Communication
Challenges in Peace Talks

A Report By Rumi Consultancy

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Rumi Consultancy is Afghanistan's premier Media and Communications firm. The company was created in response to a need for communications that speak to Afghans with clarity, respect, and hope for the brighter future we believe in. Rumi develops strategic communication campaigns, multimedia products and research content to help our partners achieve business goals and development aims. Supporting Afghanistan through its journey towards peace, progress and prosperity is Rumi Consultancy's mission.

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Glossary and Abbreviations

ANDSF	Afghan National Defense and Security Forces
badbakhti	Misery, misfortune
FDI	Foreign Direct Investment
GFI	Graphic Interchange Formats
GIROA	Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan
ISI	Inter-Services Intelligence
ISIS	Islamic State of Iraq and Syria
ISKP	Islamic State in Khorasan Province
MADRASA	School where religious (Islamic) education is imparted
UN	United Nations

Acknowledgement

Exceutive Summary

The Afghan peace process is fraught with challenges. The present study provides insight into one major challenge—the communication gap between international and national stakeholders and the Afghan people—and how it shapes Afghans' attitudes toward the ongoing negotiations and the phased US troop withdrawal. This report is an initiative of Rumi Consultancy, the culmination of three months of intense research by a team of 19 professionals. Its aim is to assess the gap between the messages communicated by decision makers and the reception of these messages on the ground, and to inform the outreach strategies of domestic and foreign stakeholders.

After a desk review of relevant material, a survey questionnaire of five multiple-choice questions was designed and distributed to trained local researchers. Researchers asked a diverse sample of 600 Afghan participants in 8 provinces (originating from 22 provinces) to share their views on different aspects of negotiations by selecting multiple-choice options and elaborating on their responses. This was followed by five focus group discussions with a subset of the sample to identify deeper trends in opinion and reasoning.

This study sought to gain insight into the whole spectrum of communication issues surrounding the peace talks. The major findings are as follows:

● 85% of participants had heard about the peace talks, while the remaining 15% had not. Access to social media was the most significant explanatory variable in participants' awareness of the peace talks, with a 21% disparity in social media access between those who had heard and those who had not.

● 63% of participants felt that their source did not provide sufficient information about the peace talks. Participants most often attributed this lack of information to the closed-door nature of the negotiations. The Afghan government's absence from formal discussions between the US and the Taliban also heightened participants' suspicions about the process. Participants noted that greater transparency and regular communication about the outcome of each round of talks would help alleviate their mistrust.

● 61% of participants identified social media as their preferred source of information, citing its 24/7 availability, interactive nature, instant updates, entertainment value, and the accuracy of the information it provided.

● When asked to identify the best source of information on the peace talks, none of

the participants referred to efforts made by international stakeholders to communicate developments in the negotiations. This reveals serious shortcomings in international parties' attempts to convey accurate and comprehensive information from the top down.

● Nearly half of participants believed that the main aim of the peace talks was to determine a power sharing arrangement with the Taliban. Furthermore, 2 in 5 participants viewed the expected US withdrawal from Afghanistan as evidence that the US has failed in the war effort.

● 46% of participants considered a successful ceasefire a vital test of whether the peace talks would make real progress.

● When asked about the use of the term 'peace talks' for the negotiations, more than one-third of participants expressed serious skepticism about the talks being intended to bring peace to Afghanistan. Rather, they saw the talks as a way for the US to secure a safe exit for its troops. Participants derided the negotiations with phrases like 'anything but peace talks', 'waste of time', and 'a joke'. Less than one-third of participants felt that the term 'peace talks' accurately reflected the purpose of negotiations.

● 64% of participants wanted to know the implications of peace talks for the country's stability, predicating other issues—like women's rights, education, and national reconstruction—on national stability and security. Both male and female participants consistently emphasized the importance of children's education and the need to preserve gains in this area. Women were especially anxious about the future of their rights. Many participants expressed suspicion about the US motives in the talks, and 1 in 4 participants stated that they had no idea what was being agreed on due to the secretive nature of the talks and unclear, inconsistent communications from the involved parties.

● More than one-third of participants who expressed interest in the peace talks' effect on national stability also expressed interest in national reconstruction. These two concerns, peace and development, were closely related in the minds of many participants.

Data from the survey and focus group discussions along with input from provincial researchers reveals a widespread narrative among Afghans that the US has been forced to admit failure in winning the 'war on terror' and is merely seeking an exit strategy from Afghanistan, with little regard for how this will affect the country's peace and stability. In this light, peace talks were merely a public relations tactic to justify a US withdrawal.
The prevalence and plausibility of this narrative for Afghans suggests that policymakers and other stakeholders must dramatically revamp their approach to communications. Although the US-Taliban phase of peace talks has concluded, messaging on the part of the

US and allied stakeholders is still vitally important to support the rest of the peace process. One major reason for the suspicion and lack of acceptance surrounding the peace talks is the lack of reliable, publicly available, and easily accessible information.

Stakeholders must adopt a two-pronged strategy of broadly targeted messages aimed at reassuring the Afghan public and specifically targeted messages that will resonate uniquely with different segments of Afghanistan's diverse population. They must also commit resources to sustained engagement with local leaders, such as elders and religious authorities, to create a two-way channel of information and feedback with the public.

Introduction

The recently concluded peace talks between the Taliban and US officials was the result of growing momentum for formal negotiations to end the Afghan conflict since 2018. However, the process has been marked by unpredictability, with an uptick in violence, the absence of the Afghan government from formal discussions, and President Donald Trump's abrupt termination of talks on the eve of a peace deal in September 2019. The spike in civilian casualties over the course of the peace talks, the uncertainties of procedure and outcome, and the fact that discussions were out of the public view undermined many Afghans' enthusiasm and confidence about the process. Now the peace process has entered the even more uncertain phase of intra-Afghan negotiations. Confusion and suspicion dominate the discourse on the ground. Exacerbating this situation is the fact that the US and other stakeholders have not made sustained, systematic efforts to dispel misconceptions and communicate a consistent narrative about the international community's commitment to Afghanistan and the precise conditions for US troop withdrawal. On the contrary, communications have been sporadic, conflicting, and unconvincing. Consequently, there is a wide gap between how peace messaging is intended and how it is received.

Afghans have deep misgivings about the role of regional states and the broader international community in the perpetuation of the war. The conflict between the US and the Taliban—now nearly two decades old—and the longer history of foreign intervention in Afghanistan, leading to recurring cycles of violence, color the way many Afghans perceive the peace process. Proponents of a negotiated peace are already working at a disadvantage when it comes to persuading the Afghan audience. Their efforts thus far have been undermined by a lack of effective communication about the nature and intent of the talks. Without clear and consistent messaging from the US and related stakeholders, Afghans' misgivings have only intensified. Since stakeholders did not apply a communications strategy preemptively, anticipating and countering fears and misinformation at the outset, the only remaining option is to intervene at a late stage in the peace process to change public perception.

For strategic communications to be effective, communicators must first engage in 'strategic listening'. In other words, communication must be grounded in data on audience perception and the information environment in order to be relevant and targeted. Although the US and aligned parties have tried to communicate a positive narrative about the peace process, these efforts have, to date, suffered from a lack of reliable data. Without an accurate understanding of audience psychology, stakeholders' communications will consistently miss the mark.

Rumi Consultancy conducted the present study to fill a severe knowledge gap. This report is the culmination of three months of research involving 600 participants in 8 provinces, capturing responses from a diverse sample that reflects the diversity of the nation. It analyzes Afghans' perceptions and opinions about the peace process, specifically the talks between US and Taliban officials, providing a crucial gauge of the effectiveness of US and international messaging. The report is designed to inform researchers, government officials, peacebuilding practitioners, and other international stakeholders in their efforts to build local support for the ongoing peace process. Such support is vital, because even though peace between the US and the Taliban has been formalized at the negotiating table, it will prove unsustainable without broad acceptance from the Afghan public.

Why Strategic Communications?

This research is based on two premises: (1) that constructive engagement with the Afghan people is critical for the long-term success of the peace process, which is defined as the realization of a durable peace; and (2) that strategic communications, as a framework for effective messaging, offers the most compelling model for this engagement.

