

Afghanistan: The Relationship Gap



Executive Summary

As the war in Afghanistan enters another summer of increasing violence, the international community is focusing its attention on Kandahar province, the spiritual and political heartland of the Taliban insurgency. At the same time, there is growing pressure for a withdrawal among the public in the member countries of the NATO-ISAF coalition is growing.

To assess the attitude of the Afghan people towards key issues, the International Council on Security and Development (ICOS) interviewed 552 Afghan men across Kandahar and Helmand provinces in June 2010.

Security Outlook

The clearest lesson of the 9/11 attacks was that global security cannot be disentangled from security in the world's ungoverned spaces, from Afghanistan to Somalia. The lack of international interest in Afghanistan after the Soviet withdrawal in 1989 allowed the Taliban to rise, and created the space for Al Qaeda bases in Afghanistan. International actors must take this lesson as its bottom line – Al Qaeda and other international terrorist groups cannot be allowed a safe haven in Afghanistan, regardless of its political terrain.

Similarly the Taliban and its affiliates must be prevented from fomenting chaos in other neighbouring states, particularly in Central Asia.¹ If either of these scenarios comes to pass, the international community will have failed in Afghanistan – an outcome which would raise serious questions about the very future of NATO and the international order.

Concerns Regarding Future Fidelity of Afghan Government

The international community needs to leave behind an Afghanistan which shares and is aligned with its security concerns. It is now well-established that building up the capacity of the Afghan state and security forces is the only realistic way to permit a NATO withdrawal, but a stable Kabul government and a well equipped Afghan army are not sufficient.

The international community needs a **guarantee of fidelity** from both the Afghan government, and the Afghan people, that they will not tolerate Al Qaeda or other hostile groups to operate from Afghanistan's territory. Currently the support and alliance of the Afghan government is not assured. President Karzai, fearing a rapid withdrawal of NATO-ISAF troops, is already reaching out to other states – Pakistan, Iran, and China, amongst them. We could be confronted with a situation where the international community will have invested an enormous military, financial and political effort into an ally that is not entirely reliable and may not entirely share our determination to defeat Al Qaeda. Relying solely on the Afghan government as an ally is not sufficient.

Good Relationship with Afghan People Necessary

The Afghan people must be committed to and aligned with the security goals of the international coalition. If there is broad popular support for Taliban and Al Qaeda, the Kabul government will find itself on a collision course with its own citizens. It is, therefore, essential to build a sustainable grassroots political relationship with the Afghan people.

¹ Afghanistan was used as a base by the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan for their attacks in Central Asia in 1999-2000.

Bad News: Struggling to Secure Popular Support in Southern Afghanistan

ICOS field research reveals a **relationship gap** between NATO-ISAF and the Afghan communities they are intended to protect. For instance 75% of interviewees believe that foreigners disrespect their religion and traditions; 74% believe that working with foreign forces is wrong; and 68% believe that NATO-ISAF does not protect them. 55% of interviewees believe that the international community is in Afghanistan for its own benefit, to destroy or occupy the country, or to destroy Islam.

These results are troubling, and demonstrate the mistrust and resentment felt towards the international presence in Afghanistan. Of those interviewed, 70% believe that recent military actions in their area were bad for the Afghan people, whilst 59% opposed further operations in Kandahar. According to interviewees, the Afghan government is also responsible by failing to provide good governance. 70% of respondents believe that local officials make money from drug trafficking, and an astonishing 64% state that government administrators in their area were connected to the Taliban insurgency.

These problems have contributed to growing support for the Taliban, with 65% of respondents calling for Mullah Omar to join the Afghan government. Interviewees also believe that there are strong links between the Taliban and Al Qaeda. 80% stated that if the Taliban regained control of Afghanistan, Al Qaeda would return.

Good News: Positive Attitudes an Opportunity for the International Community

However, field research also reveals some good news and opportunities for the international community. A majority (55%) of Afghans interviewed believe that NATO and the Afghan government are winning the war, demonstrating that the battle for perceptions is still open. Despite the 2009 presidential elections, which were marked by fraud, 40% of Afghan respondents stated that democracy was important to them, and 72% would prefer their children to grow up under an elected government rather than the Taliban.

There is some progress in women's rights, with 57% of interviewees supporting girls' education. The field research also reveals that respondents have strong social and economic aspirations – the most popular uses for \$5000USD would be establishing or expanding a business, and marriage.

The interviews also indicate that negativity is not directed solely against the international coalition, but also to other outside parties. 62% of the interviewees believe Pakistan played a negative role in their country and 56% felt negative about Iran's influence in Afghanistan. This presents an opportunity for the coalition to differentiate itself from other actors through being trustworthy and genuinely concerned for the welfare of the Afghan people. It also underscores the need for a truly regional strategy for Afghanistan, one that involves neighbouring states as well as Western countries.

Interesting News: Social and Cultural Mapping

84% of Afghans interviewed identify themselves as Muslims first and foremost. However, 32% identify themselves as Afghan – this is evidence of a growing national consciousness, which was far less visible under the Taliban rule. Another social shift can be identified in gradually loosening family structures. 56% of respondents said that their families exercised control over them, but 32% said that their families only had influence over their decisions. This may indicate a shifting social environment and a gradual decline of traditional family structures.

Conclusion

The Afghan government must be stable and must ensure Al Qaeda and allied groups will not be able to use Afghanistan to plot and launch attacks. Working solely with the Afghan government is not sufficient to assure our security interests: in addition, the West must reach out to the Afghan people through a sustainable grassroots political campaign. The research illustrates that currently many Afghans are suspicious or hostile towards foreign forces. This gulf of trust enables conspiracy theories and Taliban propaganda to flourish, and undermines the core objectives of the international presence.

Closing this relationship gap and reducing Taliban support will require the international community to communicate its message more effectively in three key ways – explaining why we are there, what we can bring which the Taliban cannot, and building a lasting alliance with the next generation. To date, our efforts in creating this type of grassroots political campaign have been ineffective, leaving a vacuum the Taliban have filled.

We must know the Afghan people better and explain ourselves better. The international community does not understand or meet the basic needs of ordinary Afghans, and they in turn do not understand the reasons for our presence. This must be addressed to reduce mutual suspicions. Addressing the increasingly chronic challenges of humanitarian and development assistance, as well as expressing the international community's respect for Afghan religion and culture, are necessary to build effective positive and lasting relationships.

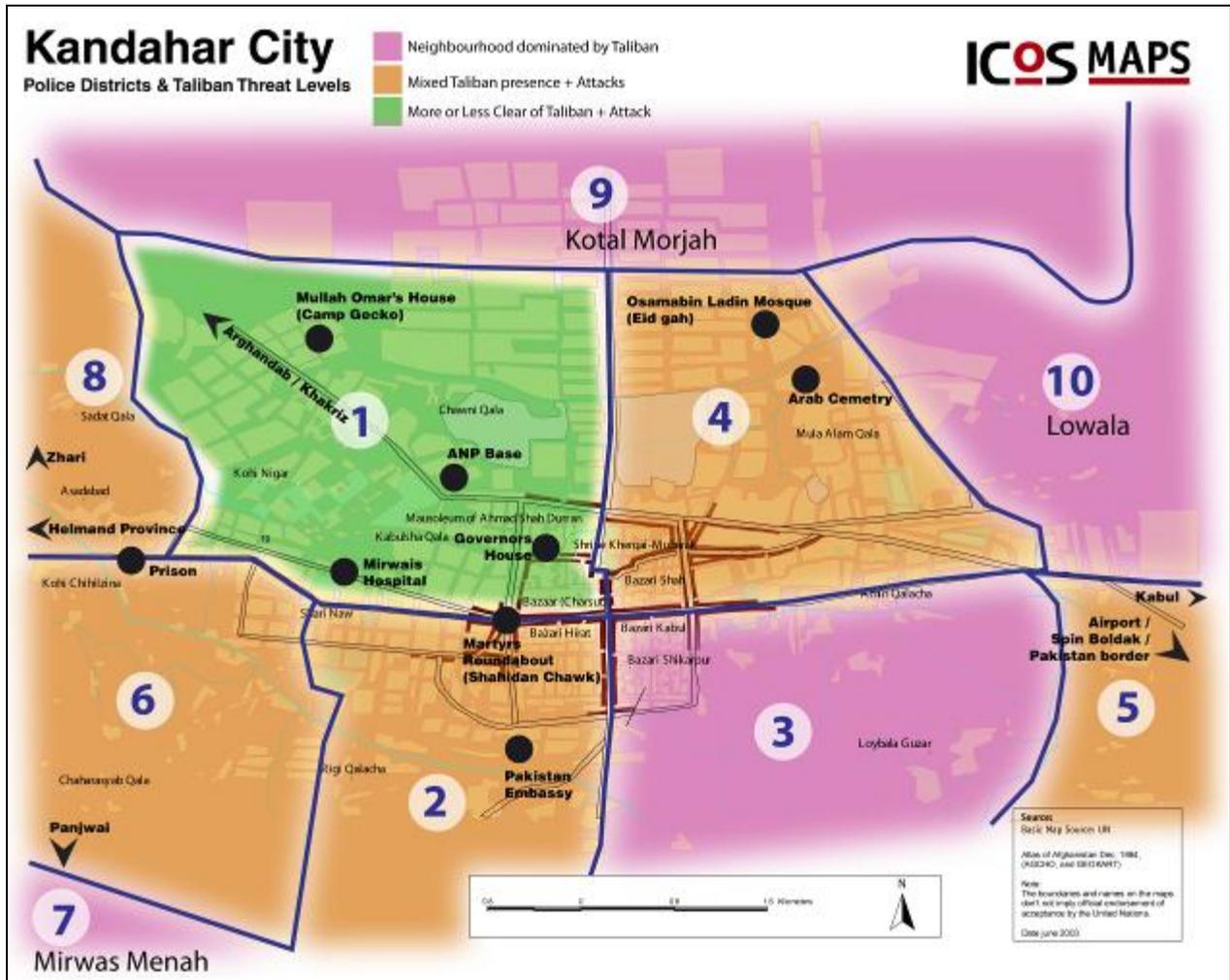
We must win the narrative by making a clear case that the Afghan people have a better future by aligning themselves with the International coalition and its security concerns, rather than with the Taliban and Al Qaeda. The Taliban and Al Qaeda cannot bring prosperity or freedom. The international community, despite its shortcomings, presents a better future for Afghans and their families.

