no doubt facilitated by an apparent widespread conceptualization among Taliban of any post-deal scenario as a Taliban political victory in which most of the movement's demands are largely accommodated. In the meantime, a standard attitude to members of the security forces is that they, "become our brothers as soon as they lay down their weapons and surrender to the mujahidin."

A major exception to this flexibility towards Government security forces is attitudes expressed towards the ALP.²⁸ They are repeatedly described as uneducated, abusive individuals who damaged the honor, lives, and property of the Afghan people, and several respondents singled them out for disbandment and prosecution.

In this respect, the possibility of the declaration of an amnesty for those involved in the fighting opens different scenarios. Such a general amnesty is supported by the majority of respondents: those who claim no connection to the Taliban suggest that it should be applied to both sides, while committed Taliban related how in his message on the first day of Eid al-Adha 1441/1399 (July 31, 2020), Taliban leader Sheikh Haibatullah Akhundzada offered an amnesty to all Government fighters after they cease fighting, hinting that the same would apply after a peace settlement.²⁹

However, several respondents specifically excluded ALP members, stating that at least those involved in crimes should not receive amnesty, lest the Taliban betray the right of the people to exact revenge on the perpetrators. The same ex-prisoner who characterized security forces as runaway criminals stated that the right to forgive them or demand their punishment belongs to the victim's relatives and not the Taliban leadership, which has the right only to issue a general amnesty. He also argued that those who committed heinous crimes at a national level, including top echelons of Government entities, will not be forgiven and should either leave the country or face prosecution. Another veteran Taliban member specified that the amnesty for security forces should not apply to the ALP; even if Taliban leadership forgave them, individuals would not, and the Taliban should not be responsible for any revenge taken on them. The frequency of similar remarks has ominous undertones for hopes of a nationwide pacification settlement scenario.

However, official Taliban narratives strive to demonstrate that the conflict is a purely ideological struggle of religious and patriotic origin, and that personal issues have nothing to do with the motivations of their fighters. Some respondents dismissed the future relevance of personal issues; that a man of 30 who spent one third of his life in prison upheld the notion that fighting was impersonal and that there are no private enmities involved, can be taken either as a display of propaganda or as a hope for the future.

Even the young respondent who threatened to disown Taliban leaders if they strayed from the 'right' path during negotiations conceded that were Taliban leadership to forgive all

28 For the distinctive hostility between the Taliban and the ALP see Borhan Osman and Kate Clark, "Enemy Number One: How the Taleban deal with the ALP and uprising groups," *Afghan Analysts Network*, July 19, 2018. <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/reports/war-and-peace/enemy-number-one-how-the-taleban-deal-with-the-alp-and-uprising-groups/>

29 "Afghan Taliban Leader Mullah Haibatullah Akhundzada in Eid Al-Adha Message: "We Are On The Threshold Of Establishing An Islamic Government," *Memri*, July 31, 2020. <https://www.memri.org/jttm/afghan-taliban-leader-mullah-haibatullah-akhundzada-eid-al-adha-message-we-are-threshold>



those security forces, including the ALP, there would still not be any private problems. He found corroboration for this forgiving attitude in a hadith referring to Prophet Mohammad's (PBUH) prohibition of taunts and insults directed to the son of Abu Jahl, who had been one of the Prophet's (PBUH) staunchest enemies in Mecca.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

These pilot study interviews offer rare insights into the lives and mindsets of supporters of the Taliban movement. By turning a considerable number of imprisoned fighters into de facto civilians, at least momentarily, the prisoner exchange has provided unprecedented access to this section of the Afghan population. Despite the idealized attitudes and official propaganda espoused by some respondents, talking to Taliban members without the mediation of their commanders or group leaders and in a context not focused on episodes of violence and military operations has been relatively unique.

As understood from the reported whereabouts of the prisoners – a slight majority reside in Taliban-held areas, with others planning to relocate there – to the opinions expressed, it is apparent that most of the respondents belong to a distinct constituency: they consider themselves citizens of the so-called Taliban Emirate rather than of the Islamic Republic. This is mirrored by the assistance received, primarily from the Taliban, and by the lack of vocational or reintegration programs offered by the Government.

