

FEATURE: Young Afghans call for new focus on 'local peace' in a city surrounded by war

Sitting for green tea with Habiba Gulustani and her fellow activists provides a lesson in peace, conflict and patience. With her anxious six-year-old daughter spinning on her lap, she has the added disquiet of knowing that her city – Kunduz – was overrun in 2015 and again briefly in 2016 by insurgents, who still encircle the city. The few small airplanes that land here make a classic “corkscrew” landing – from a high altitude and quickly looping down – as a special precaution against potential ground fire.

“In the last five years, our hopes for peace have been dashed by war,” said Habiba, 32. “Earlier we had some optimism because of the dialogue established between local elders and insurgents. But right now, there is less talk of peace and not nearly enough security for making peace.”

Even with that, Habiba and a group of fellow activists in Kunduz say they are willing to continue to work for peace at a local level in a city often described by residents as a “Mini-Afghanistan” because of its diverse ethnic mix of Pashtun, Kazakh, Kyrgyz, Tajik, Hazara, Arab, Uzbek, and Turkmen, among others. It is a city today that is at the centre of an incessant war, but one that is collectively searching for peace on every street corner.

In February, Afghan President Ashraf Ghani made an unprecedented and direct offer of peace talks with the largest anti-government force, the Taliban, who ruled the country until 2001. The offer – put forth at the “Kabul Process II” conference and discussed further by regional and international parties in Tashkent – raised hopes that peace has become not only a global concern, but also a top national priority, particularly in regions that have experienced the brunt of the conflict.

Peace activists and common citizens in Kunduz city, however, see the nation’s hopes for peace less on a national level and more through a local prism, including through their own steady efforts to reconcile and make peace from day to day.



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Habiba Gulustani and her daughter are anxious for peace.

Habiba recently spent several weeks with her group “Equality for Peace and Democracy,” interviewing “reconciled insurgents” who took up past offers to drop their armed struggle and return to their families and government-controlled territory.

“Local peace for them is essential, but I must say that most of the families we spoke to this past year, including to former insurgents, remain disappointed by the process thus far. They require more help with transitioning and also need to know they are safe from reprisals after they turn in their arms.”

For Habiba, the interviews she conducted highlighted the longer-term reconciliation needs that will have to be addressed as an Afghan peace deal with international backing takes shape. The United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan ([UNAMA](#)) has advocated for peace and reconciliation through events and media forums, including in Kunduz. More recently, President Ghani welcomed the UN role in future peace efforts, and 2018 is a year flush with fresh initiatives for peace.

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Residents here in Kunduz distinguish between “political peace,” which they see as a national priority, and a “social peace,” on a local level, which can address issues like women’s participation, long-term justice, and broader

reunification efforts after years of conflict.

“Seven years ago, when I first took a seat on the provincial peace committee, we worked on harmonizing peace on our own, and there wasn’t much international interest at all,” said Wahidullah Rahmani, 32, an activist, who this year launched a new peace initiative called the Kunduz Rescue Movement.

“During my work with the provincial peace committee, we helped take 500 fighters off the battlefield, but the whole effort fell apart over time. Our overall security in Kunduz has suffered as fighters have returned to the battle. Because Kunduz has been at the centre of the struggle, we fear that – if work for peace is not done now – we’ll be facing a much greater conflict in a year or two.”

Outside the city centre the conflict grinds on: Insurgents sustain themselves by taxing electricity lines and taking a cut from civil servant salaries, according to residents and local officials.

The Kunduz Rescue Movement is concentrating its efforts now on work that needs to be done to secure a lasting peace. “We want security improvements but also development, including new links to the outside world – as in a new airport. Peace will be a ‘local reality’ when we help to reduce the distance between people and the government. We can do this on our own but we also want and need more international support.”



UNAMA/PS

Young activist Zabihulla Majidi talks about the prospects for peace in Afghanistan.

The running conflict and constant uncertainty about the future has led to growing social problems, including a rash of drug addiction among the city's youth, according to locals.

"For the last three years we have lived under the constant fear that the city's defenses will collapse again," said Zabihulla Majidi, who advocates for peace along with Mr. Rahmani. "Recently, the situation has improved a bit, but there are not many new jobs, and young people are confused about their future and they are longing for peace."

As Habiba holds her daughter, she nods in agreement. Many young men in the region have tried to avoid the inevitability of fighting by fleeing as refugees through expensive and perilous human smuggling rackets. For women, such an escape from the realities of war is rarely an option.

"For the most part, women and girls don't have the possibility to leave – and that is why we are seeking a greater role in the peace effort."

UNAMA has a mandate to support the Government of Afghanistan and its citizens in a shared goal of becoming a stable, open, and peaceful nation. This feature piece is meant to tell a human interest story related to how Afghanistan and the UN are working together to overcome the many challenges to achieving this goal.