

Distinguishing Friend From Foe in Afghanistan

Author: [IWPR Afghanistan](#)

Calls for more clarity on who might qualify as a negotiating partner in peace talks.

Participants in IWPR debates have called on the government to clearly define who should be included in the ongoing negotiations with insurgent groups.

As well as a stop-start talks process with representatives of the Taleban, the government has launched schemes to offer work, education and land to insurgents who lay down their arms.

In a 2010 speech, the then president Hamed Karzai famously addressed the insurgents in conciliatory terms.

“My dear Taleban, you are welcome on your own soil. Do not hurt this country, and don't destroy or kill yourselves,” he said.

Panellists at recent IWPR discussion events held in Baghlan, Badakhshan, and Badghis provinces said it was important to differentiate between those actors who could contribute to reconciliation and those who would be an obstacle.

“Unfortunately, there is still no clear definition of the enemy in the Afghan constitution,” said Nur Ahmad Atay, who heads a social and cultural institution in Badakhshan's Kishm district in the northeast of the country.

Audience member Dost Mohammad, who is training to be a teacher in Kishm, said this ambiguity created public mistrust.

“The lack of a clear definition of the enemy means that everyone who is different – whether they're local or foreign – makes people suspicious,” he said.

Civil society activist Mohammad Osman Shirzai said that the High Peace Council, set up by Karzai to oversee negotiations, had done little to help.

“Afghans have not been able to get a general definition of the Taleban,” he said. “I believe that an enemy is a someone who stands against the religion, people and law of the land.”

Shah Zaman Zamani, a religious scholar and tribal leader, said that the real threat came from regional powers.

“The enemies of Afghanistan are those [states] that are in economic, cultural and historical competition with Afghanistan,” he said, in an apparent reference to neighbours Pakistan and Iran. “We will achieve peace when we develop better intelligence and information capabilities.”

Afghanistan's neighbours also came in for criticism in the event held in Badghis province, located in Afghanistan's northwest.

“The enemies of peace and of the Afghan people are the ISI [Pakistani intelligence service] and Pakistan's military, which do not want peace in Afghanistan,” said Abdul Hadi Beg, the head of the development council of the provincial capital Qala-ye Nau. “And it isn't just Pakistan, but also some other neighbouring states that indirectly interfere in our country's internal affairs.”

Badghis provincial council member Monisa Qaderi agreed.

“Our young people go to Pakistan and are fed a false ideology in the madrassas [religious schools],” Qaderi said. “They come back full of extremism and the Taleban creed.”

*This report is based on an ongoing series of debates conducted as part of the IWPR programme **Afghan Reconciliation: Promoting Peace and Building Trust by Engaging Civil Society.***

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