Emily Goldman distinguishes strategic communication from generic communication: 'Communication is strategic when the scope of communication activities are geared for multiple and diverse audiences . . . ; when it occurs continuously through time . . . ; when communication is receiver-centric, or tailored for suitability to audiences . . . ; and when words and actions are marshaled to advance policy goals'. [1] Strategic communication(s) considers the whole context in which messages are sent (including how the sender's actions will affect the interpretation) and received. It prizes consistency, constant adaptation to changing circumstances, nuance and flexibility for a variety of recipients, and a proactive rather than a reactive approach to shaping the narrative.

In light of this definition, US and international efforts to communicate the purpose and benefits of the peace talks to the Afghan public performed poorly. These efforts were late, sporadic, and mostly geared towards the Afghan government rather than the Afghan public.

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[1] Emily Goldman, 'Strategic Communication: A Tool for Asymmetric Warfare', Small Wars Journal, October 2007, https://smallwarsjournal.com/blog/strategic-communication-a-tool-for-asymmetric-warfare.

The fact that there is a crisis of perception among many ordinary Afghans has not been a significant point of discussion among international stakeholders. There is powerful grassroots support for peace, as public momentum for local activism (such as the Helmand People's Peace) demonstrates, but it has been divorced from the top-down, formal peace process in Doha. Policymakers and negotiators missed the opportunity to frame the peace talks as a complementary initiative and thus ride a wave of local support.

Other actors have more aggressively shaped the flow of information about the peace process. The Taliban, foreign states, and prominent critical voices within Afghanistan have exploited communicational gaps and ambiguities to create confusion and fear about the negotiations and what they mean for Afghan society.

The Information Environment

Afghans live in a heavily saturated information environment, with exposure to numerous conflicting messages sent through different channels.

First, there are a number of media institutions active in the country that are affiliated with larger foreign networks and supported by foreign funding, such as BBC Dari/Pashto services, Radio Azadi, and Radio Ashna. They operate from a more global, western editorial outlook than their local counterparts[2], are better resourced, and tend to give in-depth coverage to all the key players in the conflict, including the Taliban. The influence of foreign-sponsored media in shaping Afghan civil society and society at large deserves a separate discussion, but it is sufficient to note here that this influence has been considerable.

Second, there is a large local media sector including several successful broadcast, print, and online news outlets. In contrast to foreign-sponsored media, these institutions have comparatively limited range of movement due to financial constraints, threats from extremist groups and powerful political figures, and a perilous security environment. The threat posed by the Taliban and the Islamic State in Khorasan Province (ISKP) is especially dire in the provinces, where both journalists and their families are often subject to intimidation and violence. Given these constraints, the news produced by local media tends to be more straightforward and delve less into analysis and in-depth reporting. However, editorial pieces, special features, and roundtable discussions do exist, providing the audience with an Afghan media perspective on the peace process.

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[2] Siddiqullah Tawhidi, a media leader and former director of Bakhtar News Agency, personal communication, December 14, 2019.

The third channel for information about the peace process is social media. Afghans' access to the internet has increased dramatically in a short span of time, and platforms like Facebook have become a major forum for exchanging views and updates about the latest events. Social media now wields formidable influence over popular opinion in areas with coverage[3] . However, the rapid dissemination of information generated by social media users to a large, diverse audience of other users makes the task of countering misinformation and communicating clearly all the more difficult. Online audiences are exposed to unverified, often sensationalized, claims, and Afghan political figures on Facebook exert powerful influence by airing mostly critical or pessimistic views about the peace process, which are then recycled by their supporters. Rumors and conspiracy theories quickly gain currency through shares and likes, followed by offline conversations.

Fourth, and finally, the Taliban have proven to be skilled social media users, quick to respond to new developments and adept at broadcasting their version of events. The group is active through Facebook, Twitter, and their website Al-Emarah ('The Emirate'), which publishes a high volume of news and other content. They have maintained a consistent narrative about US atrocities and civilian casualties, Afghan government corruption, and their own role as Afghanistan's protectors and liberators. Articles on Al-Emarah constantly decry US and allied activity in Afghanistan. After President Trump summarily suspended the peace talks in September 2019, Taliban news pieces said that the move had exposed the 'evil satanic agenda of prolonging war in Afghanistan' and that 'war mongers always see war and terror a much better alternative to diplomatic solutions'.[4] The group has deftly framed events to support their message.

How does messaging from various sources affect local Afghan perceptions? Rumi's previous explorations in this area suggest that Afghans are not uncritical consumers of mass media communications. Rather, their perceptions are heavily informed by the experience of forty years of war, which has instilled deep skepticism about political guarantees, the neutrality of institutions like the press, and the role of foreign states. Since tight-knit family and community networks provide one of the few guarantees of stability amid wider social instability, news and opinions filtered through these channels are more readily accepted.

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[3] Internews, Social Media in Afghanistan: Users and Engagement, October 2017,
 https://www.internews.org/sites/default/files/2017-12/Internews_Afghanistan_SocialMediaAssessment_Altai_2017-12.PDF.

In summary, Afghans live at the confluence of multiple, conflicting channels of information. Not only do individual sources provide a grim outlook on the peace process, but collectively, the noise of so many competing claims creates an enabling environment for misinformation and conspiracy theories. This study finds that stakeholders' communications have so far failed to convince most Afghans that the current top-down peace process is being responsibly orchestrated and will safeguard their rights and freedoms. **Proponents of the formal peace process must be exceptionally strategic if they wish to shift the tide of public opinion at this late stage.**

In September 2019, the UN Secretary-General's Special Representative for Afghanistan, Tadamichi Yamamoto, told the UN Security Council that the peace talks must have the backing of the 'whole spectrum of Afghan society' to pave the way for a sustainable peace. Although a peace deal has already been signed, the process itself is far from over. Effective strategic communications will play a pivotal role in convincing Afghan society that the international community and the Afghan stakeholders is playing a constructive role and that the formal peace between the US and the Taliban will prove to be in Afghanistan's interest.

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[4] See 'Cheerleaders of Trump in Kabul', September 11, 2019, http://alemarahenglish.com/?p=31067; and 'Occupation and Ceasefire', September 21, 2019, http://alemarahenglish.com/?p=31064.

[5] This observation is in keeping with Klapper's theory of 'selective exposure', which argues that audiences' understandings do not change based on every new piece of information to which they are exposed. Rather, they discriminate between information that confirms their preexisting way of thinking and that which challenges it, generally assimilating the former while discarding the latter. See Joseph T. Klapper, The Effects of Mass Communication (Glencoe, Illinois: The Free Press, 1960).

[6] '"Whole spectrum of Afghan society must get behind peace talks", UN envoy tells Security Council', UN News, September 10, 2019, https://news.un.org/en/story/2019/09/1046042.

Key Figures and Demographics

- 600 participants sampled in 8 provinces; participants came from 22 provinces

- 62% urban, 38% rural

- 68.33% male, 30.33% female, 1.33% chose not to specify[7]

- 85% of participants were between the ages of 18 and 40

- 70% of respondents were employed, 23% of them female

- 56% single, 43% married, 1% engaged

- 93% of participants had received some level of education

- 86% had access to social media

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[7] In most cases, figures in the report are rounded to whole numbers for ease of reading. Annex 1 provides the exact percentages with decimals.

Figure 0.1 Political map of Afghanistan showing participants' provinces of origin

Jawzjan

Kunduz
43

Takhar
8

Badakhshan
7

Balkh
37

Faryab

Samangan

Baghlan
42

Nuristan

Sar-e-Pul

Panjsher
6

Kapisa
5

Kunar
2

Badghis

Parwan
46

Laghman
3

Herat
36

Bamyan
7

KABUL
128

Ghor
2

Wardak
6

Nangarhar
37

Daykundi
2

Logar
7

Paktya
31

Farah

Uruzgan

ghazni
49

Khost
42

Paktika

Zabul

Nimroz

Helman

Kandahar
47

Methodology

Based on an analysis of current politics and a desk review, the research team for this study drafted 11 multiple-choice questions asking participants to characterize their views on the formal peace talks between the US and the Taliban. Participants would then be asked to elaborate on their responses, and this data would be analyzed to assess the impact and effectiveness of peace-related communications by international stakeholders and Afghan stakeholders to the Afghan public. Since the project was time-sensitive and there were limited resources for processing large quantities of data in this timeframe, the initial 11 questions were condensed into 5. The survey also captured basic demographic details of the participants.