We must also empower NextGenAfg, the next generation of Afghans, by providing social, economic and political opportunities. This will allow them to lead the country out of the current cycle of violence, and will reduce the current pool of potential Taliban recruits.

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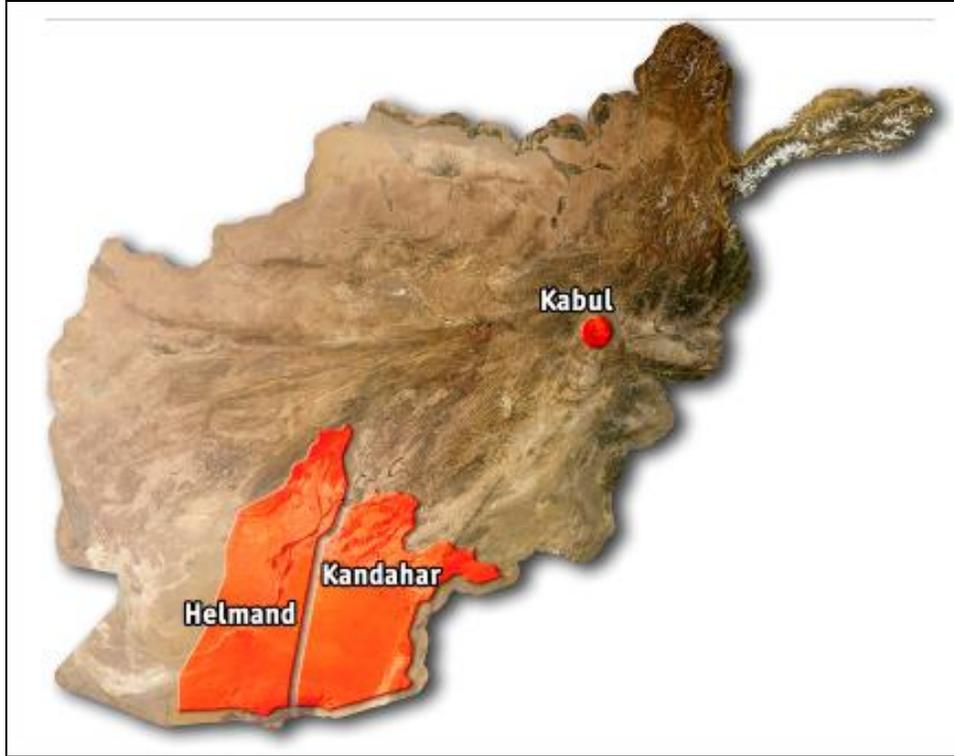
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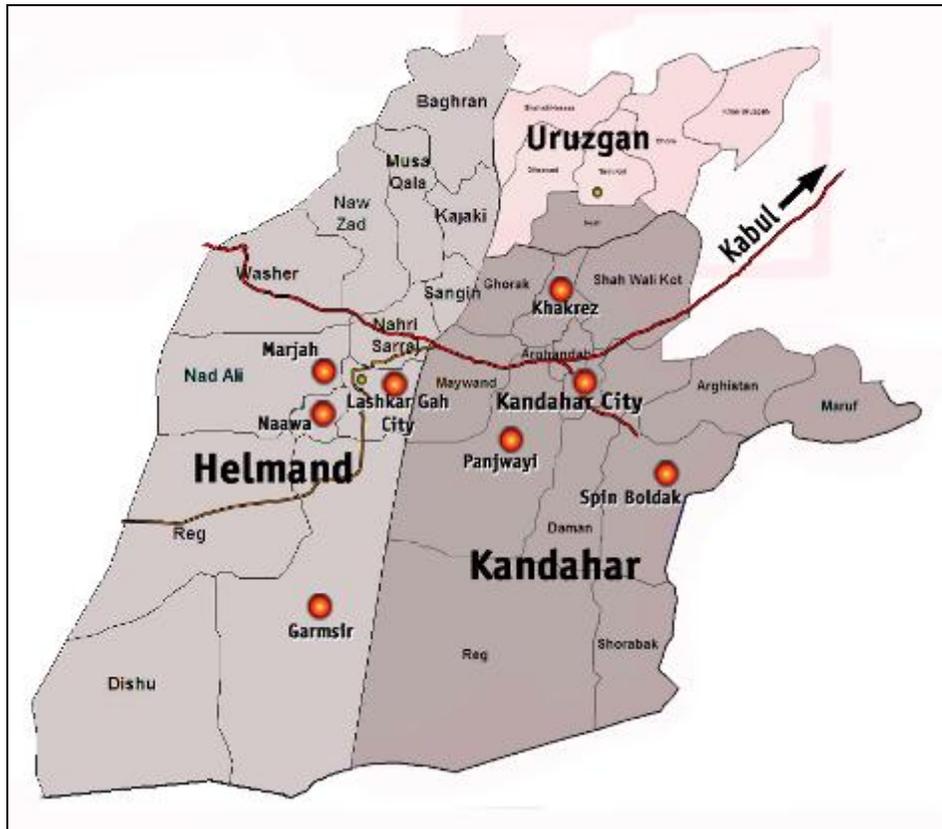


This map shows the police districts in Kandahar City (numbered 1-10) and the current security situation in the city, based on UN sources. The pink shading, indicating strong Taliban influence, illustrates the extent to which the insurgency dominates Afghanistan's second city. Thousands of NATO-ISAF and Afghan troops are unable to secure anything but a small section of Kandahar, creating a high-risk environment full of fear and suspicion.

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Helmand and Kandahar provinces



Locations of ICOS interviews

Build-Up to Kandahar

United States President Barack Obama's decision to 'surge' an extra 30,000 US troops into the volatile Afghan war was made last December. Only now, however, are those troops finally arriving in strength. 18,000 have been deployed, mainly in the south and east where fighting against the Taliban insurgency, now in its ninth year, is fiercest.

The additional forces are critical to implementing the new counter-insurgency strategy developed by General Stanley McChrystal, formerly the commander of NATO-ISAF. The new strategy recognises that military force alone is not the answer - protecting the population and building up Afghanistan's economic, security, and governance structures is the only real long-term solution.

The first showpiece operation for the new strategy and the troop reinforcements was Operation Moshtarak, which took place in the Marjah district of Helmand province in February 2010. A high-profile offensive intended to drive the Taliban out of one of their 'last strongholds', Operation Moshtarak was heralded as a success.

Operation Moshtarak – A limited victory

However in the aftermath of Operation Moshtarak, the International Council on Security and Development (ICOS) conducted a series of interviews in Nad Ali and Lashkar Gah in Helmand, and Kandahar City in Kandahar, to assess the impact of the offensive on the Afghan people.

