Institution: Queen's University, Belfast
Unit of Assessment: UoA22 Anthropology and Development Studies
Title of case study: Impacting a peace initiative in Afghanistan
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2014 – 2020

Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s): **Michael Semple**	Role(s) (e.g. job title): **Professor of Practice and project lead for Afghanistan Peace Research**	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI: **Practitioner Chair 2017 – present. Formerly Visiting Research Fellow 2013-2017**

Period when the claimed impact occurred: January 2017 to 2020
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? No

1. Summary of the impact (indicative maximum 100 words)

The impact of this research on Afghan peace-making is based on a set of insights into the political culture of the Afghan Taliban Movement built up over five years. This research has impacted on the Afghan peace process in three broad ways: (i) shaped the strategic understanding of key actors in the Afghan conflict in favour of a negotiated settlement; (ii) impacted tactical decisions on peace-making by state actors involved in "Track One" official governmental diplomacy during 2018-2020, and; (iii) influenced the post-2020 phase of the peace process, specifically securing inclusion of sub-national engagement with the Taliban.

2. Underpinning research (indicative maximum 500 words)

The first phase of the research profiled in this case study consisted of an investigation into Taliban attitudes to reconciliation, conducted by Michael Semple, as part of a three-year ESRC funded project "The Taliban's War", designed as a research collaboration between Prof. Theo Farrell, PI, Michael Semple, CI and Antonio Giustozzi, CI, 2014-2017. The study captured Taliban narratives of the conflict. Semple was responsible for the workstream on Taliban attitudes to reconciliation, in which he used dialogue events and semi-structured interviews to document Taliban perspectives on pathways to ending the war and intra-Afghan reconciliation. In convening the dialogue events, Semple drew on his track record of having conducted Taliban research and engagement on reconciliation issues. The research conducted during 2014-2017, as published in (3.1) and (3.2) made a key and innovative contribution to scholarship of the Afghan conflict by establishing that the Taliban Movement manifests a distinct political culture which constrains the Movement's conduct of the war.

A further distinctive contribution was that Semple's research gave voice to conflict actors outside the constraints of the dominant binary narrative of government versus opposition. His research linked Taliban activists' narratives of reconciliation to their positioning on narratives of power and dissent within the Movement. The methodology gave Taliban and Taliban dissidents voice. This was relevant to attempts to transform the Afghan conflict as, after 2014, US-led attempts at a counter-insurgency solution in Afghanistan were abandoned. As space for Taliban reconciliation opened up, the research gave an early indication of the importance of understanding dynamics within

the Movement to explain how Taliban engage with any peace process constructed by actors external to the Movement.

The second phase of the research was conducted during 2016-2020. Semple researched the political culture of the Taliban Movement to capture those dynamics which, in the first phase, had been shown to shape Taliban's stance on reconciliation. The impactfulness of the research was boosted by the evolution of macro-level policy making on the Afghan conflict. Policy-makers innovated with politically led peace initiatives and overtures to the Taliban, which increased the need for insights such as Semple's into the Movement.

In the second phase, Semple's principal research focus has been a project entitled "Afghanistan peace dialogue research". This study commenced in 2016 and, at the time of writing, is ongoing. It has been funded by the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) (2016-2020) and by the German Foreign Ministry (2019-2021). The study draws on a panel of local researchers, located in Afghanistan, Pakistan and elsewhere in the region, all of whom have ongoing access to members of the Taliban. They record observations of political developments within the Taliban, which are supplemented by interviews conducted directly by Semple, as well as original written and multi-media sources produced by the Taliban and analysis of Taliban social media. To encourage candour, interviews are conducted in the vernacular Farsi and Pashtu, in which Semple is proficient. Semple sets research questions and is the lead author for the series of analytical reports which draw on this source material to yield insights into Taliban political culture and explanations of developments in the conflict and the peace process. Semple is assisted by co-investigator Dr. Felix Kuehn. The research findings are disseminated through a series of reports prepared for the FCDO and German Foreign Ministry and shared with other key policy makers and interlocutors in Afghanistan, Europe and the US.

