

WHEN IS THE RIGHT TIME FOR A CEASEFIRE IN AFGHANISTAN?

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Looking at the sedate and complicated Intra-Afghan peace negotiations¹, it seems that the arrival at a mutually acceptable arrangement for the war in Afghanistan is likely to take a long time. It will require negotiators from both the Afghan government and the Taliban to tackle the delicate political issues and the future of a government underlying the conflict. In the few months that the representatives sat at the negotiation table, we have seen that the killings, atrocities and destruction continued, perhaps more than before the official start of the peace process. As the Intra-Afghan peace negotiations enter into a critical phase, many would ask, when is the right time for a ceasefire? Of course, ordinary Afghans more than anyone else yearn for the soonest possible cessation of the conflict that takes its toll every single day from the innocent citizens. Indeed, moral and human principles teach us that every life is important and should be preserved and saved whenever possible. But what does history teach us? When is the right time for a ceasefire and to interrupt a war (in this case the war in Afghanistan)? Should it be before or after the Intra-Afghan negotiations on political reforms begin? Should the Afghan government, the Taliban and the International Community give priority to reaching a ceasefire in order to save

¹ The Diplomat, January 12, 2021: [Latest Phase of Intra-Afghan Peace Talks Off to Slow Start](#)

lives immediately? Or should they first prioritize the achievement of a political settlement that would likely result in an enduring peace and with it a definitive end to the decades-long conflict? In this article, I will look at various previous ceasefires and their success or failure to result in lasting settlements in conflicts and their implications for the case of Afghanistan. I will look at the timing possibilities for a ceasefire in Afghanistan by briefly examining the episodes of civil wars where ceasefires were introduced before, during, or after the negotiations on political issues underlying the conflicts.

A Ceasefire before Negotiations on Key Issues

Three main arguments, among others, could argue for a ceasefire before the Intra-Afghan negotiations on underlying political issues. First, declaration of a ceasefire before negotiations on key political issues could be justified for humanitarian reasons. An early interlude in the fighting will spare a great number of innocent lives as well as of those in the fight². Additionally, an early cessation of the strife will allow for the safe transportation and distribution of urgent humanitarian assistance and relief to part of the population that has long been the victims of the violence.

Second, agreeing to a ceasefire before the Intra-Afghan negotiations on core topics could serve as a trust-building factor showing the belligerents' willingness to negotiate in good faith³. Moreover, the continuation of war on a scale we are now witnessing may generate sentiments of hatred and stir up desires of revenge on both sides, hence perpetuating the cycle of violence and fueling the war rather than motivating the Afghan government and the Taliban to end it. An early ceasefire will help reduce the level of anger between the two sides and greatly contribute to trust building, which is critical for closing the differences and, reaching to a mutually acceptable and enduring settlement of the war in Afghanistan.

Third, it can be argued that a ceasefire before the Intra-Afghan negotiations on fundamental political issues will freeze the situation for both the Afghan government and the Taliban that will in turn allow for consecutive negotiations under predictable situation rather than constantly changing positions based on differing cost-benefit analysis grounded on the gains and losses incurred on the battleground. A preliminary truce will immobilize violent events on the

² (Touval, 1995)

³ (Skoog, 2003)

battlefield and likely make the Intra-Afghan negotiations process shorter and expedite the attainment of an agreement⁴.

But what does the history of pre-negotiations ceasefire teach us? In the contemporary history, only the case of Northern Ireland supports the hypothesis that a ceasefire before negotiations may contribute to the achievement of a mutually acceptable agreement and a definitive end to a civil war. The conflict in Northern Ireland continued for nearly three decades (1969-1998), during which the rebels sought to end the status of Northern Ireland in the UK and establish a United Ireland through the use of violence. The most influential among the pro-united Ireland insurgent groups was the Irish Republican Army (IRA) and its associated political party Sinn Fein. The British government denied discussing core political issues underlying the conflict with Sinn Fein before the IRA agreed to a ceasefire and cessation of violence. The IRA/Sinn Fein eventually agreed to a ceasefire in August 1997, which was shortly followed by the first all-inclusive peace negotiations that led to the achievement of a comprehensive peace agreement – known as the Belfast or Good Friday Agreement – endorsed by all parties to the talks⁵.