The resulting report, *Operation Moshtarak: Lessons Learned*², which was published in May 2010, builds on ICOS's previous research in Afghanistan. In August and September 2009, ICOS reported on the build-up and the consequences of the flawed Afghan presidential elections.³ This demonstrated the Afghan government's lack of legitimacy and the international community's failure to tackle the fraud and its aftermath. The implications of these failings continue to affect operations in Afghanistan today.

The results of the research subsequent to Operation Moshtarak highlighted how despite the welcome improvements in the size and conduct of the military operation, there was a lack of sufficient corresponding measures in the political and humanitarian campaigns.

Inadequate planning left thousands of refugees without supplies, and the failure to effectively communicate the purpose of the offensive created resentment and hostility amongst local Afghans, raising the risks of Taliban recruitment. ICOS field research revealed that 61% of interviewees felt more negative about NATO-ISAF forces than before Operation Moshtarak, and 67% did not support a strong NATO-ISAF presence in their province.

² The results were released in *Operation Moshtarak: Lessons Learned*, March 2010. Available at: http://www.icosgroup.net/documents/operation_moshtarak.pdf

³ *Afghanistan Election: Guns and Money*, August 2009. Available at http://www.icosgroup.net/documents/Guns_and_Money.pdf; *Political Quagmire in Afghanistan*, September 2009. Available at: http://www.icosgroup.net/documents/political_quagmire.pdf

Support for Kandahar operations – Agreement on ends but not means

Despite their lack of support for much of the international presence, 67% of respondents expressed support for operations to clear the road from Lashkar Gah to Kandahar to Kabul, and to clear insurgents in Kandahar, indicating the importance of these issues to the local population.

These results imply an “agreement on ends but not means” – Afghans in Helmand and Kandahar do not want the return of the Taliban, but neither do they want to endure unnecessary suffering. NATO-ISAF and the international community have made mistakes, but their military operations and the current surge are not a mistake. The policy mix being deployed needs to be dramatically renovated to produce results in Kandahar and subsequent operations.

Kandahar: A high-stakes target

In the wake of Operation Moshtarak, NATO-ISAF has begun preparations for a new operation in Kandahar which has been described as a ‘rising tide of security’ rather than a single offensive as in Marjah. This time, the focus is on economic and institutional development, with military force taking a backseat.⁴ This is a clear demonstration that lessons have been learned from Operation Moshtarak. For both the coalition and the Taliban, Kandahar is a high-stakes target.⁵

Achieving success in Kandahar could demonstrate the strength of NATO-ISAF’s new counter-insurgency policy. It would also strengthen the domestic political narrative in the United States: by providing justification for President Obama’s controversial troop surge, whilst building confidence that American troops can begin to draw down in July 2011, as planned.⁶

For the Taliban, regaining control of their spiritual and political heartland is a critical priority in 2010,⁷ and it has quietly increased its presence in the city (see map, page 1). A wave of assassinations aimed at intimidating local government officials, and a lack of public support, have led to the launch of the operation being repeatedly delayed.

In Kandahar City the local population is now hyper-polarised and politicised. Mistrust and suspicion is rife, and the community is full of rumours, conspiracy theories and growing paranoia. The international community must tread carefully within this complex and mistrustful environment if its attempts to wrest control from the insurgents are to succeed.

⁴ Human Terrain System and Glevum Associates, *Kandahar Province Survey Report March 2010*, 2010. Available at: http://www.wired.com/images_blogs/dangerroom/2010/04/kandahar-province-survey-report-5-apr-2010-for-isaf.pdf

⁵ Cronin, P, *Restraint: Recalibrating American Strategy*, Center for a New American Security, June 6 2010. Available at: http://www.cnas.org/files/documents/publications/CNAS_Restraint_Cronin.pdf

⁶ Biddle, S, Fotini, C & Their, J, *Defining Success in Afghanistan: What Can the United States Accept?* Foreign Affairs, July/August 2010. Available at: <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/66450/stephen-biddle-fotini-christia-and-j-alexander-thier/defining-success-in-afghanistan>

⁷ Department of Defense, *Report on Progress Towards Security and Stability in Afghanistan*, 2010. Available at: http://www.defense.gov/pubs/pdfs/Report_Final_SecDef_04_26_10.pdf

About ICOS

The International Council on Security and Development (ICOS) is an international policy think tank working to combine grassroots research and policy innovation at the intersections of security, development, counter-narcotics and public health issues. Through a unique mix of field research, reports and project implementation, ICOS examines the root causes of current crises, and works to achieve measurable and direct policy results.

ICOS is a project of the Network of European Foundations' Mercator Fund. The work of the Mercator Fund is underpinned by the principle that the global philanthropic community has a vital role to play in promoting and implementing the work necessary to bring about social and political change. The Mercator Fund aims to generate innovative ideas to respond to key global challenges through the development of projects that address core global social issues.

About ICOS Afghanistan

In 2005, research on counter-narcotics policies brought ICOS to Afghanistan. ICOS Afghanistan's field research operations revealed that the Afghan problem of illegal poppy cultivation and opium production was not a standalone problem but instead both a cause and symptom of broader security and development concerns. As a result, ICOS subsequently started to develop research programmes looking more closely at the related security and development conditions of Afghanistan.

Field research probed into areas such as the delivery of humanitarian aid, the status of hospitals and internally displaced people camps in southern Afghanistan, and the basic needs and legitimate grievances of the Afghan people. In order to reveal the inefficiencies of the policies implemented by the Afghan government and the international community, ICOS developed opinion surveys and related field research with the overarching objective to identify possible solutions and interventions that could bridge the gap between people and policy.

Perception assessment surveys were developed to shed light on the general perception of the Afghan people, for example, when it comes to the presence of foreign soldiers on Afghan soil, reconstruction efforts, the situation in the hospitals, the process of democratisation, the Karzai Government or the resurgence of the Taliban insurgency.

Between 2005 and July 2010, ICOS released 33 reports related to Afghanistan, together with numerous several academic articles, Opinion Editorials, policy papers and other publications. It currently has offices in Kabul and Lashkar Gah.

Methodology

To assess the situation on the ground in southern Afghanistan, ICOS's international and local staff carried out interviews with **552 men** across Kandahar (238 interviews) and Helmand (303 interviews).

In **Kandahar City**, 108 interviews were conducted; 45 in **Khakrez** district; 37 in **Panjwayi** district; and 48 in **Spin Boldak** district. In **Helmand**, 97 interviews were conducted in the district of **Marjah**, the scene of Operation Moshtarak in February; 116 in **Garmsir** district; 54 in **Nawa** district; and 37 in **Lashkar Gah City**.

This research mapped local Afghan perceptions of the international presence in Afghanistan, the Taliban and Al Qaeda, and provided commentary on their own personal situations.⁸

ICOS Fieldwork Experience

The International Council on Security and Development (ICOS) has been conducting studies in conflict zones since 2007. In this time, **ICOS has carried out over 19,000 interviews across Iraq, Somalia and Afghanistan**. This fieldwork has examined the root causes of current crises, in order to help achieve measurable and direct policy results.

Previous ICOS Conflict Zone field research includes:

- *Operation Moshtarak: Lessons Learned (May 2010)*
- *Iraq - Angry Hearts and Angry Minds (June 2008)*
- *Chronic Failures in the War on Terror - From Afghanistan to Somalia (April 2008)*
- *Afghan and Somali Views on the United States Presidential Elections 2008 (April 2008)*
- *On a knife edge: Rapid Assessment Field Survey, Southern and Eastern Afghanistan (May 2007)*

⁸ The results in this presentation have been rounded to the nearest number by data-analysis software, so results presented in pie charts do not always add to 100%.

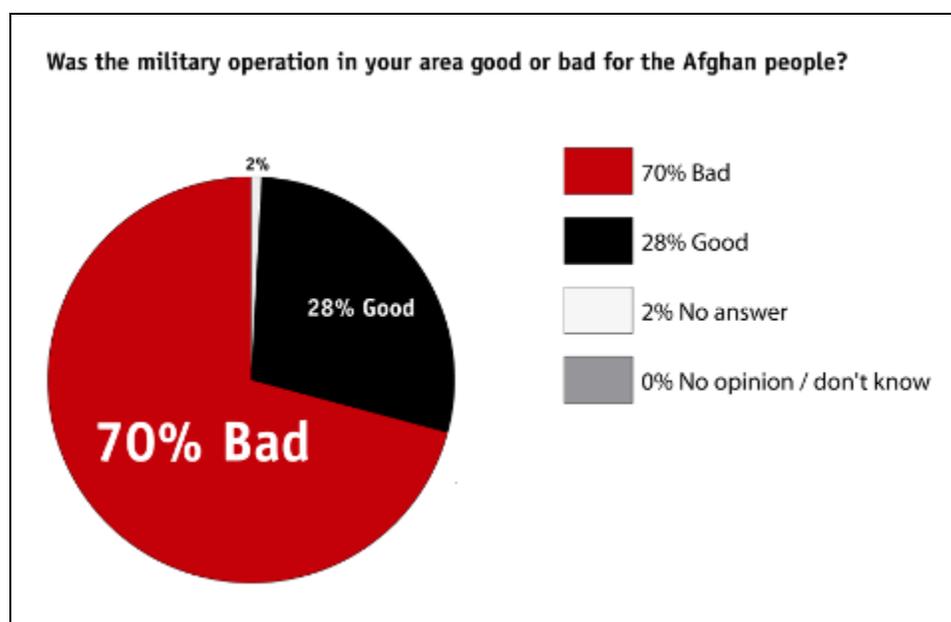
Research Findings

1. Bad News: Struggling to Secure Popular Support in Southern Afghanistan

A MIXED SUPPORT FOR MILITARY OPERATIONS

The interview results reveal the underlying negativity to military operations and pessimism about the future security situation of the region amongst Afghans in both Helmand and Kandahar.