Throughout the impact period, Semple worked with the principal Afghan national body charged with domestic peace-making. Originally this was known as the High Peace Council (HPC). In 2020 the HPC was superseded by the High Reconciliation Council (HRC). The research has also drawn on dialogue events, convened by Semple in collaboration with the HPC, in which the Afghan Taliban, the HPC leadership and facilitators participated (5.11). The HPC collaboration led to an action research element. Inspired by the dialogue, pro-peace caucuses within the Afghan Taliban conducted de-escalation activities in their home districts (5.9), applying Semple's research-based protocols on sub-national peace-making and helping to refine recommendations (5.5).

The ESRC research established that the contemporary Taliban Movement is still underpinned by a political culture influenced by the Movement's origins within the networks of armed Sunni clerical networks, originally mobilised for the post-1979 anti-Soviet jihad. The research has documented how Taliban military strategy and political behaviour are constrained by the norms prescribed in this political culture and that depictions of the Taliban either as a proxy for regional powers or as a modern political party are inadequate (3.1).

The research has highlighted the culturally driven emphasis within the Taliban on maintaining the Movement's cohesiveness (the concept of *etahat-e-amir*, obedience to the *amir*), as well as the importance of informal comradely networks nested within the Movement's hierarchy. The research has applied these insights into the Taliban's formal and informal organising principles to explain the robustness and limits of command chains and loyalty within the Movement. The analysis of cohesiveness has explained the place of ethnicity within the Taliban's political culture (3.3). It identified

contradictions in the Taliban's handling of ethnicity. Firstly, embedded within the political culture is an ideal of a Movement beyond ethnicity, united by Afghan Sunni-Hanifi identity. But multiple organisational practices, such as appointments to key positions, give expression to ethnic and tribal identities. Secondly, key ethnic groups within the Movement, upon which it has depended for military recruits and control of territory, have been systematically excluded from power-structures. The research has documented how maintenance of the Movement's cohesiveness, critical to its conduct of the military campaign and negotiations, has depended on suppressing ethnic grievance.

The policy-focused elements of the research applied political culture insights to addressing practical issues in the peace process, such as how to legitimise a Taliban transition from violence (3.1) and the optimal design of sub-national engagement with the Taliban (5.3).

3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)
1. "Rhetoric, Ideology and Organizational Structure of the Taliban Movement", Michael Semple, United States Institute for Peace, January 5, 2015. (Submitted as an output).
2. "Making peace with the Taliban", (with Theo Farrell) *Survival* 57 (6): 75-110, 2015. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2015.1116157
3. "Locating the Uzbek narrative of social justice within the Afghan Taliban's political culture". On line at: *Orient 60 (4): 25-38, 2019. (German Journal for Politics, Economics and Culture of the Middle East)* http://www.orient-online.com/Home/issues/ORIENT-IV/2019. Available on request from HEI'.
4. ESRC grant "The Taliban's War", led by Theo Farrell PI, Michael Semple CI and Antonio Giustozzi, CI, 2014-2017. Share administered by Semple: £30,000.

4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

1. Impact on state actors' management of the conflict and the promotion of cultural and behavioural change in the Taliban Movement
The Afghan war, and efforts to launch a peace process, provided the real-world context of the research. While the timing and overall blue-print of peace process initiatives were determined by political considerations beyond the scope of the research, Semple's research was one of the authoritative sources of evidence which state actors drew upon to understand the Taliban Movement. This is evidenced in testimonials from policy-makers involved in the 2018–2020 peace initiative. A UK diplomat, who was the head of the then FCO's Afghanistan political team in the run-up to the peace initiative, confirmed that he and colleagues drew on Semple's "multiple insights from the Taliban political culture research, both as we shaped HMG policy and actions in the peace process and as we fed into US policy processes." (5.1)