Fifteen field researchers, 4 female and 11 male, were selected to conduct the survey. Researchers were based in the provinces of Nangarhar, Kandahar, Khost, Baghlan, Parwan, Ghazni, Herat, Balkh, and Kabul. The majority had prior journalistic or research experience, but they were additionally trained on project goals and methodology in an intensive seminar for this study.

The survey provided critical data on the perceptions of 600 randomly selected participants about the peace talks and, consequently, whether messaging from international stakeholders had succeeded in conveying to the Afghan public the nature and content of the talks. The sample was diverse by age, sex, language, location, level of education, and employment status. Because the topic of the study required a basic awareness of politics and an ability to form opinions independently, researchers only selected participants 13 years old and above. Age categories were grouped as 13–17, 18–25, 26–40, 41–55, and 55+. In Nangarhar, Kandahar, Kunduz, and Kabul provinces, researchers only interacted with participants of the same sex, in keeping with cultural norms.

Data was gathered through informal, semi-structured interviews. Researchers asked participants to answer all 5 multiple-choice questions and to elaborate on each response. These interactions lasted 12 minutes on average. Researchers coded responses to each question on a special form and manually noted suggestions or additional comments for each part of the questionnaire. Interviews were conducted in the prevalent local language(s): Pashto in Khost, Ghazni, and Kandahar; Dari in Herat, Balkh, Baghlan, Parwan, and Kabul; and Dari, Pashto, Urdu, and Hindko in Nangarhar.

To further identify patterns and the underlying logic in participants' responses, five focus group discussions were conducted involving members of the original sample, with 19

participants in the first two groups and 7, 6, and 5 participants in the next three groups respectively. These focus group discussions lasted 35–50 minutes.

Participant responses are analyzed below. Interviewees' critical inputs and suggestions helped our content analyst grasp the full significance of the population's concerns and perceptions. Participant demographic variables were also analyzed for significant trends.

Limitations

The single greatest challenge during data collection was earning participants' trust. Given the political nature of the subject and participants' fear of reprisal, our researchers had to reassure respondents that this study would preserve confidentiality. Female participants and some university students were especially cautious, and participants in Kandahar, Khost, Nangarhar, and Ghazni were wary about the purpose of the research. However, since most of our provincial researchers had prior journalistic and research experience, they knew how to create a calm atmosphere, build trust with participants, and reassure them that the study was not a political or foreign-funded initiative.

One distinctive subgroup within the sample was Afghan Hindus, who represent a minority within a minority in the larger society. Because the community has faced extreme marginalization and persecution over the past three decades, it was difficult to break through the barrier of suspicion. Interviewing male Hindu participants proved especially challenging, since they adhered to a strict Pashtun code of gender norms and were reticent speaking with the female researcher. However, participants began sharing more freely after a few minutes of conversation. Perspectives from the Afghan Hindu community provided a unique window into minorities' fears and misgivings about the outcome of peace talks.

Another limitation was the short interaction time with participants from certain demographics. Interviews with high school students, for instance, were much shorter on average than interviews with university students and working professionals or elderly participants.

Data and Analysis

1. Awareness of Peace Talks

The first survey question asked participants in broad terms if they knew about the peace talks with the Taliban. Participants were told that if they had previously heard the term 'peace talks' or 'peace negotiations', even if they knew nothing more about the subject, they should answer yes. Depending on the answer, researchers followed up with a prompt (in parentheses below) to generate discussion.

> *1. Do you know about the peace talks with the Taliban?*
>
> *A. Yes. (How did you learn about it?)*
> *B. No. (Why not?)*

1.1 Data

Five hundred and eleven of the 600 participants, or 85% of the sample, answered question 1 in the affirmative, while the remaining 15% responded that they did not know about the peace talks. Again, it should be emphasised that a yes response merely indicated an aware-ness that peace talks existed, not that the participant had further knowledge about them.

Figure 1.1. Do you know about the peace talks with the Taliban?
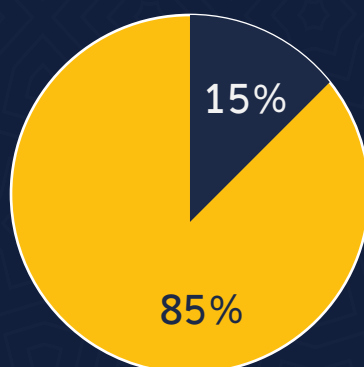
1.2 Profile Analysis

As table 1.1 shows, 93% of participants who answered yes to question 1 had received some education, compared to only 82% of participants who answered no.

Table 1.1. Participants' awareness of peace talks

Criterion	Know about Peace Talks (%)	Do Not Know about Peace Talks (%)
Age Bracket(Years)		
13-17	90	10
18-25	84	16
26-40	87	13
41-55	85	15
55+	59	41
Sex		
Male	87	13
Female	81	19
Education		
None	69	31
High School Student/Graduate	86	14
University Student/ Graduate	87	13
Madrasa Education	75	25
Employment		
None	78	22
Private Sector	89	11
Public Sector	87	13
Marital Status		
Married	83	17
Single	87	13
Engaged	86	14
Access to Social Media		
Yes	88	12
No	65	35
Area of Residence		
Urban	87	13
Rural	83	17

1.3 Key Findings

● The strongest explanatory variable for whether participants had prior knowl edge of the peace talks was employment status. Participants who answered yes were over 1.3 times as likely as those who answered no to have a job.

● The second-strongest variable in participants' awareness of the peace talks, almost as strong as employment status, was access to social media: 'yes' respon dents were just under 1.3 times as likely as 'no' respondents to have social media access.

● Females in the sample were significantly less likely than their male counterparts to know about the peace talks. Women accounted for only 29% of 'yes' responses but 39% of 'no' responses to question 1.

● Although participants from urban areas constituted majority against both response, their proportion is seven percent points higher in case of knowledge of peace talks.

● Factor like age distribution do not seem to have visible bearing on knowledge of peace talks.

2. Sufficiency of Information about Peace Talks

Question 2 asked participants whether their source of news about the peace talks provid- ed adequate information. Participants were asked to respond using one of four options and to elaborate on their response.

Does your source offer sufficient information about peace talks?

A. Yes.

B. No.

C. I don't understand that information much due to its complexity.

D. I switch to other topics when my source starts sharing peace talks–related informa- tion.

2.1 Data

Sixty-three percent of participants answered this question negatively, with option B, C, or D, while 37% of participants responded in the affirmative (option A). Participants who chose option A were heavily criticized by those in the other response categories.

Figure 2.1. Does your source offer sufficient information about peace talks?