Over two thirds of all respondents felt that recent military operations in their area had a negative effect. However, the level of negativity varied greatly between the two provinces.



In Kandahar, almost half of those interviewed felt that recent military activity has been good for them, whereas this sentiment was shared by only 16% of Helmand interviewees. The stark contrast may reflect the differing approaches that NATO-ISAF has taken in the two areas.

General Stanley McChrystal, former commander of NATO-ISAF, stressed these convergent approaches when he described how Kandahar would be more like a 'rising tide' than a single invasion, as was the case in Helmand's Operation Moshtarak.⁹ In Kandahar City the perceptions of security are most positive, suggesting that the security situation there is better than elsewhere.

⁹ 'Gen. McChrystal Details Lessons of Marja Offensive', *American Forces Press Service* March 8 2010. Available at: <http://www.isaf.nato.int/en/article/news/gen.-mcchrysal-details-lessons-of-marja-offensive.html>

Was the military operation in your area good or bad for the Afghan people? ¹⁰			
	Good	Bad	No answer
Garmsir	23%	77%	0%
Marjah	1%	99%	0%
Nawa	20%	80%	0%
Lash City	27%	69%	4%
Helmand	16%	83%	1%
Kandahar City	64%	33%	3%
Khakrez	16%	84%	0%
Panjwayi	24%	73%	3%
Spin Boldak	40%	58%	2%
Kandahar	44%	54%	2%
Total	28%	70%	2%

Marjah: Deteriorating attitudes towards military operations

All of the assessed Helmand districts felt overwhelmingly negative about military operations. Lashkar Gah, the biggest urban centre in the region, had the most positive response in Helmand with a third of respondents stating that operations were good for them. Particularly striking though, were the responses of interviewees in Marjah, the focal point of Operation Moshtarak, the coalition's largest counter-insurgency operation in Afghanistan since 2001. Almost all of respondents here – 99% - felt that the military operation in their area was bad for the Afghan people.

This level of resentment felt by Marjah residents is a marked deterioration in attitudes. In March 2010, ICOS field research in Marjah revealed that 67% of the local population interviewed believed the military operation was bad for the Afghan people.¹¹ Recent experience has taught that military action cannot be successful without local backing, so securing the support of the Afghan people is key.

Emphasising non-violent tools alongside military operations

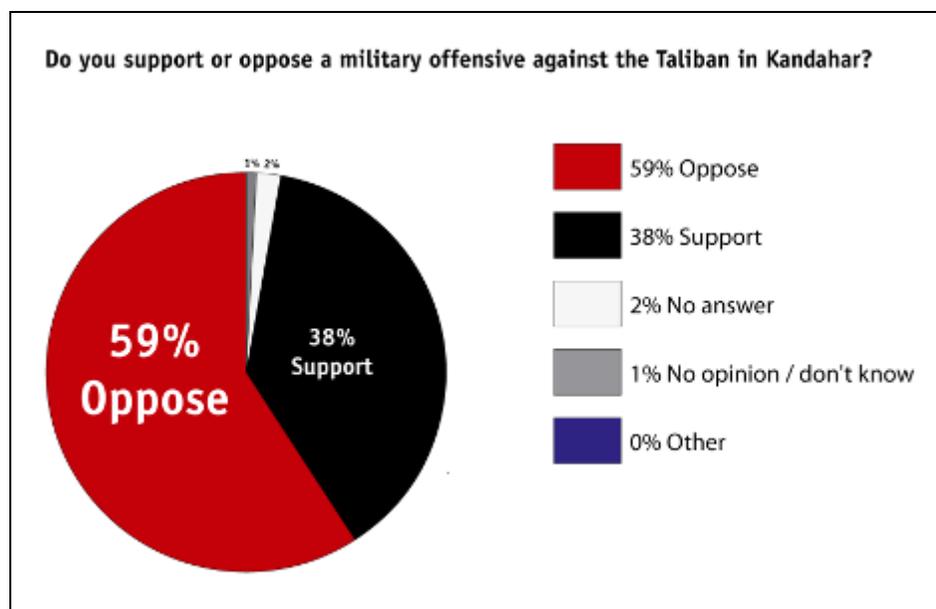
The augmentation of negativity in the district, over such a short time frame, indicates that in situations where development, aid, and counter narcotics are not accorded the same level of political and financial support as military force, outcomes can be counter-productive in terms of local resident's perceptions of the coalition

¹⁰ In some of the tables, the two most positive district results are highlighted in green colour, and the two most negative with red colour.

¹¹ *Operation Moshtarak: Lessons Learned*

Caution about future military actions and fear of civil war

There are mixed opinions regarding further military operations in Kandahar. Overall 59% opposed such operations, whilst 38% supported them.

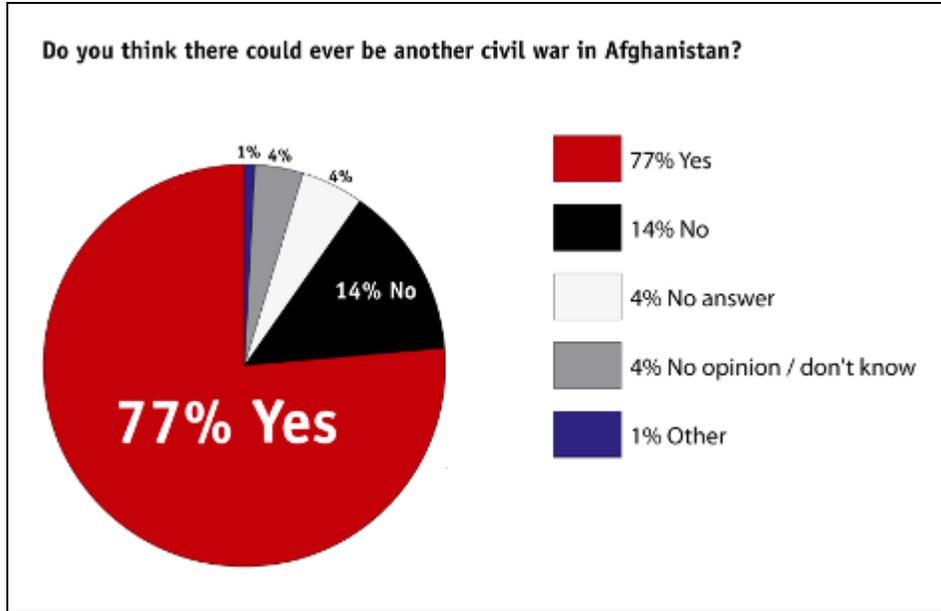


Do you support or oppose a military offensive against the Taliban in Kandahar?					
	Support	Oppose	Other	No answer	No opinion/ Don't know
Garmsir	46%	52%	0%	1%	1%
Marjah	20%	80%	0%	0%	0%
Nawa	35%	61%	0%	2%	2%
Lash City	42%	56%	0%	2%	0%
Helmand	35%	63%	0%	1%	1%
Kandahar City	68%	27%	1%	2%	2%
Khakrez	4%	91%	0%	4%	0%
Panjwayi	6%	89%	0%	5%	0%
Spin Boldak	48%	50%	2%	0%	0%
Kandahar	42%	53%	1%	3%	1%
Total	38%	59%	0%	2%	1%

Support for an operation against the Taliban in Kandahar was higher in the province itself than in Helmand. The most positive responses were in Kandahar City where 68% of interviewees showed support for anti-Taliban offensives in Kandahar, a sentiment shared by only one-fifth of Marjah respondents.