Semple was frequently consulted as the peace process played out, and increasingly recognised for his world-leading expertise on the Afghan Taliban Movement. He offered behavioural insights to state actors involved in the negotiations and conflict management, primarily in written format through monthly research briefs delivered throughout the 2018-2020 initiative. [text removed for publication] as an independent reality check: "Prof. Semple and his team's analyses served to amplify existing information and to challenge our own conclusions; this alternative thought and deep expertise was highly valuable during such a complex and unprecedented peace process." (5.2)

The Co-Director and Senior Analyst at the leading Afghanistan think-tank, Afghanistan Analysts Network, confirmed the unique relevance of the research output to peace process policy-making: "Professor Semple is one of the very few analysts, and I think the only Western analyst, with widespread direct contacts within the Movement." She continued "…having evidence-based research and analysis, especially on the Taleban, is critical to understanding the dynamics of war and negotiations in Afghanistan" and "I have drawn upon many of these insights when briefing Afghan and international policy makers and others." (5.3)

2. Impact on policy-maker attitudes to the pursuit of a negotiated settlement (during 2018-2020 peace process)

After 2017, research findings presented by Semple were drawn upon by US, European and Afghan policy makers while they reshaped the Afghan peace process. Policy makers prioritised pursuit of a political settlement with the Taliban and integrated military and political action in a way that had previously been notably lacking; they relaxed the insistence that only the Afghan government could lead in talks and accorded the Taliban the status of a political actor. The key pivot in these shifting attitudes towards a negotiated settlement occurred after September 2018, with the appointment of Dr. Zalmay Khalilzad as U.S. Special Envoy for Afghan Peace.
In a speech circulated to all Taliban in 2019, the Taliban chief negotiator explained the genesis of the Khalilzad peace initiative. In this speech, he named Semple as having introduced the Taliban Movement's leadership to the potential of negotiation, and thus prepared the Taliban to engage with Khalilzad. The fact that a leading figure in the Taliban credited Semple with a role in the genesis of the initiative helped to boost the impact and significance of the research during the REF census period. (5.4)

Under Khalilzad, the U.S. pursued direct US-Taliban talks and developed a peace framework based on an initial agreement between the US and Taliban over US troop-withdrawal, to be followed by talks between the Afghan government and Taliban on a ceasefire and general political settlement. The agreement was signed on 29 February 2020.

The Afghan peace process, as it evolved up to and through 2018-2020 has been a complex and dynamic multi-actor process aimed at ending one of the most destructive national conflicts globally. By sharing research results with key actors, including Ambassador Khalilzad and his team, Semple helped to shape decision-making, while remaining independent of the blueprint adopted.

3. Impact on tactical decisions on peace making among international and Afghan policy makers involved in the Track One official governmental diplomacy

During the 2018–2020 peace initiative and in order to facilitate the application of the research to real-time decision-making, Semple maintained his network of well-connected Afghan primary researchers and generated a flow of political culture insights into the challenges confronting peace process actors. Semple packaged the periodic reports [text removed for publication] under the series title "Emirate Update" and the QUB Mitchell Institute logo. The series employed consistent methodology, within a well-structured, collaborative research effort and competently offered valid observations on a notoriously opaque subject. These research outputs are linked to policy decisions, in particular, the "Emirate Update" reports, which have been circulated or briefed to key UK, US, European and Afghan policy-makers.

The key actors who were given access to the research included members of the five country international facilitator group for the talks. From this group, Semple briefed the

German Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the US political team (in particular, the adviser to Ambassador Khalilzad), and the US and NATO military (commander, deputy commander and political advisers). Additionally, he briefed the Afghan government (President, Vice President, National Security Adviser, Peace Minister and HRC leadership). Orchestrating negotiations involved handling of Taliban demands for mass release of prisoners, response to ongoing violence and the framing of demands for reduction in Taliban violence. When Afghan talks began in Doha in September 2020, Germany was an active member of the group of five countries facilitating. [text removed for publication] how the facilitators were impacted by Semple's research: "The research has contributed to enhanced understanding of important contextual issues such as the relationship between the political and military within the Taliban Movement, and the cultural basis for Taliban visions of state and society. During a period when the priority for countries engaged in Afghanistan has been to launch intra-Afghan negotiations and set the conditions for a settlement, the research has informed our understanding of the priorities of the Afghan parties, our support for the negotiations and long-term contingency planning." (5.5)