7%

35%

37%

21%

◼ Yes

◼ No

◼ I don't understand that information much due to its complexity

◼ I switch to other topics
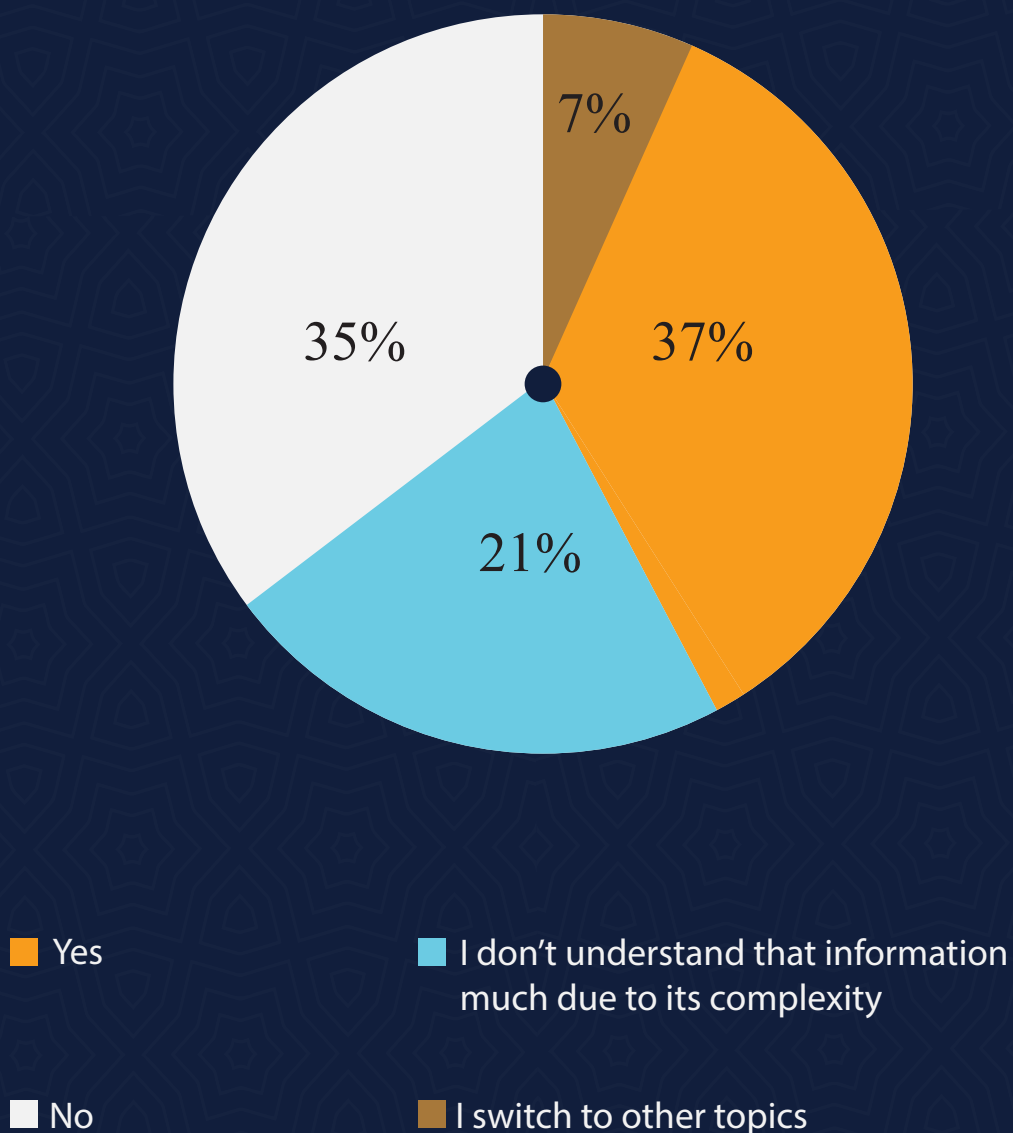
2.2 Profile Analysis

Figure 2.1. Does your source offer sufficient information about peace

Criterion	Know about Peace Talks (%)	Do Not Know about Peace Talks (%)
Age Bracket(Years)		
13-17	58	42
18-25	36	64
26-40	37	63
41-55	20	80
55+	12	88
Sex		
Male		
Female	38	62
	35	65
Education		
None	14	86
High School Student/Graduate	47	53
University Student/ Graduate	35	65
Madrasa Education	13	87
Employment		
None	29	71
Private Sector	39	61
Public Sector	43	57
Marital Status		
Married	29	71
Single	43	57
Engaged	29	71
Access to Social Media		
Yes	40	60
No	18	82
Area of Residence		
Urban	36	64
Rural	38	62

2.3 Response Analysis

This analysis is based on explanations given by survey and focus group participants and input from the provincial researchers.

● Participants who answered yes had significantly better employment status, educational status, and access to social media than those in the other response categories.

● Analysis of responses to question 2 revealed a limitation in the question itself, which was the ambiguity of the word 'sufficient'. Based on an unexpectedly high rate of 'yes' responses, it seemed that many participants had answered yes not because their source provided detailed information but because they were only mildly interested in the subject of peace talks. For instance, 17 female students from Kandahar answered question 2 in the affirmative. In their comments, they indicated that they were content with a headline or some other summary of the news and did not care to know more. This trend was true across all demographics. Others who said their source provided sufficient information added that peace is elusive for Afghans anyway, suggesting that there was no point in following the news because the peace talks were sure to fail.

● Based on focus group discussions, it is possible that a higher number of participants than expected answered yes to avoid appearing uninformed, since there is some social pressure to present oneself as knowledgeable.

● Focus group participants who answered yes to question 2 were frequently lambasted by the rest of the group. 'No' respondents believed that 'yes' respondents were speaking from ignorance and complacency or had formed a hasty opinion based on insufficient information. They also reasoned that journalists, entrepreneurs, extremist sympathizers, and supporters of certain warlords or politicians would answer yes because of their special access to influential circles in the peace talks.

● Participants who answered no were generally more critical of political developments and the security situation than those who answered yes. They opined that it was impossible to form an accurate impression of what was happening in the peace talks because of the many conflicting reports and the vested agenda of various media outlets. Participants who had more access to information were more likely to find it insufficient.

● Participants who answered with option C, that the information on peace talks was too complex to understand, characterized this complexity as a barrage of incoherent, illogical, and contradictory reports through various sources. This perception may well have decreased their curiosity about the topic.

● Various explanations emerged for participants choosing option D, which stated that they would switch sources whenever the subject turned to peace talks. One group of respondents was clearly uninterested in political developments around them, while another felt certain they would be unable to process the information. When researchers asked participants why they were not interested in a topic pertaining to Afghanistan's future, some answered that they were already exploring the possibility of emigrating. Others stated that the peace talks were hopeless because of the sheer length of the conflict, the international community's failure to secure peace in Afghanistan, the lack of Afghan government representation in negotiations, or the nefarious role of regional players.

2.4 Key Findings

● Roughly 3 out of 5 participants felt that their source did not equip them with sufficient information about the peace talks. This was attributed to several factors, including lack of clear messaging, the complexity of the information being presented, and loss of trust in the media's reliability. Many participants cited bias in the media, arguing that media outlets varied their framing of the content depending on their source of funding and patronage. Some noted that media personnel are themselves political actors because they determine content and focus on certain issues over others. It is worth noting that participants identified social media as the preferred source of information (61%), ranking it higher than media institutions, in the following survey question (although they also saw the shortcomings of social media).

● Based on the focus group discussions, three main reasons emerged for participants calling the information about the peace talks insufficient: (1) participants' own lack of knowledge about the peace talks, and the sense that anyone who claimed to have special knowledge or a different perspective on the talks was relying on 'unbalanced' information; (2) the perception that the closed-door nature of the talks had created an information gap for everyone on the outside, including the media and GIRoA, and that this gap fostered misinformation and disinformation; and (3) ironically, the sheer volume of information from different sources, which participants found difficult to make sense of.

● Participants who were generally critical of the Afghan government and/or US involvement in Afghanistan, or who felt that messaging from parties other than the Taliban had been unclear, were more likely to answer no to question 2. Conversely,

3. Best Source of Information

Question 3 asked participants which source of information they found to be 'the best' for getting updates and analysis on the peace talks. They were given five multiple-choice options.

What is the best means for you to obtain information?

A. Social media
B. Radio
C. TV
*D. Newspaper*
E. Other—mosque, government advertisements, billboards, etc.

3.1 Data

Despite being asked to choose only one answer to the question, 31% of participants chose multiple options. The survey was designed to provide respondents with all possible options, facilitating an easier choice, but for question 3, a significant number of respondents were unable to select the 'best' option.
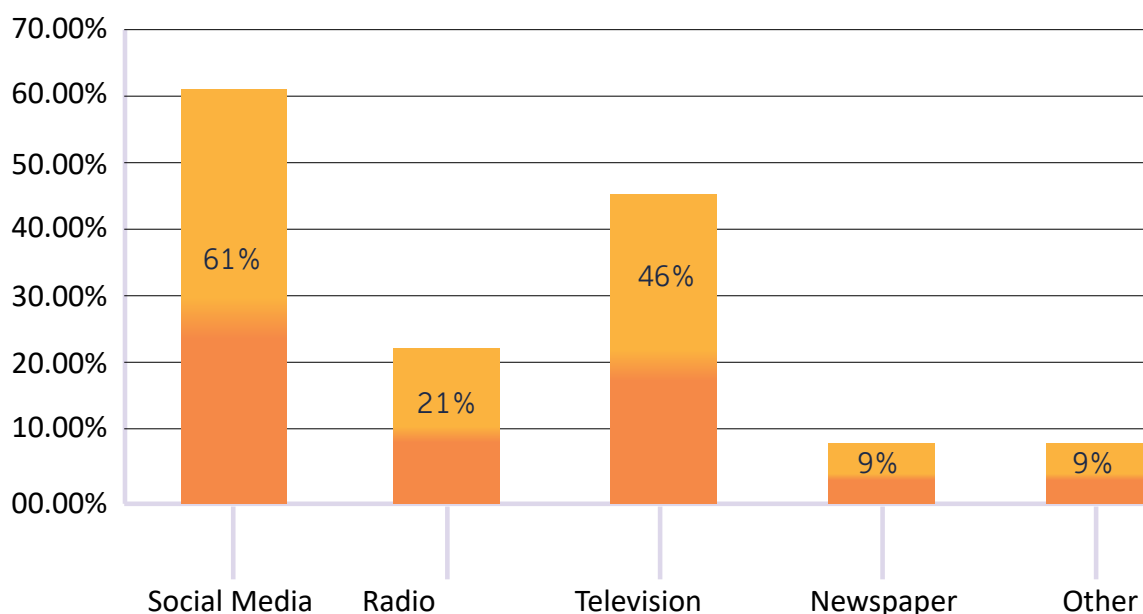
3.2 Response Analysis