In other cases, preliminary ceasefires failed to make a conducive environment for negotiations over a political settlement that would accelerate a mutually acceptable solution and a definitive end to the conflicts. The First Liberian Civil War (1989-1996) is one such example where pre-negotiations ceasefires not only helped achieve an agreement, but also each of the interruptions in the hostilities provided an opportunity for the belligerents to re-group and re-arm for the resumption of a much-intensified attacks. The war in Liberia began in December 1989 when insurgents belonging to an opposition group, the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL), led by Charles Taylor, attacked the country from the neighboring Côte d'Ivoire⁶. The conflict soon turned into a flood of atrocities against civilians. The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) intervened in the conflict in 1990 prioritizing to convince the warring parties to agree to a ceasefire. The ECOWAS intervention resulted in a ceasefire in November 1990. The truce was believed to be a first positive step towards all-encompassing negotiations that would result in definitive end to the conflict and an enduring peace. However, the conflict resumed in October 1992 with one of the most destructive episodes of its kind when NPFL combatants attacked Monrovia in a fierce assault – known as Operation Octopus, after which

⁴ (Mahieu, 2007)

⁵ (Archick, 2005)

⁶ (Cook, 2003)

sporadic fighting began across the country. After the resumption of the conflict, the several interludes in the fighting gave the belligerents opportunities to prepare for the next episodes of war rather than occasions to work for a lasting peace⁷. Each of the ceasefires broke down and none helped in the way they were intended to make a conducive environment for the negotiations to lead to a mutually acceptable agreement⁸.

Liberia is just one example among the rich pool of cases where preliminary ceasefires were implemented, failed and followed by even more intensified wars leading to lengthy state of conflict, an increased number of lives lost and widespread destruction. In other countries like Darfur (2003-2004), Bosnia (1994) or Sri Lanka (1995), ceasefires were introduced as a precondition to the negotiations and as a trust-building measure or for humanitarian reasons. In all these cases, the warring parties exploited the premature truces to enhance their capabilities to achieve their objectives through the use of violence, objectives they believed were not achievable at the negotiations table during that stage of the conflicts⁹.

What can we learn from all these cases? Historical evidence does not seem to favor a ceasefire in Afghanistan before the Taliban and the Republic of Afghanistan negotiators achieve a consensus on key political issues. Opponents of an early ceasefire might argue that there is no guarantee that a pre-negotiations interlude will lead to a lesser loss of life while the key political issues remain untouched by the negotiators. Since such a ceasefire will not be based on a political agreement between the Afghan government and the Taliban, it will likely be fragile and vulnerable to breaking down. If failed, this will lead to intensified fighting between the belligerents and a much higher loss of lives than if the negotiators had been allowed to achieve a definitive settlement of the conflict through a political agreement. What can then explain the success of an early ceasefire in Northern Ireland? The best explanation could be a “hurting stalemate” between the British Army and the IRA, where both warring parties realized that they were in a costly deadlock and that they would be better off if they reached a settlement through negotiations¹⁰. On one side the rebels realized that they could not reach their goals through military or political campaigns. And on the other, the government realized that the IRA was an

⁷ (Sesay, 1996)

⁸ (Zartman & Berman, 1982)

⁹ (Mahieu, 2007)

¹⁰ Ibid

insurmountable obstacle, one that could neither be defeated nor win. Both the parties had reached a mutually hurting stalemate that made the situation ripe for a pre-negotiations ceasefire.

Another risk that lies after a ceasefire before any agreement on key political issues is that it may simply freeze the war in Afghanistan for even a longer time, causing an awkward situation where no one can really succeed or fail and creating a sense that there is no real chance for a negotiated settlement. A good historical example of such a scenario is Cyprus. An UN-brokered ceasefire in 1974 stopped the fighting between the Turkish and Greek Cypriots. Even though both sides respected the truce, the negotiations which followed did not convince the belligerents to come to mutually acceptable solutions to their differences. Opposite to that, the ceasefire gave birth to a complacent *status quo*, which has eroded the groups' incentives to seek a true settlement of the conflict and kept the *de facto* division of the Island¹¹. One may add to the list the cases where the wars were/are essentially frozen, that of Nagorno-Karabakh between Armenia and Azerbaijan, Abkhazia, Trans-Dniester in Moldova, South Ossetia in Georgia, and Kashmir between India and Pakistan – all of which suffered the same fate as Cyprus.