4. Shaped national government policy-makers' interpretations of Taliban positions in the peace process, and influenced the Afghan government's preparation of "no-deal" alternative approaches to pursuing peace

Semple's research gave the Afghan leadership access to authoritative, independent and timely analysis of the Taliban, during a critical period in the peace process. Independence was critical. The high profile of the US initiative generated widespread expectations that Track One talks would deliver a comprehensive political settlement. This influenced much that was written about the Taliban. Throughout the period of the peace initiative, Semple presented his research in a series of briefings titled the "Emirate Update", as mentioned above. These explained how and why the Taliban prioritised their jihad and how pro-settlement figures in the Movement tended to be marginalised. The research offered a reality check, in the face of official optimism. Afghan recognition of the importance of independent research was reflected by the fact that during 2020 Semple personally and in writing briefed top Afghan leaders. [text removed for publication] and has an advisory team working in support of the Afghan government leadership. The Senior Projects Director confirmed how they applied the research at this stage as it "challenged prevailing assumptions and helped us to ground our work in a sober assessment of what is attainable in negotiations, which in turn has refined and improved the advice we provide." (5.6)

The decisions around Afghan government conduct of the Track One negotiations, which the research contributed to, were of fundamental importance to the Afghan state. The research elaborated complementary approaches to engagement with the Taliban, which apply the political culture insights and offer a way forward when Track One progress is blocked. Semple helped the leadership team of the new HRC to launch evidence-based support of sub-national peace-making. The HRC's deputy confirmed: "Professor Semple's research has contributed to our understanding of the discourse around peace within the Taliban Movement. Importantly, this research has established that networks within the Movement have distinct aspirations about what can be achieved in a settlement and ideas about their relationship to state and civil society, which differ from the positions pushed by the Movement's national leadership. These insights have been helpful to the HRC in developing sub-national engagement with the Taliban." (5.7)

Semple was consulted by the Afghan President and Vice-President on appropriate ways to engage with pro-peace tendencies within the Taliban, outside the framework of Track One. The State Minister for Peace acknowledged that Semple provided the analytical basis for the shift towards a longer-term negotiation approach, after the first

negotiation round in Qatar: "Professor Semple has briefed the State Ministry for Peace and shared written observations on the positions of the Taliban Movement, towards the end of the first round of Intra-Afghan negotiations. These observations have helped ground our approach to negotiations in realism and they have inspired our efforts to develop new smart activities within Afghanistan which increase momentum towards a settlement." (5.8)

5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

1. Testimonial, sent 6th January 2021, from former head of the FCO political team (2014–2017).
2. Testimonial [text removed for publication]
3. Testimonial, undated, Co-Director and Senior Analyst, Afghan Analysts Network.
4. Speech by chief Taliban negotiator, Sher Abbas Stanakzai, on Afghan Independence Day, 18 Aug 2019, naming Michael Semple who influenced the Taliban Movement to accept the rationale of a negotiated settlement. (Available as video & transcript, see 2'-4'46").
5. Memo [text removed for publication]
6. Testimonial [text removed for publication]
7. Email, dated 3rd February 2021, from Deputy of the High Council for national Reconciliation, Afghanistan. The testimonial refers to Semple's briefing reports "incremental peace-making in Afghanistan", by Conciliation Resources, as part of the British Academy Political Settlements Research Project. (http://www.c-r.org/downloads/Incremental%20Peace%20in%20Afghanistan.pdf); reports documenting pilot innovative local peace-making in Afghanistan, 2020; and reports from the three rounds of low-profile talks between HPC and Taliban, 2018-2019, including 2020 observations from local peace initiatives).
8. Email, dated 11th February 2021, from Afghanistan State Minister for Peace.