The rolling tempo of military operations, Taliban successes and political tensions have all contributed to the strong fears of renewed, full-scale war: 77% of interviewees believe that there could be another civil war in Afghanistan.

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Do you think there could ever be another civil war in Afghanistan?

	Yes	No	Don't know	Other	No answer
Garmsir	75%	6%	12%	0%	7%
Marjah	94%	2%	0%	0%	4%
Nawa	94%	4%	0%	0%	2%
Lash City	85%	6%	4%	2%	4%
Helmand	85%	5%	5%	0%	5%
Kandahar City	59%	39%	0%	1%	1%
Khakrez	73%	20%	0%	0%	7%
Panjwayi	78%	5%	0%	0%	16%
Spin Boldak	69%	17%	10%	4%	0%
Kandahar	67%	26%	2%	1%	4%
Total	77%	14%	4%	1%	4%

This suggests that there is still a deep-seated pessimism amongst the Afghan people about the current security situation. Many of them are tired of war and are sceptical about the usefulness of further military operations.

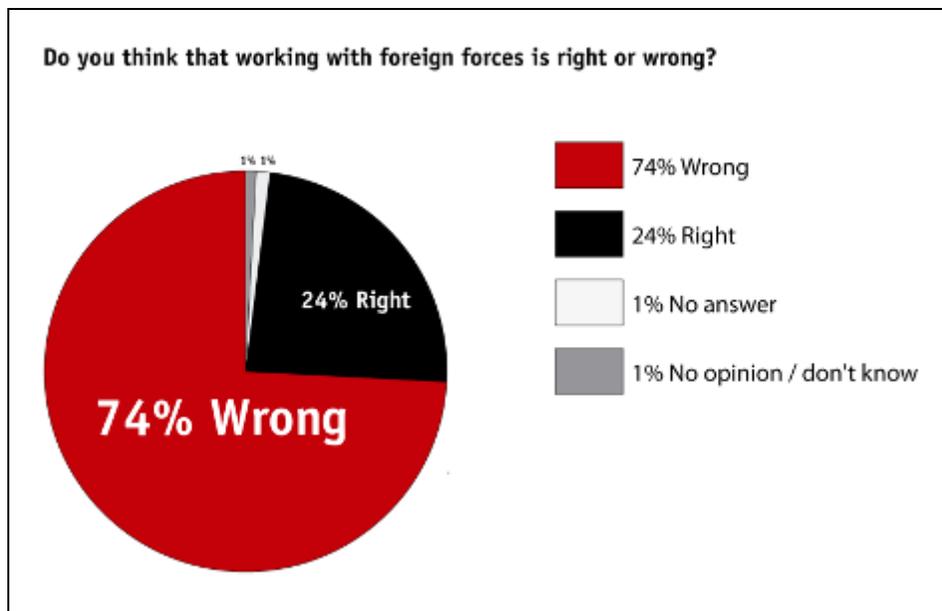


Destroyed by the Taliban; the ruins of a Kandahar City guesthouse used by international personnel as a base for development projects.

B MISTRUST TOWARDS FOREIGN FORCES

A consistent trend established by the field research is the mistrust and suspicion which Afghans feel towards international military forces. On a number of indicators, interviewees were cautious or negative about building a close relationship with NATO-ISAF troops.

For instance, almost three-quarters of Afghans interviewed believe that working with foreign forces is wrong.



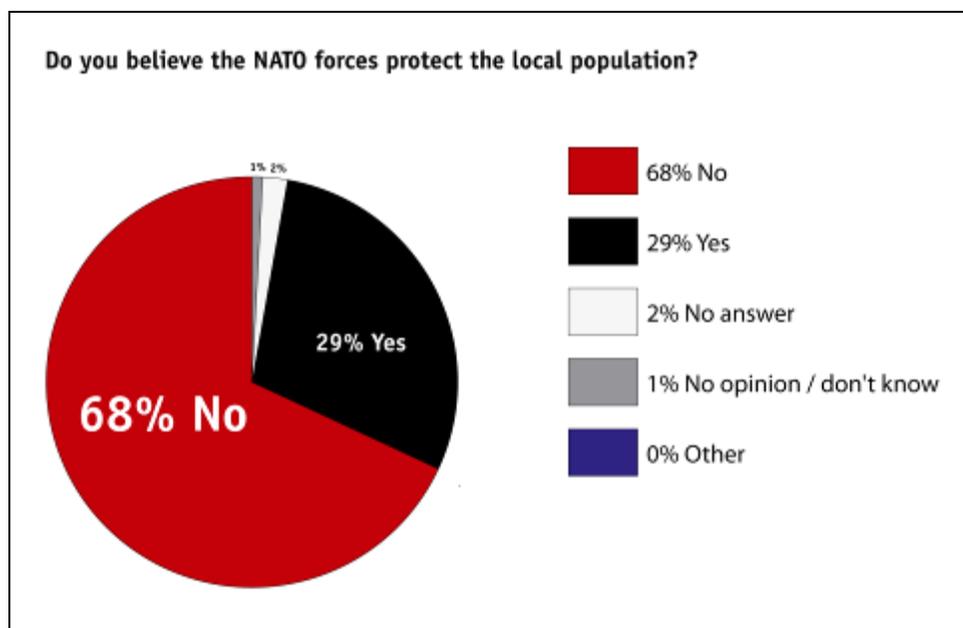
Do you think that working with foreign forces is right or wrong?

	Right	Wrong	No answer	No opinion/ Don't know
Garmsir	16%	76%	4%	4%
Marjah	2%	98%	0%	0%
Nawa	16%	82%	0%	2%
Lash City	35%	65%	0%	0%
Helmand	15%	82%	2%	1%
Kandahar City	49%	51%	0%	0%
Khakrez	18%	80%	2%	0%
Panjwayi	19%	76%	3%	0%
Spin Boldak	38%	62%	0%	0%
Kandahar	36%	63%	1%	0%
Total	24%	74%	1%	1%

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In Marjah district, this figure reached 98%, an alarming result in a district considered the showpiece for the international community's new counter-insurgency policy. This strategy is based on working with local populations to gather intelligence and to build sustainable security, governance, and economic development. Such strong opposition to working with coalition forces suggests that it will be challenging for the coalition to build up an adequate cadre of Afghans willing to cooperate with them.

It is also discouraging that over two-thirds of Afghans interviewed believe that the NATO-ISAF forces do not protect the local population.



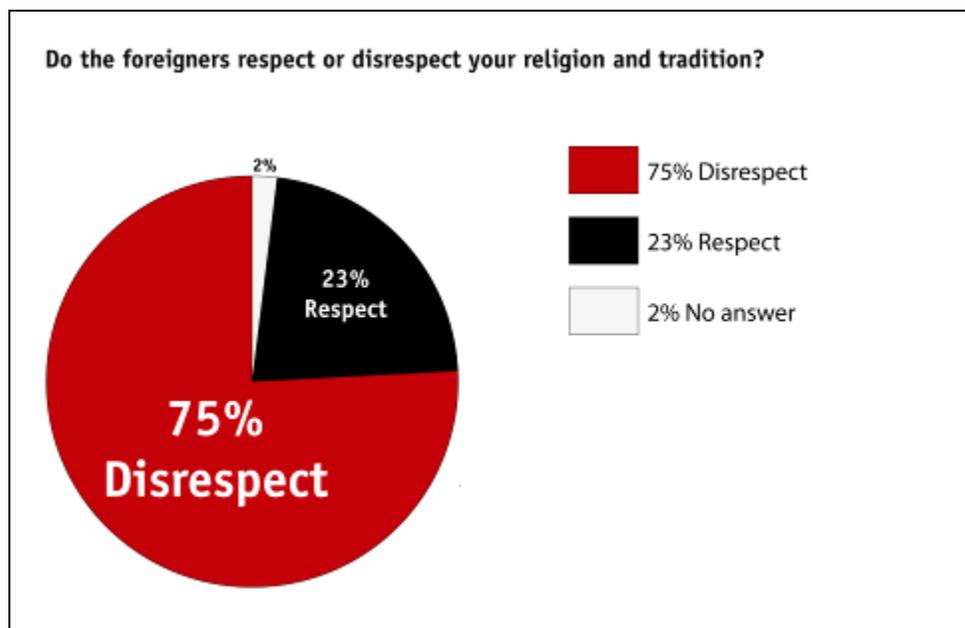
Do you believe the NATO forces protect the local population?					
	Yes	No	Other	No answer	No opinion/ Don't know
Garmsir	40%	60%	0%	0%	0%
Marjah	26%	73%	0%	0%	0%
Nawa	35%	61%	0%	2%	2%
Lash City	27%	71%	0%	2%	0%
Helmand	32%	66%	0%	1%	0%
Kandahar City	36%	58%	0%	2%	4%
Khakrez	7%	84%	0%	2%	7%
Panjwayi	14%	84%	0%	2%	0%
Spin Boldak	27%	69%	0%	4%	0%
Kandahar	25%	69%	0%	3%	3%
Total	29%	68%	0%	2%	1 %

Another of the counter-insurgency strategy's key principles – perhaps the most fundamental - is that coalition forces should protect the local population.¹² They are working for the benefit of the Afghan people: maintaining their security is absolutely essential to winning hearts and minds and creating the conditions for NATO-ISAF withdrawal.