A Ceasefire During the Intra-Afghan Negotiation

A ceasefire after reaching a mutually acceptable agreement at the end of the Intra-Afghan negotiations would be an imperative. But what about a ceasefire during the negotiations? At which stage of the Intra-Afghan peace negotiations will a ceasefire be more effective? One historically successful option is that a truce can be implemented during the negotiations at a stage when the negotiators arrive at some sort of consensus on key political issues that are at the roots of the Afghan conflict. Of course, it does not mean that the Afghan government and the Taliban must agree on every difference. A general formula agreed upon by both the sides will give the belligerents a good enough incentive to agree to an honest cessation of the war, not only because it will be more likely to last longer,



¹¹ (Mahieu, 2007)

but also it will help in the achievement of a final settlement and a definitive end to the decades-long war.

In fact, when the two sides establish a common understanding of the conflict and a resolution, it will be easier for them to realize that it is less costly to settle their disputes through negotiations rather than on the battleground. Hence, such a situation will convince the two sides to truly engage in a joint pursuit of a mutually acceptable solution and will lessen the temptation to go back to war. Additionally, such a ceasefire will allow the Afghan government and the Taliban to benefit from a satisfactory atmosphere while they deal with the details of a peace agreement. It will further strengthen the cooperative conditions between the Afghan government, the Taliban, and the International Community to accelerate the process for finding mutually acceptable and enduring solutions.

Historical evidence shows that ceasefires at a stage of negotiations where the belligerents have reached a consensus on key political issues underlying the conflicts were more successful than if they were introduced prematurely¹². The war in Bosnia (1992-1996) witnessed several ceasefires imposed by the UN. However, not only did these ceasefires not achieve the objective of de-escalation but were also used by the warring parties as occasions to equip, train and recruit additional combatants that would intensify rather than deescalate the conflict¹³. While the war continued in Bosnia, the foreign ministers of Bosnia, Croatia, and Yugoslavia (representing the Bosnian Serbs) first met in Geneva and then in New York in September 1995. There they agreed to a fundamental principle, among other things, for a peaceful settlement to the war in Bosnia. That principle was that Bosnia would continue its existence within its natural borders, but the country must contain two entities: The Serb Republic (49% territory) and the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (51% territory). A week later, a 60-day ceasefire was agreed upon, which preceded comprehensive peace negotiations that began on November 1, 1995 in Dayton, Ohio. A peace agreement that was based on the Geneva and New York accords was reached on December 14, 1995 as a result of the talks¹⁴.

An important question can be asked now: Why was this last ceasefire successful and resulted in an agreement while all the other preceding truces failed to do so? A short answer could be that

¹² Ibid

¹³ (Luttwak, 2004)

¹⁴ (Mahieu, 2007)

the last ceasefire came after the belligerents agreed to a general formula. That general formula was achieved before in Geneva and New York, which paved the way for a sustainable ceasefire and detailed negotiations for a final agreement. Importantly, the parties established a common understanding of how to solve their differences, which led to the realization that a solution through talks was within reach that also made the subsequent ceasefire sustainable and successful.

Similar to Bosnia, Niger's so-called Tuareg Rebellion (1990-1995) witnessed several ceasefires, but only one led to a peace agreement. The rebellion started in 1991 when the *Front de libération de l'Air et de l'Azawagh* (FLAA) started fighting the Nigerien government for a federal system, greater autonomy, and better economic conditions for the Tuareg people. Throughout the years of the conflict, peace talks were held continuously that led to several of unsuccessful ceasefires, mostly because the parties did not address fundamental political issues underlying the conflict before implementing the truces. In 1994 a fresh round of talks began between the Nigerien government and the *Coordination de la résistance armée* (CRA), representing the Tuareg rebels. Unlike the previous negotiations, this time the government, in principle, conceded autonomy to the Tuareg regions, one of the main demands of the rebels, which would be governed by elected governors and assemblies. The talks were followed by a cessation of hostilities to create a conducive environment for detailed negotiations.

As opposed to the previous round of negotiations, in these latest talks the negotiators were able to find common ground on one of the underlying issues of the conflict. Hence, the ceasefire lasted for the rest of the negotiations on the details of a settlement that included the establishment of the elected assemblies for the Tuareg regions, security and rehabilitation of the regions affected by the hostilities, and the repatriation and resettlement of the refugees. Eventually, the peace talks resulted in a comprehensive peace agreement signed on April 24, 1995 by the Nigerien government and the rebels represented by CRA and FLAA.