● Social media was the most popular source of information, with 61% of participants selecting this option. Participants cited a variety of reasons for why they preferred social media as a source of news and analysis on the peace talks: (1) its ability to provide accurate information, since news and updates could be cross-checked immediately with posts by other users (as opposed to TV, radio, and print media); (2) access to the opinions of community/religious leaders, civil society representatives, and other influential figures (which emboldens readers to take a stand on the issues); (3) 24/7 availability via smartphone; and (4) social media's combination of educational and entertainment value. Entertainment value, for participants, meant the ability to toggle between news and more light-hearted content, such as games, photos, and chats with friends and family. Respondents saw this feature of social media as moderating the negative emotional impact of a constantly discouraging news cycle. Some stated that they preferred social media to broadcast media precisely because of this contrast. Moreover, participants shared that they typically tuned in to TV and radio along with family members, and the group setting somehow intensified the atmosphere of negativity, whereas social media shielded the individual user.

● Although users engage in social media individually, it offers them unprecedented opportunities for interaction and connectivity with Afghans from different regions and walks of life. Participants with a background in journalism asserted that some media agencies mine social media as their primary source of information, paraphrasing users' posts in their news content. The ability to broadcast one's views while remaining anonymous on social media allows especially vulnerable segments of society, such as women, journalists, activists, and other civil society leaders, to engage in social and political discourse without becoming a target of extremist groups and their sympathizers.

● The demographics of the sample may at least partially explain participants' preference for social media. Education (93%) and employment (70%) rates were higher among the sample than in the general population, and urban and male demographics were especially well represented.

● For participants who chose radio or television as the best source of information, accessibility was a key factor. Some participants mentioned the discussions on TV news programs as an attractive feature, providing them with more than one perspective. Participants who preferred radio noted that they can continue with their tasks, even in some cases at the workplace, while they listen to news.

● Participants who preferred the newspaper as a source of information seemed to do so because it was an old habit or hobby. Interestingly, two participants who preferred newspapers were illiterate. When asked to explain their choice, one woman said that she liked looking at the images to save time, and an older male said that he enjoyed it when his grandchildren read the newspaper to him. In certain provinces, such as Baghlan and Parwan, no participants opted for the newspaper because their areas were deprived of timely supply, rendering print news out-of-date by the time it arrived.

participants opted for the newspaper because their areas were deprived of timely supply, rendering print news out-of-date by the time it arrived.

3.3 Key Findings

● Although data from the last response category, 'other', paints a complicated picture, it should be emphasized that no participants in this group mentioned any initiatives by international stakeholders to communicate developments in the peace talks.

● While females who selected 'other' tended to cite family members, friends, and neighbors as important sources of information, males in this response category also listed community leaders, the mosque, and shuras.

● Nearly equal numbers of rural and urban participants selected 'other' in response to question 3—the highest rural-urban ratio in any response category. Participants in the 'other' category also had the lowest employment and education rates of any response category.

● There was remarkable parity between male and female preferences for all five sources of information.

● All but two participants in the 'newspaper' category belonged to the 13–40 age group. This is notable, since no strong age trends were observed in the social media category.

● Although most participants identified social media as their favorite source of information, access to social media does not necessarily translate to a preference for it. While 86% of participants reported having access to social media, only 61% said it was their preferred means of getting news and analysis on the peace talks.

● Although female participants were well represented in every other response category, they only accounted for 26% of responses in the 'newspaper' category. This might be due to the lower education rate among women in the general population.

4. Perception of Topics Discussed in the Peace Talks

The objective of this study was to analyze communication gaps in reaching the Afghan audience with information related to the peace process. Answers to question 4 were the most telling, in that they revealed a wide chasm between audience perceptions and the narrative promoted by international stakeholders.

> *What topics do you think are being discussed in the peace talks in Doha? And why?*
>
> *A. Power sharing arrangement with the Taliban*
> *B. Power sharing arrangements within major ethnicities/factions of Afghani stan*
> *C. American withdrawal*
> *D. Ceasefire*
> *E. How peace can be brought to Afghanistan*
> *F. Other (please specify)*
> *G. I don't know*

Participants were free to choose more than one option from the list. Three hundred and fifty-two participants, or 59% of the sample, chose multiple options, while only 248 (41%) chose a single option.

4.1 Data

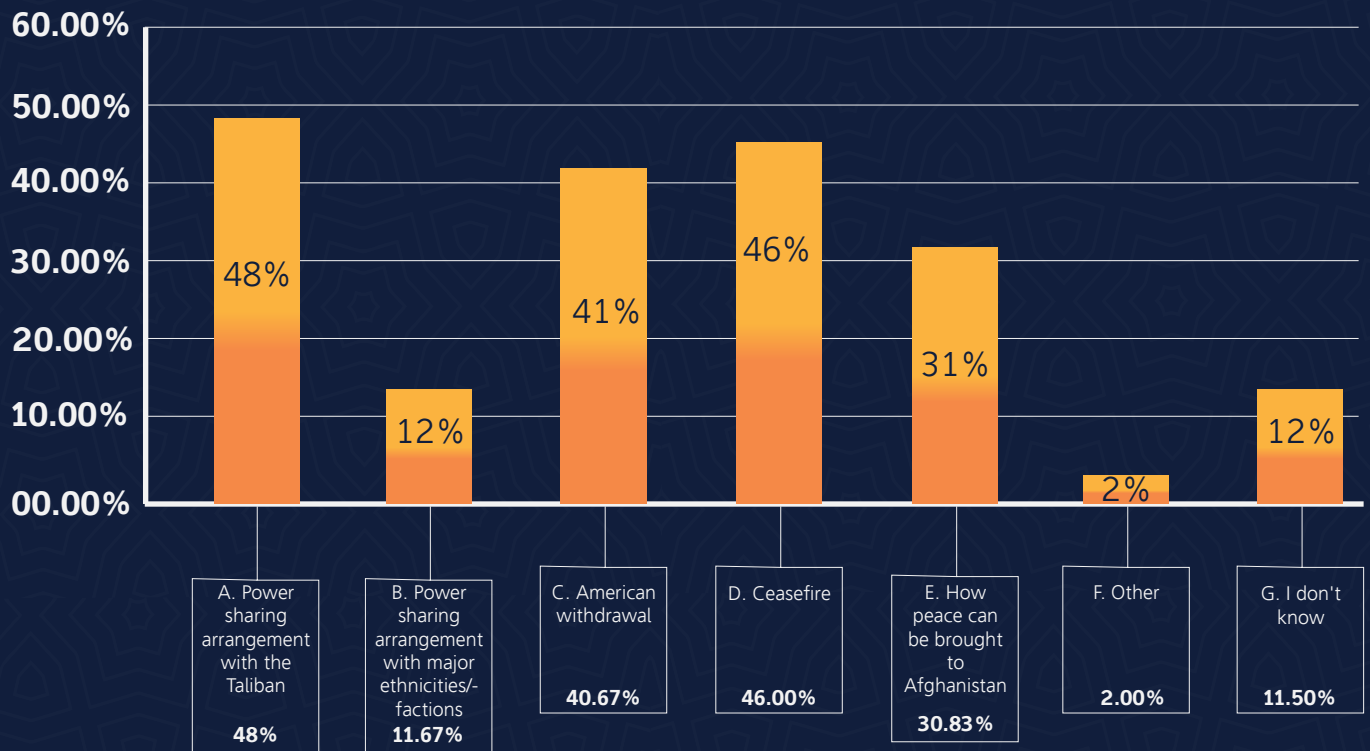*Figure 4.1. What topics do you think are being discussed in the peace talks in Doha?*

A. Power sharing arrangement with the Taliban	B. Power sharing arrangement with major ethnicities/-factions	C. American withdrawal	D. Ceasefire	E. How peace can be brought to Afghanistan	F. Other	G. I don't know
48%	11.67%	40.67%	46.00%	30.83%	2.00%	11.50%

4.2 Response Analysis

● The most widespread rationale for choosing option A ('Power sharing arrange-ment with the Taliban') was that the political calculation behind the peace talks was to give the Taliban a share of power in order to legitimize them in Afghan politics, which in turn would enable a phased drawdown of US troops from the country. When asked why they held this belief, respondents gave varying responses, such as 'This is what I have read/heard', 'This is what people around me talk about', 'It's common knowledge', and 'We have seen enough in this country to draw this conclu-sion'. Participants said that, having already experienced power less than two decades ago, the Taliban were determined to take advantage of the US's loosening grip over security and return to power; thus, they were bargaining for the maximum advan-tage in the peace negotiations.