Whether or not these perceptions are objectively true, their strength is very significant. As the international community is aware, the conflict in Afghanistan is also a war of ideas and perceptions, and winning a counter-insurgency campaign without support from the civilian population would be extremely challenging.

Taliban capitalising on perceived foreign disrespect

There is also a strong perception that foreigners are insensitive towards Afghan custom and religion. Fully three-quarters of respondents believe that foreigners violate local customs. Islam and local custom are very important to Afghans, so failing to show adequate respect risks serious political blowback from the local population.

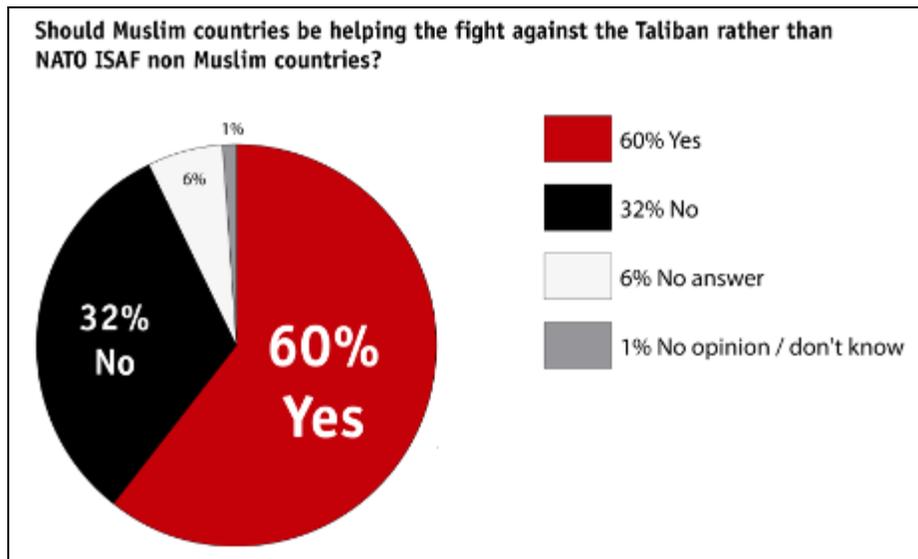


¹² NATO-ISAF, *ISAF Commander's Counter-insurgency Guidance*, Aug 2009. Available at: http://www.nato.int/isaf/docu/official_texts/counter-insurgency_guidance.pdf

Do the foreigners respect or disrespect your religion and tradition?					
	Respect	Disrespect	No answer	Other	No opinion
Garmsir	28%	69%	3%	0%	0%
Marjah	22%	78%	0%	0%	0%
Nawa	8%	92%	0%	0%	0%
Lash City	18%	82%	0%	0%	0%
Helmand	21%	77%	2%	0%	0%
Kandahar City	30%	69%	2%	0%	0%
Khakrez	13%	82%	0%	0%	4%
Panjwayi	5%	89%	5%	0%	0%
Spin Boldak	35%	65%	0%	0%	0%
Kandahar	24%	74%	1%	0%	1%
Total	22%	75%	2%	0%	0%

The Taliban capitalises on this perception for propaganda purposes. They use it as part of their efforts to cast the conflict in a religious light, portraying the coalition as blasphemous foreigners who do not know or care about Islam, and are only in Afghanistan for occupation and destruction.

Underlining the importance of religion, a majority of respondents stated that they would prefer troops from Muslim states to be deployed in Afghanistan, rather than non-Muslim forces. This is an indication that Muslim countries should be approached to join the international coalition.



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Should Muslim countries be helping the fight in Afghanistan rather than NATO-ISAF non Muslim troops?				
	Yes	No	Don't know	No answer
Garmsir	71%	23%	3%	3%
Marjah	54%	39%	1%	6%
Nawa	55%	39%	2%	4%
Lash City	54%	40%	0%	6%
Helmand	60%	33%	2%	4%
Kandahar City	69%	28%	0%	3%
Khakrez	62%	31%	2%	4%
Panjwayi	65%	19%	0%	16%
Spin Boldak	31%	48%	0%	21%
Kandahar	60%	31%	0%	9%
Total	60%	32%	1%	6%

Conspiracies and Mistrust Rife

The field research suggests that a conspiratorial view of foreign forces is already quite strong. 55% of the Afghans thought that foreigners were in the country to destroy or occupy Afghanistan, for their own personal reasons, or to destroy Islam. Worryingly, only 12% of all interviewees thought that the objective of foreign troops was to bring peace and security to Afghanistan.

What are the foreigners fighting for?			
	Helmand	Kandahar	Total
To occupy Afghanistan	24%	10%	18%
For their own targets (Al Qaeda)	17%	12%	15%
For violence and to destroy Afghanistan	20%	6%	14%
For their own benefit	9%	20%	14%
Don't know	10%	18%	13%
Peace and security	5%	21%	12%
To destroy Islam	12%	4%	9%
No answer	1%	6%	3%
Rebuilding Afghanistan	2%	0%	1%
Other	0%	2%	1%

Perceptions of the good points and bad points of foreign forces give additional weight to this analysis. When questioned, 58% of interviewees either did not know what the good points of foreign forces were, stated that there were no good things about them, or had no answer. Only 8% thought that foreigners brought peace and security to Afghanistan.

What are the good things about foreigners?			
	Helmand	Kandahar	Total
No answer	28%	34%	31%
Help and Assistance	33%	5%	21%
No good things	12%	20%	16%
Don't know	9%	12%	11%
Peace and security	3%	16%	8%
Roads	9%	3%	6%
Reconstruction of Afghanistan	5%	4%	4%
Schools	2%	2%	2%
Other	0%	3%	1%

On the other hand, the majority of Afghans (83%) identified bad points about foreigners. By far the most common attributes identified were related to military operations – bombings, killing civilians, and searching homes.

What are the bad things about foreigners?			
	Helmand	Kandahar	Total
Bombings	32%	19%	26%
Searching homes	21%	20%	21%
Killing civilians	16%	25%	20%
No answer	9%	15%	11%
Unnecessary military operations	10%	0%	6%
Don't know	4%	3%	3%
Other	3%	3%	3%
Do not respect Islam	2%	2%	2%
Failing to fix Afghanistan	0%	5%	2%
Disruption caused by convoys	2%	3%	2%
A lot of bad things	0%	5%	2%
Arresting civilians	1%	0%	1%
Occupation	2%	0%	1%

The responses emphasise how security is the bottom line for the Afghan people. In Marjah, which saw one of the most intensive military operations in years, 73% feel more negative about

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foreign forces compared to one year ago. This indicates that the current political dynamics and the humanitarian strategy in Afghanistan are failing to create effective relationships with the Afghan people.

Compared to one year ago is your opinion of the foreign forces more positive or more negative?			
	More positive	More negative	No answer
Garmsir	53%	47%	0%
Marjah	27%	73%	0%
Nawa	43%	55%	2%
Lash City	52%	46%	2%
Helmand	43%	56%	1%
Kandahar City	56%	44%	0%
Khakrez	36%	64%	0%
Panjwayi	41%	59%	0%
Spin Boldak	60%	40%	0%
Kandahar	50%	50%	0%
Total	46%	53%	1%

These results indicate that foreigners are viewed negatively. They are believed to be fighting for their own reasons or to inflict destruction; they are widely perceived as being disrespectful to Islam and unable or unwilling to protect the local population.