Programs aimed at reintegrating the prisoners into the Government-aligned society would likely not have been easily accepted; the overall atmosphere of these interviews does not point to demobilization. Most of the interviewed ex-prisoners – excluding those who claimed to have no connection with the Taliban – stated they were in a temporary hiatus from their active participation in a movement they believe is heading towards momentous success and will be the single biggest factor in their future lives. Individual loyalty to the movement is compounded and augmented by the belief that the duty to defend the country and Islam from foreign aggression hinges on every member of the collective, and that only the Taliban can lay a legitimate claim to the re-establishment of this collective couched in a truly 'Islamic' system, vague as its formulation may be. This ideological bedrock is often made more solid by time spent in detention and excludes most possibilities of long-term reintegration into civilian life before some major event – like a real or perceived change in the current political system – occurs.

However, a minority of the prisoners displayed tiredness and/or disillusion with the Taliban form of struggle, if not its goals. Some of these were relatively educated people aware of their close escape and with prospects for a professional career, so they may not be in a hurry to go back into harm's way. Others, although ideologically committed, were worn out by the length of detention and its harsh conditions. These demographics might be more open to outreach and assistance from the Government. Despite this weariness or criticism of violent means, the lack of viable 'civilian' opportunities for economic and social fulfilment leads to adherence to the Taliban movement, with its sense of political purpose combined with economic and social status. For released prisoners who spent much of their youth in captivity, this lack of economic and social status in civilian life is coupled with the reality that they cannot easily socially assimilate at a familial or community level, much less a societal level.

Based on these conclusions, the following recommendations for assistance can be made. A largely non-controversial and currently sorely lacking method of assistance that

could be provided to released prisoners is medical and psychosocial outreach programs: both to address the many health problems that affect long-term detainees without causing them excessive costs and, more specifically, to offer them psychological care in order to cope with traumas. Such assistance could be offered without political agenda and could potentially fall within the set of health-related activities that are ostensibly provided protection by both sides of the conflict.

The ex-prisoners interested in embracing their newfound civilian status must be encouraged to do so by removing obstacles and potential dangers, and whenever possible, creating opportunities for them. As difficult as it may be in the context of a continuing or worsening conflict situation, discrimination against individuals because of their past role as Taliban fighters must be prevented. Those ex-prisoners who reside in Government-administered areas or who may want to travel there for professional or other legitimate reasons must be assured of their safety and dignity. This is not only necessary for the Government to portray itself as the legitimate representative of all Afghans, but for all individuals making up Afghan society to realize that the outcome of peace need not be a zero-sum game or result in limitations on freedom of movement for citizens across the country. On the path towards peace, it will be necessary to bridge existing gaps in life experiences, expectations, and opportunities across the spectrum of the Afghan public, from citizens living under Taliban influence to the rest of the population.

In this respect, the released prisoners ought not only be enabled to safely and freely live in and move across both Taliban- and Government-controlled territories, but whenever possible should also be encouraged to engage in dialogue and other forms of interaction with members of civil society and the formal institutions of Government areas, eventually contributing to dispel the idea of a complete and irreconcilable “otherness” of the opposing side. Irrespective of the form of peace agreement that develops from the current Afghanistan peace process and of its ideological implications, any viable solution to the Afghan conflict must ensure no Afghan feels unjustly cut out from access to security, justice, fair livelihoods and representation and that the only way to redress such an imbalance is joining an armed opposition.

As the road toward a negotiated solution to the Afghan conflict decelerates, additional research and monitoring of the released prisoners will be needed in the coming months. In particular, it will be useful to expand the scope of the present research both in terms of the number of former prisoners interviewed and by concentrating the focus on a set of districts, building upon those already fairly well-represented in this research, in order to have a sufficient sample of respondents to disaggregate sub-groups such as age, education, professional background or family status. Results from this pilot study suggest that social integration of younger prisoner demographics might prove the most challenging.

Tracking the trends of prisoners’ return to fighting or to civilian life, the role they play in their home communities, their ability to settle in Government-controlled areas, their economic and social needs, and their opinions on peace initiatives and political participation is not only relevant for their impact on the conflict and short-term security considerations, but could also offer a preview of a new Afghanistan to come.



Heart of Asia Society (HAS), founded in 2019 in Kabul, is an independent Afghan think tank working to expand research and dialogue in Afghanistan and among countries of the Heart of Asia region. HAS prioritizes support to the ongoing peace process in Afghanistan, with a special focus on conducting research and facilitating dialogue aimed at garnering regional consensus and support for Afghan peace. Please read more on our work at: www.heartofasiasociety.org.

