



# REVIEWING THE 'EID CEASEFIRE' IN AFGHANISTAN

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The Taliban and Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) jointly observed a three-day ceasefire during June 15-17, 2018. It came as a follow up of Afghan President Ashraf Ghani's prior demand from the Taliban to observe a brief unilateral ceasefire which the government was to uphold over the Ramadan month.<sup>1</sup> In the past one decade, Afghan government had offered several temporary ceasefires to the Taliban which has been a failure. Thus, the ceasefire was an extraordinary move and exclusively new which lasted during June 15-17. It came at a time when security situation has worsened in Afghanistan and almost 70 percent of the country is under the Taliban control.

The three-day truce resulted into peaceful movement of fighters and soldiers across the Afghan territory. Peace endured in several regions including—Faryab, Ghazni, Kunduz provinces which have been theatres of war for the most violent Taliban 2018 Al-Khandaq Offensive.<sup>2</sup> The truce also renewed peaceful

Helmand and Kandahar provinces which are the traditional strongholds of the Taliban. In a country inflicted with decades of war, it was a rare vision where the Taliban fighters met with the government officials and vice versa. According to the Conciliation Resources report published in June, highlights interviews with the spokesperson of five territorial Taliban 'caucuses'.<sup>3</sup> The report suggests the growing desire for peace among Taliban factions, their exhaustion from the longest war in Afghanistan and criticism of the Taliban leadership.

The ceasefire resulted to unusual festivity in the war-torn country. A feeling of plausibility, expectation over a peaceful Afghanistan also emerged seeing unusual grinning selfies<sup>4</sup> of Taliban soldiers with the Afghan army and officials who are normally their targets. The truce also demonstrated that calling upon a ceasefire is possible from both sides—Afghan government and the Taliban. It helped Afghans picture what a future without violence could look like. Furthermore, the Afghan President on June

17 advanced the political progress of the truce by an additional unilateral ten-day extension of the ceasefire-until June 30. He emphasized on government's willingness to negotiate with the Taliban on issues of shared concerns including the presence of foreign forces in Afghanistan.<sup>5</sup> Rejecting further extension of the ceasefire, the Taliban soon resumed offensive operations in Badghis, Faryab and Farah provinces on June 18. Attacks were also carried out in Kunduz, Logar, Nangarhar and Helmand provinces.

The unilateral ceasefire may not have paid off in a way anticipated by President Ghani, nevertheless it brought certain dimensions. (a) The Taliban announced their own ceasefire independent of the truce declared by the Afghan government; (b) when invited for further extending the ceasefire, the Taliban refused and immediately resumed attacks—reflecting that they prefer war over dialogue; (c) many Taliban expressed their discontentment at being ordered to fight again after the end of the holiday. This demonstrated that a potential rift exists between the Taliban leadership and the order of militants in Afghanistan that debilitate cohesion among the Taliban. In return, the claims of probable rifts among the Taliban cadre and ranks have been denied by the Taliban calling it as a baseless propaganda<sup>6</sup> attempting to complicate the public opinions.

Nationwide ceasefire for Eid holiday on June 15-17, 2018, uncovered rifts among the Taliban leadership regarding reconciliation.

Within its ruling of Quetta Shura, the Taliban additionally faces a power struggle. The truce could fuel a fracture between Taliban leaders willing to reconciliation and hardliners challenging the peace talks. Second Deputy Leader of the Taliban, Mullah Yaqoob and others were angered by the joint celebrations during the truce. The Taliban leader—Mullah Haibatullah Akhundzada is considered a moderate *via-a-vis* whom persuasive peace can be spoken of. In fact, most of the peace negotiations initiated by the government are being referred to Akhundzada. The Afghan government's past endeavours to exploit these cracks inside the Taliban and push its pioneers towards peace talks by supporting seceding groups have not yielded huge outcomes. Therefore, before it is too late and opportunity for a probable peace fades away, the government must hands-on rather than further delay.

Currently, Ghani administration is looking for improving the war situation of Afghanistan particularly through dialogue. In addition, the Afghan President is also desperate to stop the fighting to provide respite to his people, stabilizing the situation. In the midst of developing conjecture about a possible peace talks in Afghanistan, a significant shift came about in the U.S. policy on July 15, 2018, in lieu to the United States ongoing war in Afghanistan. The Trump administration has shown its willingness to join peace talks with the Taliban, however, ascertaining an Afghan-led and Afghan-owned peace process. Mike Pompeo, Secretary of

State has very clearly stated during his Afghan visit in early July that U.S. role will be limited to — facilitating, supporting, participating in the peace talks only in the presence of the Afghan government.

At the same time, the exposed rifts among Taliban leadership indicate that there are possibilities where Afghan government can advance their strategic goal of a negotiated settlement with the Taliban and channelize further peace talks to advance with strategic objectives in Afghanistan. Peace moves and strategy will be most advantageous for the Afghans, Taliban and Afghanistan. As of now the uncertainty of immediate peace continues to prevail in the country.

***(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS])***

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Ahmed Rashid, “What is with the Eid ceasefire with the Taliban?”, *Aljazeera*, June 10, 2018, <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/eid-ceasefire-lead-peace-taliban-180610105510469.html>. Accessed on July 7, 2018.

<sup>2</sup>Kate Clarke, “The Eid Ceasefire: Allowing Afghans to imagine their country at peace”, *Afghanistan Analysts Network*, June 19, 2018, <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/the-eid-ceasefire-allowing-afghans-to-imagine-their-country-at-peace/>. Accessed on July 7, 2018.

<sup>3</sup>Dr Anna Larson, “Possibilities for a peaceful political future: perspectives of five Taliban caucuses”, *Conciliation Resources*, June 2018, <http://www.c-r.org/accord/afghanistan/possibilities-peaceful-political-future-perspectives-leaders-five-taliban>. Accessed on July 27, 2018.

<sup>4</sup>Scott DesMarais, “A “Remarkable” Afghan Ceasefire”, *Institute for the Study of War*, June 22, 2018,

<http://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/remarkable-afghan-ceasefire>. Accessed on July 9, 2018.

<sup>5</sup>“Helmand Peace Convoy Arrives in Kabul”, *Tolo News*, June 18, 2018, <http://prod.tolonews.com/afghanistan/helmand-peace-convoy-arrives-kabul>. Accessed on July 9, 2018.

<sup>6</sup>“Statement of Islamic Emirate regarding end of three day Eid ceasefire”, *Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan*, June 17, 2018, <https://alemarah-english.com/?p=30455>. Accessed on July 7, 2018.