Like Bosnia, all the ceasefires implemented in Niger failed to sustain before the parties found a solution to the fundamental issues underlying the conflict. Once the belligerents found a common ground on how to tackle fundamental issues underlying the unrest, the interlude in the conflict proved effective in providing a more serene atmosphere for the detailed negotiations for a mutually acceptable peace agreement and a final settlement to the conflict.

While the historical evidence shows that finding a general formula or solutions to the underlying issues of a conflict are likely to cause a ceasefire to endure, it will be adventurous to say that it is the only factor that determines the fate of a truce. Of course, other factors alone or in combination, determine the fate of a ceasefire such as whether there is a capable mediator or guarantor of the ceasefire, or whether the war has reached a hurting stalemate, where no one is actually losing or winning significantly on the battleground.

Finally, the case of Mozambique presents a scenario where a ceasefire was implemented only after the belligerents reached a comprehensive peace agreement. Initially the government insisted that a ceasefire should be implemented before negotiations could start on key political issues. On the other hand, the rebels refused to lay down their arms until the negotiators reached a comprehensive peace agreement. The government finally gave up on their demand, fearing that such a stance would result only in an unpleasant deadlock¹⁵. As a result, the negotiations continued simultaneously to the war. In fact, the continuation of the war proved to be very crucial for the success of the negotiations. The more the hostilities intensified, the more incentives the belligerents had to make concessions at the negotiations table. Because of the constant pressure from the hostilities, the warring parties were quick to compromise that led to the achievement of a final deal¹⁶.

No one will ever know for sure when is the best time for a ceasefire in Afghanistan, but it should not stop us from learning from the historical cases. One thing that we might agree on is that the timing for a ceasefire is not an easy trade-off for the warring parties in Afghanistan between 1) agreeing to a ceasefire now that would momentarily save lives and halt the hostilities but taking the chance that the country might return to the war again and again, resulting in increased accumulated victims and destruction, or 2) accepting the loss of lives now in support of a settlement that would resolve the conflict once and for all. Another risk of a premature ceasefire is, as seen in the case of Cyprus, that it would freeze the conflict by making the parties complacent with a situation where a real settlement would be seen as a distant mirage.

Historical ceasefires preceding negotiations show that such interludes served only as occasions for the warring parties to re-arm and rebuild their forces for intensified hostilities, only prolonging hostilities. The one case, Northern Ireland, where an early ceasefire was successful

¹⁵ (Lloyd, 1995)

¹⁶ (Masabaha, 1995)

seems to show that ceasefires before negotiations could be successful, when other important conditions are in place. This case shows that a favorable outcome can be achieved if the belligerents reach a mutually hurting stalemate, where no party could significantly lose or win in the conflict and the benefits of a settlement through negotiations outweigh that of the conflict.

Other cases show that the priority should be to reach a real settlement, and it is not recommended to rush for an immediate ceasefire before negotiations on key political issues begin. Of course, it is a painful and difficult decision for the parties involved in the Afghan conflict to forego seeking a truce before commencing negotiations. Indeed, basic moral principles bluntly teach us that every single life is precious and should not be endangered. Nonetheless, the decision to save lives in the short-term should be weighed against the long-term destruction and the loss of life that may result from prolonging the war. Experience shows that an immediate ceasefire, while stopping the killings and destruction for the moment, tend to intensify the damage of the resuming war, prolonging it and delaying the achievement of a true settlement (like in Bosnia and Liberia). Premature ceasefires might provide a respite for the combatants giving them the chance to re-organize their forces. A premature truce before any consensus is reached on key political issues might lead to an even more ferocious fighting that could lower the chances of a negotiated settlement.

The Afghan government, the Taliban and the International Community are thus best advised to interrupt the war during the Intra-Afghan negotiations. Learning from the historical cases, it appears that the most appropriate moment for a ceasefire in Afghanistan would be when the negotiators reach a broad consensus on key political issues such as the nature of a future Afghan government, power sharing, etc. It will be much easier for the Afghan government and the Taliban to sustain a ceasefire, and ultimately reach a negotiated settlement, if they first find a general formula to the negotiations and then cease the fighting. Once they have such a common understanding of the conflict and solutions to it, they will realize that a negotiated settlement is within reach. Such a perception will encourage the sides to silent their guns during the detail phase of the Intra-Afghan negotiations that will in turn provide a conducive environment for the talks and the achievement of a final agreement.

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