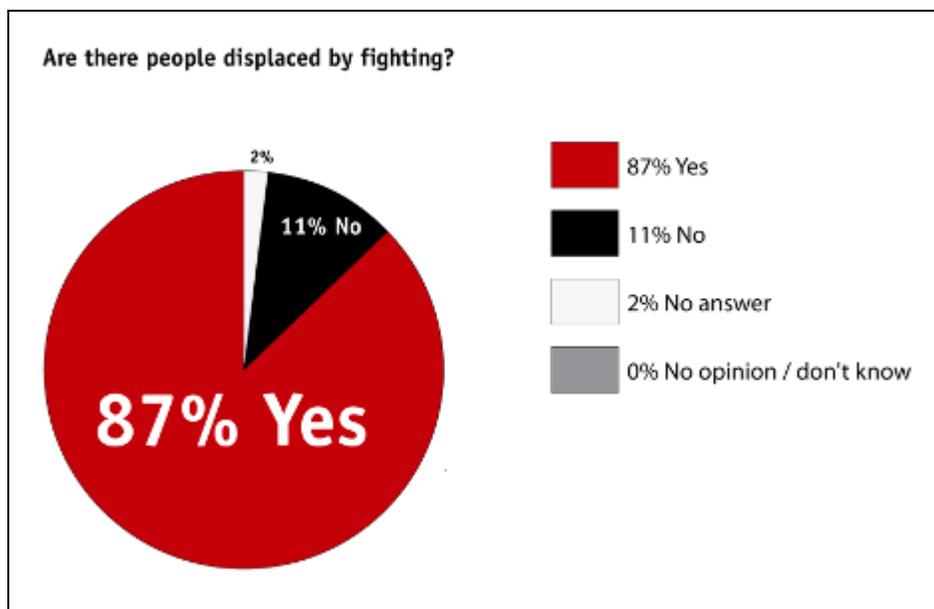
C ONGOING HUMANITARIAN CRISIS IN SOUTHERN AFGHANISTAN

Large numbers of displaced Afghans living in difficult conditions



Refugee camp in Kandahar City

Negative perceptions of foreign forces are exacerbated by the humanitarian situation in Southern Afghanistan. The great majority of Afghans interviewed (87%) state that they know of people displaced by fighting.

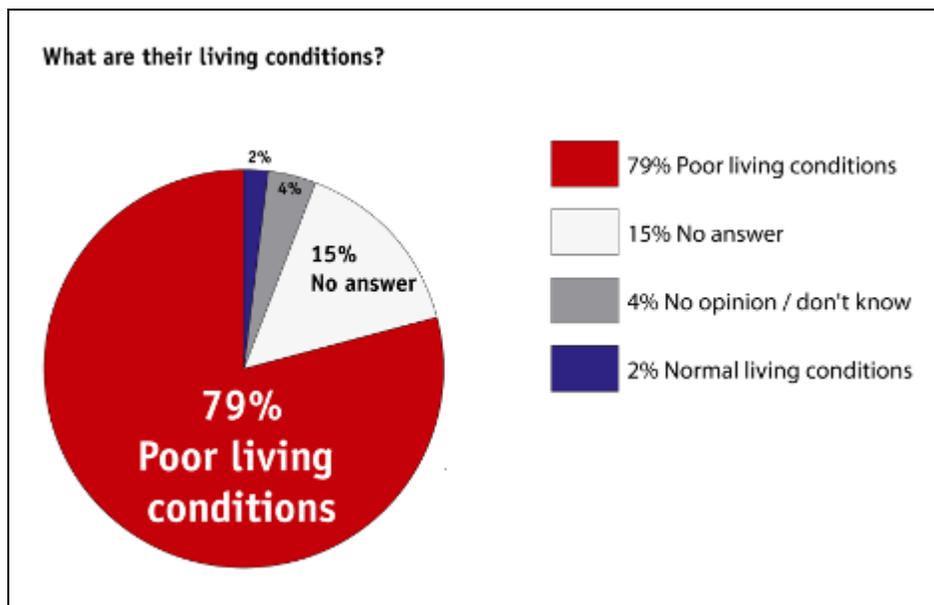


Although Lashkar Gah was cited as the main location of these displaced people, the range of answers reveals that refugees are scattered throughout the region and outside of Afghanistan itself.

Where are the displaced people? (Helmand Responses)	
	Helmand
Lashkar Gah	42%
Iran and / or Pakistan	22%
All over the province	15%
No answer / don't know	9%
Abroad	8%
Different districts of Helmand province	3%

Where are the displaced people? (Kandahar Responses)	
	Kandahar
Kandahar City	28%
No answer	25%
All over the province	22%
Different districts of Kandahar province	9%
Iran and/or Pakistan	5%
Don't know	5%
Kandahar and Abroad	3%
Other	3%

These displaced people were widely believed to be living in poor conditions by Afghan interviewees.



Many are likely to be civilians who have fled from NATO-ISAF operations, suggesting that insufficient measures have been put in place to provide them with adequate facilities and supplies. Previous field research (in the aftermath of Operation Moshtarak) found that the facilities available to refugees fleeing the conflict zone were few and far between; they lacked sufficient food, shelter and medical equipment.

The fact that interviewees provided a wide range of locations for the displaced people suggests that there is still a serious shortfall in the number of available camps; the poor living conditions which were reported also shows that these camps are still without vital humanitarian supplies.

Appalling Conditions Persist in Mirwais Hospital



For several years, research has drawn attention to the situation at Mirwais Hospital in Kandahar.¹³ Overcrowding, inadequate staff, and a lack of suitable equipment have all seriously affected the hospital services available to local residents.

In June 2010 ICOS researchers returned to Mirwais Hospital to assess the conditions. The men's surgical ward had improved dramatically but the children's ward, maternity and women's surgical wards were far below any type of basic standard.

These wards were extremely unsanitary with dirty sheets, very little visible medical equipment and no medical staff present. In the baby ward, malnourished babies lay two to a bed, At the time of our visit, there were no medical staff on the ward, One baby had died and lay in a bed shared with another child.

¹³ See *War Zone Hospitals in Afghanistan: A Symbol of Wilful Neglect*, February 2007. Available at: http://www.icosgroup.net/documents/Hospital_Report.pdf; *The Canadian International Development Agency: Unanswered Questions*, August 2007. Available at: http://www.icosgroup.net/documents/CIDA_Unanswered_questions.pdf

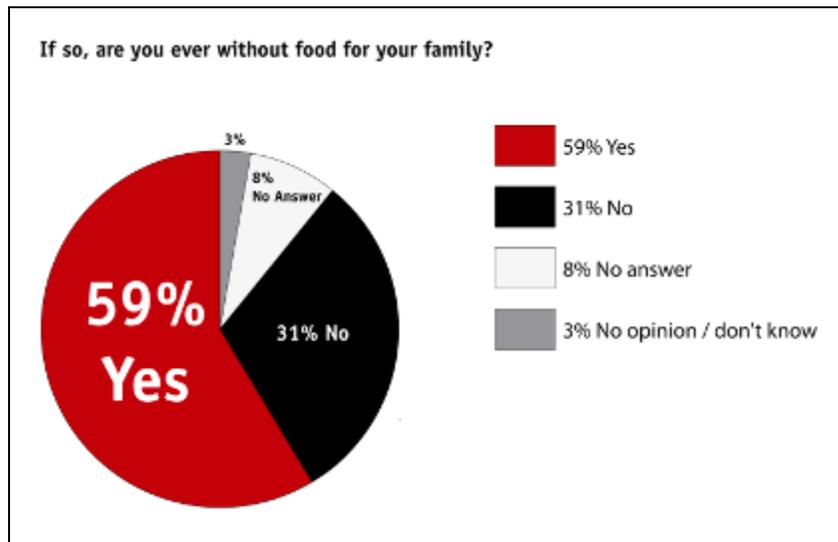
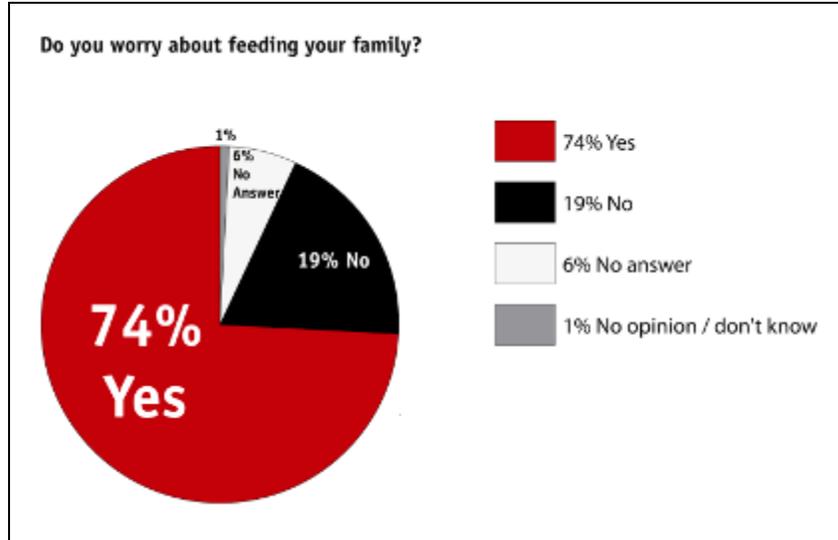
The male intensive care unit was in slightly better condition, with modern medical equipment, better hygiene, and more visible staff care. Nonetheless the conditions are still poor, given the amount of effort and resources which have supposedly been devoted to this hospital.