● Many respondents from Nangarhar, Kandahar, Kunduz, and Kabul stated that under the pretext of supporting peace in Afghanistan, Pakistan was aiming to have greater sway in Afghan politics. This wish would be realized only when the Taliban have a share of power. Ninety-four percent of these respondents were educated. In other respects they were representative of the overall sample: 37% of participants in this response category were rural (compared to 38% overall) and 26% were female (vs. 30% overall).

● When asked why they had selected option B, most participants reasoned that in a war-torn, ethnically and regionally divided society like Afghanistan's, power distribu-tion among domestic stakeholders would be a major determinant of peace and stabil-ity; thus, intra-Afghan power sharing must be a topic of discussion in Doha. Although the multiple-choice option referred to 'ethnicities/factions', some participants insist-ed on adding 'warlords' to the list of those who would divide power. They named warlords as a major factor in Afghan politics, noting that some were already part of local or central government.

● There was near-consensus among the 41% of participants who chose option C that the US's eagerness for peace talks was motivated not by a sense of goodwill or concern for Afghanistan but by its own national interest in withdrawing troops. Partic-ipants only differed on the underlying reason for withdrawal: mounting domestic pressure to bring troops home, the financial strain of overseas military involvement, or embarrassment on the world stage at being unable to end a nineteen-year conflict.

being discussed in the peace talks. Participants stated that, irrespective of the peace talks' outcome (which many were not hopeful about), every stakeholder except the Taliban saw a ceasefire as the first step towards peace. The people and the government wanted it, and the US could use it as a critical test of the Taliban's autonomy and control over their forces. Many participants from Kandahar stated that if the Taliban failed to abide by a ceasefire, it would discredit their claim of being independent, proving that they could not override decisions made by their foreign patrons.

control over their forces. Many participants from Kandahar stated that if the Taliban failed to abide by a ceasefire, it would discredit their claim of being independent, proving that they could not override decisions made by their foreign patrons.

● Option E (that the peace talks are about 'how peace can be brought to Afghanistan') elicited strong opinions. The 31% of participants who selected it were unable to provide a robust rationale for their choice, merely following up with comments like 'This is what the name [peace talks] seems to suggest'. Others insisted that the talks were 'non-peaceful' and criticized participants who had chosen option E or being gullible for taking the misleading label 'peace talks' at face value. Many of the nearly 70% of participants who rejected option E dismissed the negotiations with phrases like 'anything but peace talks', 'a waste of time', and 'a joke'. The same trend emerged in focus group discussions. Some participants argued that the peace talks were just a way for the US to salvage its reputation by showing the international community that it was serious about ending the Afghan conflict. They also accused Afghans who lobbied for peace talks as being 'stooges of the west' who stood to benefit the most from the negotiations.

● Participants who chose option F, 'other', commented on the futility of peace talks. They came from all age groups, backgrounds, and provinces. Although their responses did not directly address the question, they provided valuable insight into the mindset of a large subset of the Afghan public and how negative perceptions of the peace talks had become deeply embedded. Some participants in this category also volunteered opinions on what the peace talks should include, e.g., 'Efficiency of local governance should be a topic of discussion'. The rationale for this argument was that poor local governance erodes trust in public institutions, which in turn bolsters the credibility of insurgents, who thrive on local grievances.

4.3 Key Findings

● Thirty-one percent of participants accepted the term 'peace talks' as an accurate label, but the remaining 69% expressed serious skepticism. Instead, they saw the talks as a US attempt to save face and secure a safe exit from the country.

● Among participants who chose only one answer, option G ('I don't know') was the most popular choice at 41%. It accounted for 26% of the total responses from the sample. As discussed above, most participants took this opportunity to castigate the peace talks and the involved parties. The second most popular choice was option A, accounting for 25% of all responses.

● Although the majority of participants expressed anxiety about giving the Taliban legitimacy through a political role, 48% believed that the crux of the peace talks was to determine a power sharing arrangement. While some participants strongly object ed to the idea of negotiating with the Taliban prior to them renouncing violence, others saw negotiations as a chance (albeit a slim one) for peace. At the time of the study, the US's inability to secure a commitment from the Taliban to renounce violence, as well as President Trump's abrupt termination of peace talks in September 2019, had left both groups of respondents dismayed, casting doubt on the intent of international stakeholders.

● Fifty percent of participants selected options A and B together, about power sharing arrangements with the Taliban and among different ethnic/religious factions. Barely more than 1% of participants selected option B alone. Participants demonstrated a deep understanding of how political elites have used ethnic identity to consolidate support for their own agendas. Some young and elderly participants voiced concern at this trend, which they believed would undermine national identity. They also opined that no real, sustainable peace could be achieved without a power sharing arrangement among different Afghan factions, including warlords. If warlords were excluded from the process, they would upset the delicate equilibrium that exists.

● Two in 5 participants believed that US withdrawal from Afghanistan (option C) was one of the main topics of discussion in the peace talks, stating that it was a 'necessity' rather than an 'option' because of domestic pressure to bring troops home, unsustainable military costs, rising casualties, and the failure to win the war after nineteen years.

5. What More Would Participants Like to Know about the Peace Talks?

The survey's fifth and final question was meant to identify participants' concerns about the peace talks and on what topics they wanted clearer communication.

If given a chance, what more would you like to know about the peace talks? And why?

A. If it is going to bring stability in Afghanistan
B. If it is going to safeguard women's rights
C. Will it impact the education of our children?
D. Will it lead to national reconstruction?[8]
E. What is actually being agreed upon?
F. What are the motives of the Americans?
G. How will it affect the future political setup of Afghanistan?
H. Other (please specify)

As with the previous question, participants were told they could select more than one option for this question as well. Whereas for question 4, no single option was selected by more than half of participants, for question 5, option A (about Afghanistan's stability) earned an absolute majority.

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[8] Literally, 'nation building'. However, 'national reconstruction' is used in this translation because of the political connotations of the former, which are absent in Dari and Pashto.

5.1 Data

Figure 5.1. What more would you like to know about the peace talks?

	A. Stability in Afghanistan	B. Safeguard-ing women's rights	C. Impact on kids' education	D. Nation building	E. What is actually agreed upon?	F. Motives of the Americans	G. Future political set up	H. Other
	64.33%	48.33%	38.50%	31.00%	25.17%	27.33%	22.50%	5.83%
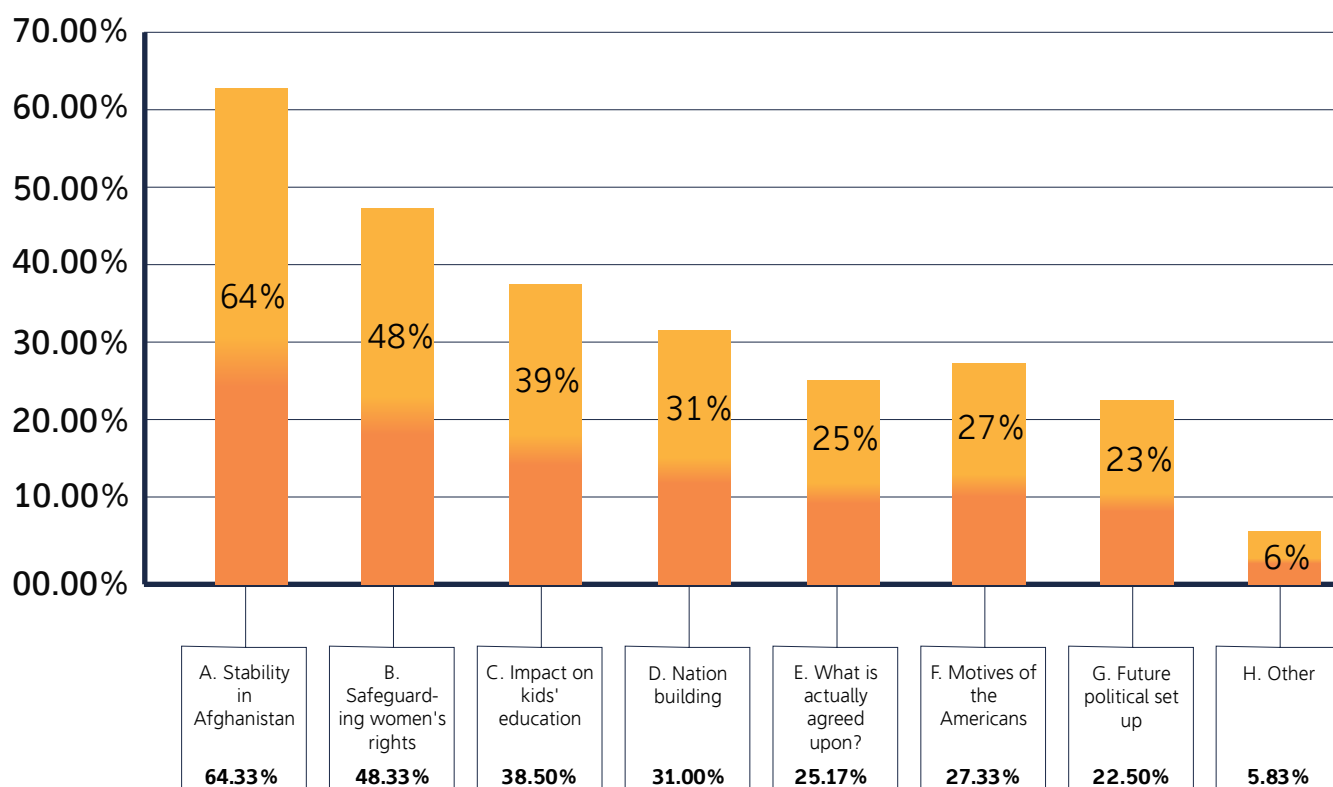
5.2 Response Analysis

● Nearly all participants stated that stability in Afghanistan was a prerequisite to ensuring any of the other goods—health, education, etc.—mentioned in question 5. Different demographics interpreted stability differently. Young participants and male participants spoke of political stability as a precursor to security, observing that an unstable, ethnically divided coalition has hindered law and order and prevented the delivery of basic goods and services. This situation has also deterred foreign invest-ment, leaving Afghans unemployed and frustrated. Some participants noted that social stability directly affects national unity and integrity. For elderly participants, stability meant creating an environment where their adult children would flourish, so much so that they would opt to stay in Afghanistan rather than leave. Female participants said that stability meant, for instance, freedom to walk down the street to buy groceries without fear, and that a lack of stability would restrict their choices in life. Many participants expressed sympathy for fellow Afghans and ANDSF mem-bers, who are killed regularly and indiscriminately due to continuing instability.

● Fifty-five percent of those who selected option B, about women's rights, were male; they also represented roughly the same urban-rural ratio as the overall survey sample. However, male participants interpreted women's rights much more narrowly than did the women themselves. While women mentioned equal opportunity and equal treatment, the right to vote, the right to education, the right to work outside the home, and the right to free speech, men only spoke of the right to education. They also stated that it is better for women to work at/from home or to restrict themselves to professions such as caretaker, nurse, midwife, or teacher. When asked why, some men said that these roles complement women's inherent nurturing quality, while others reasoned that women would be interacting less with unrelated males in these professions. Female participants expressed serious concern about how the Taliban returning to power would impact their future and voiced little to no sympathy for the Taliban. Forty-five percent of respondents for option B were female, 15% more than their proportion in the overall sample. The ratio of working to non-working women in this response category was 1:1.

● Thirty-nine percent of participants expressed concern about how a Taliban return to power would affect children's education (option C). This concern came from memories of Taliban rule, when the regime weakened the science curriculum and banned girls from attending school. Forty percent of participants in this response category were married, and 30% were female (comparable to the overall sample demographics).

● Most participants who selected option C, about national reconstruction, identified themselves as Afghan first (i.e., before using an ethnic identifier) and voiced deep concerns for the future of the country. They wanted to know if the peace talks would lead to greater division or encourage unity. Participants in this response category were worried not only about the effects of Afghan ethnic tensions on national development but also about subversive efforts by Afghanistan's neighbors; Pakistan, Iran, Russia, and China.

concerns for the future of the country. They wanted to know if the peace talks would lead to greater division or encourage unity. Participants in this response category were worried not only about the effects of Afghan ethnic tensions on national development but also about subversive efforts by Afghanistan's neighbors; Pakistan, Iran, Russia, and China.

● One in four participants cited the closed-door nature of the negotiations and conflicting information from various sources as the main causes for concern. Participants wanted to know precisely what was being agreed on with the Taliban (option E).

● Participants who chose option F, about wanting clarity on US motives, mentioned the exclusion of GIRoA from peace talks, President Trump's abrupt cancellation of the peace deal over the deaths of two US soldiers (a move that they saw as trivializing ANDSF deaths by comparison), the reversal of the US's initial resolve to defeat the Taliban, and the fact that the US continues to collaborate with Pakistan despite Pakistan's destabilizing role. Elderly participants, Pashtuns, and residents of Kandahar were more likely to express these sentiments.

● The 6% of participants who chose option G, 'other', had a variety of concerns, including the implications of the peace talks for Afghanistan's sovereignty; whether foreign powers would guarantee non-interference in Afghanistan; what kind of precedent a peace deal / power-sharing arrangement would set for other terror groups (e.g., Daesh); and the future of goods and services such as primary health care centers and potable water. It may be significant that one-third of participants in this response category were Afghan Hindus, who are highly concerned about how the Taliban's resurgence could affect their religious freedom, sites of worship, education and emploment, and equality before the law as citizens.

5.3 Key Findings

● Nearly two-thirds of participants (64%) wanted more information about Afghanistan's future stability, raising a spectrum of issues ranging from personal safety to political, economic, and social stability. More than a third of these respondents (35%) also wanted to know how the peace talks would affect national reconstruction. For many Afghans, Afghanistan's stability and development are closely related issues.

● The significant increase in education levels and women's presence in the workforce, politics, and society at large has increased awareness of women's rights. Half

of all female participants expressed anxiety about the future of their rights, and 50% of these were working women. Whereas the women in the survey construed women's rights as freedom to make life choices, economic independence, and equal opportunity, the male participants interpreted the concept much more narrowly.

● The importance of both sexes ascribed to children's education reveals a widespread desire to preserve gains in this area, as well as widespread anxiety about potential reversals. As some married participants noted, any setbacks in children's education would be reason enough to consider emigrating. Male participants who were not particularly concerned about women's rights in general were nonetheless concerned about the consequences of the peace talks for children's education—especially their daughters'.

● When participants voiced suspicion of US motives in the peace talks, the root cause was a sense that the US had failed to keep its initial commitment to defeat al-Qaeda and the Taliban. Having personally experienced violence and terror, many participants rejected the idea of legitimizing the Taliban through peace talks.

● Participants stated that there must be an inclusive political order with ethnic and regional representation in order to address the deteriorating security situation. In contrast to the current political climate, national interests must come before personal gain.

● Participants overwhelmingly expressed disillusionment with the peace talks. Some believed peace was simply elusive for Afghanistan; others opined that even if peace came, it would be too little, too late; and still others voiced concerns about the inability of Afghan leaders to guide the country, ethnicity as a factor in conflict, and a national culture of impunity and strongman rule. External contributors to this sense of disillusionment included the cross-border sponsoring of terrorism and the suspicion of US motives in the peace process, exacerbated by US military involvement in other parts of the Muslim world. The most visibly discouraged participants were Afghan Hindus, whose fears about the peace talks were acute due to their status as a small, targeted religious minority in a country where pluralism is under threat.

Conclusion

The aim of this research was to explore Afghan perceptions of an uncertain, shifting peace process and to assess the effectiveness of stakeholders' communications. This report is offered as a starting point for effective listening, which will enable stakeholders to devise an effective communications strategy to support the implementation of the peace deal and the critical intra-Afghan talks. Without understanding the concerns and perceptions of the Afghan audience and targeting communications accordingly, stakeholders will merely be one of many conflicting sources broadcasting messages into an already oversaturated, chaotic information environment.

This report finds that Afghans are largely reading the current peace process through the lens of the US's policy ambivalence over the past nineteen years and the present administration's desire for a rapid troop withdrawal. By pressing for peace negotiations, the US was perceived as seeking a face-saving exit that would release it from its responsibility for ensuring security and stability in Afghanistan. Other concerns, such as the absence of the Afghan government from formal talks and the US's inability to secure an enforceable commitment from the Taliban to renounce violence reinforced this perception.

For many Afghans, formal peace efforts over the past year and a half have sparked hope for an end to the conflict, but also fear, uncertainty, and heightened anxiety about the country's future. The fact that less than one-third of participants believed that the negotiations had to do with peace strongly suggests that the US and other international stakeholders failed to communicate their narrative effectively. Study participants responded negatively to the peace talks because the information they had received was contradictory, sporadic, complex yet incomplete, and, from their viewpoint, laden with media bias and malign political agendas. Rather than galvanizing public support for a formal peace process, US and international messaging on the subject has deepened Afghans' suspicions and created a chaotic atmosphere of misinformation.

Left unaddressed, broad skepticism among Afghans will make it impossible to implement a sustainable peace deal. Although negotiations have now moved to another stage, international stakeholders still have an opportunity to shape the peace narrative and execute a communications strategy that is localized, nuanced, and responsive to public perception. The following recommendations offer some practical steps towards this end.

Recommendations

Reshaping public perception of the peace process at this juncture will be far from simple. One fatal communications error is to picture the audience as a blank slate on which new messages can be written. On the contrary, history and context always give recipients a preexisting 'template' for processing new information. This is especially true in regard to the Afghan audience, whose template includes two decades of US military and political involvement in Afghanistan and a longer history of conflict and foreign intervention. As this study demonstrates, the US is operating from a negative balance of trust and legitimacy with the Afghan public. The task of communicating well is complicated by the country's extraordinary diversity and the many other, conflicting messages about the peace process to which Afghans are exposed. Furthermore, building (or rebuilding) trust takes time. Communicators should recognize the limitations of even the best communications strategies, focus on the demographics most likely to reconsider their views, and maintain modest expectations for outcomes.

A revamped communications strategy should address the core grievances and negative perceptions raised in this report: that the peace deal is a cover for US failure, and that the US is seeking to withdraw troops regardless of how this impacts Afghanistan's stability.

Communicators should adopt a two-pronged strategy:

(1) Frame messages to appeal to as broad and diverse an audience as possible. The 'conversion' rate (i.e., percentage of the general population who change their views) from these kinds of communications will probably be low, but so will the risk of backlash from those who take issue with specific religious or cultural arguments.

(2) Target different demographics with different messages based on political inclinations (e.g., attitude towards democracy, religious pluralism, women's rights, or the US legacy in Afghanistan). The conversion rate will probably be higher than for (1), but this approach will require a greater expenditure of time and financial resources.

> ● International stakeholders should launch a concerted multimedia campaign highlighting the gains of the last nineteen years and why an imminent peace is crucial to secure them. Conversely, prolonging the conflict might irretrievably jeopardize the country's progress in areas like education, health care, and the economy.

● Messages should be clear, succinct, and consistent. Effective messaging in the local context also requires a narrative approach that incorporates deeply personal stories and symbols drawing on cultural values and traditions, with emotional impact.

● Every possible medium should be used in order to reach every possible demographic—TV, radio, and print, but especially social media, since 61% of survey participants identified it as their preferred source for news and analysis on the peace talks, and because viral content on social media often gets picked up by the media establishment and amplified through coverage. Animations, short videos, memes, and Graphic Interchange Format (GIF) images can be quickly and widely disseminated through popular platforms, especially Facebook.

● The US government should appoint regional and provincial liaisons to network with district governors, elders, and mosque leaders, acting as two-way conveyors of information and feedback about US policy and the progress of the peace process. This will help dispel misconceptions and misinformation circulated at the local level. University students and civil society organizations also represent important segments of society for fostering local movements in support of peace.

● Communicators must give special attention to not only communicating facts about the peace process but also framing these in terms of benefits for Afghan society.

● Communications content should especially address the themes of children's education, women's rights, national stability, and reconstruction, which were overwhelmingly issues of concern for the study participants. Communicators should reaffirm their commitment to Afghan society's gains in these areas and explain how the US-Taliban peace deal lays the foundation for preserving them.

Annex I

Demographic Details

A total of 600 responses were collected from 8 provinces of Afghanistan.

Location: 372 of 600 participants (62%) hailed from urban areas, while the remaining 228 (38%) were from rural areas.

Sex: Participants had the option of selecting 'male', 'female', 'do not wish to reply', or 'other'. Four hundred and ten participants (68.33%) identified as male, 182 participants (30.33%) as female, and the remaining 8 (1.33%) preferred not to specify.

Age: To facilitate analysis and identify any age-related patterns in opinion, participants were divided into five age groups:

- 13-17 years: 59 participants (9.83%) - 37 male, 32 female.
- 18-25 years: 275 participants (45.83%) - 183 male, 92 female.
- 26-40 years: 209 participants (34.83%) - 162 male, 47 female.
- 41-55 years: 40 participants (6.67%) - 35 male, 5 female.
- 55+ years: 17 participants (2.83%) - 11 male, 6 female.

It is noteworthy that nearly 85% of respondents fell in the age bracket of 18-40.
Employment Status: Participants could select one of three options. Response distribution and sex distribution were as follows:

- None: 181 participants identified as unemployed at the time of the survey; 97 male, 84 female.

- Private: 269 participants identified as being employed in the private sector; 204 male, 65 female.

- Public: 150 participants identified as being employed in the public sector, i.e.,government in some capacity; 117 male, 33 female.

- Thus, 69.83% of survey participants (419) were employed and 30.17% uneployed. Women constituted 23.39% of workers in the sample.

Marital Status: Although the questionnaire only provided two options for this questi o n , 'married' and 'single', 7 participants identified themselves as 'engaged', leading to the creation of a third category for data analysis.

• Married: 275 participants (42.83%); 198 male, 59 female; 146 urban (116 male, 30 female); 111 rural (82 male, 29 female).

• Si 6 participants (56%); 216 male, 120 female; 222 urban (131 male, 91 female); 114 rural (85 male, 29 female).

• Engaged: 7 participants (1.17 %).
Education: Participants could choose one of four options for this question. Response distribution was as follows:

• None: 42 participants had never received any education, formal or informal. They were unable to read or write.

• High School / Graduate: 171 participants were enrolled in high school at the time of the survey, had graduated from high school but not pursued further studies, or had completed some high school studies but not graduated.

• University Student / Graduate: 374 participants were enrolled in university at the time of the survey, had graduated from university, or had completed some university studies but not graduated.

• Madrasa: 12 participants identified themselves as madrasa students.
Access to Social Media: Participants were given a simple yes or no response option. Answers to this question were compared against other demographic variables as follows:

• 8 participants (86.33%) reported having access to social media; 366 male (70.66%), 152 female (29.34%).

• 325 of 518 participants (62.74%) with access to social media were from urban areas and 193 (37.26%) were from rural areas.

• Of the 419 participants in the total survey sample who reported being employed, 382 (91.17%) had access to social media.

• No: 82 participants (13.67%) had no access to social media; 52 male (63.41%), 30 female (36.59%).

• 47 of the 82 participants (57.32%) without access to social media were from urban areas and 35 (42.68%) from rural areas.

• A majority (58.54%) of 'no' responses to the social media question came from participants in the 13-17, 41-55, and 55+ age groups.