Mirwais Hospital demonstrates that the international community's pledges of aid and development are still failing to make a difference to key projects. A well-functioning hospital in Kandahar would be a visible and concrete indication of the benefits which the International community can provide to the people of Afghanistan, and which the Taliban can never deliver.



Food shortages

Nearly three quarters of Afghans interviewed reported that they struggled to earn enough to provide for their families. Almost 60% spoke of food shortages.



The quality of life in southern Afghanistan remains poor. During five years of field research conducted in Afghanistan by ICOS, one element has been consistently salient: the depressingly bleak assessments of the government services given by ordinary Afghans. For many Afghans the quality of life has hardly changed for the better since 2001. The inability of the Afghan government to improve and extend access to basic services such as provision of primary school education, access to healthcare, electricity and running water to large sections of the population, remains one of the principal failures of post-2001 Afghanistan.

It is difficult to expect these disenfranchised people to support the efforts of the Kabul government and the international community against the Taliban, particularly in the south of the country where cooperating with international humanitarian and political agencies comes at a considerable risk to oneself or one's family.

Afghans continue to struggle to obtain basic necessities. The 2007-2008 National Risk and Vulnerability Assessment (NRVA) report of the Afghan Central Statistics Office found that 7.4 million people are unable to get enough food to live active, healthy lives. Another 8.5 million people are on the borderline of food insecurity. That means that 15.9 million or 56.7% of the total population of 28 million is in need of help.¹⁴



Street peddlers in Lashkar Gah

¹⁴ Central Statistics Office, *National Risk and Vulnerability Assessment 2007/2008: A Profile of Afghanistan*, October 2009. Available at: <http://nrva.cso.gov.af/>

The main aspiration of the interviewees is an end to conflict and restoration of peace and security, the principal precondition for any kind of meaningful personal development. 13% of the interviewees named withdrawal of foreign forces as their main aspiration.

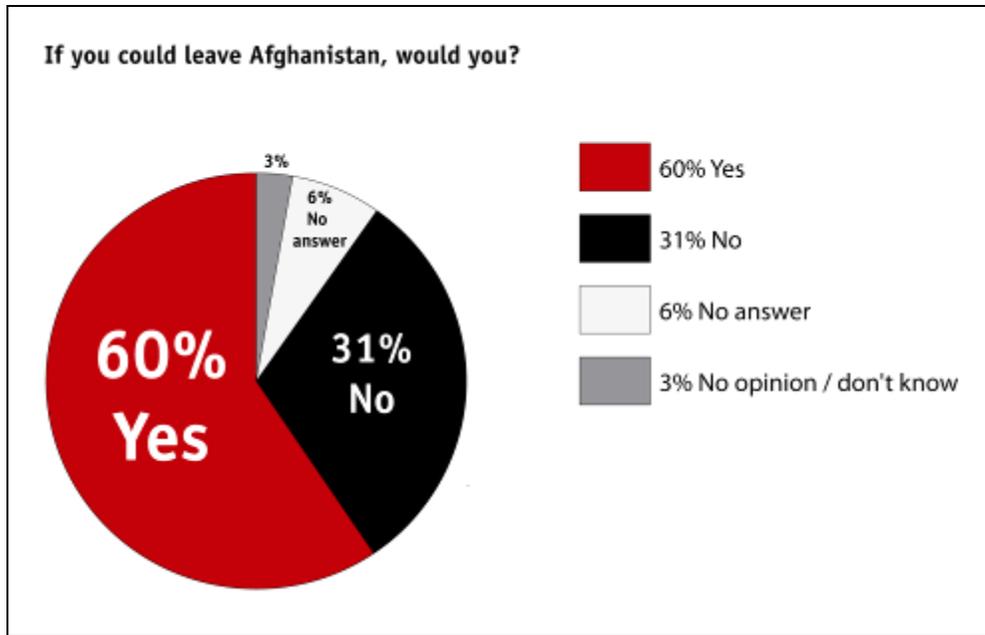
What is the main personal aspiration in your life?			
	Helmand	Kandahar	Total
Peace and security	63%	39%	53%
Withdrawal of foreign troops	10%	16%	13%
Other	5%	20%	12%
Reconstruction	6%	13%	9%
Marriage	12%	1%	7%
No answer	4%	4%	4%
Education	1%	6%	3%

Negative feelings and disenfranchisement

The result is a population that feels let down and marginalised. When asked about their emotional state, more than half of the interviewees spoke of feelings of anger, and almost a third felt depression and frustration. These figures are alarmingly high in Helmand province, with 69% of locals feeling angry. On the other hand, the proportion of Afghans with regular feelings of happiness, confidence and optimism is functionally insignificant.

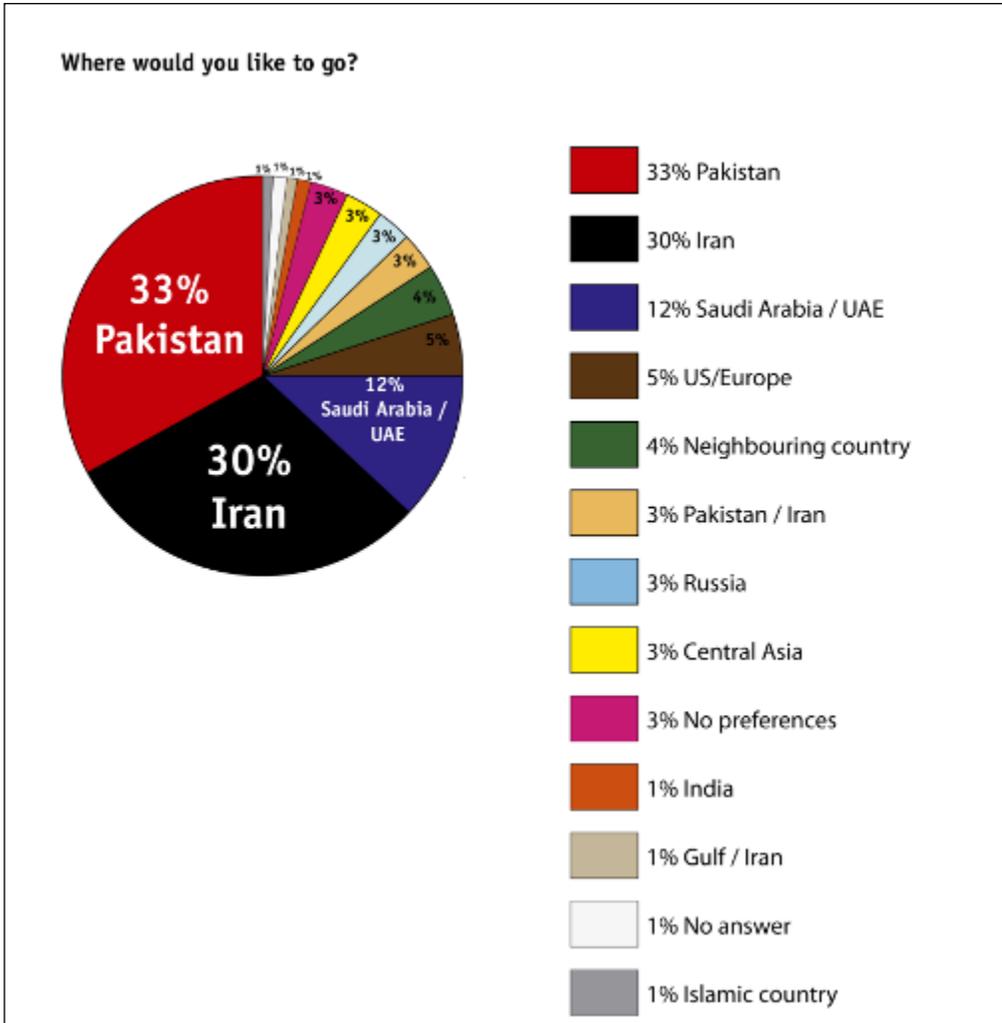
45 Which of the following emotions do you feel most strongly on a regular basis?			
	Helmand	Kandahar	Total
Anger	69%	32%	53%
Sadness / Depression	41%	21%	32%
Frustration	35%	23%	30%
Fear	3%	8%	5%
Happiness	2%	10%	5%
Confidence	1%	2%	1%
Optimism	0%	1%	1%
Ambition	0%	3%	1%
Other	0%	5%	2%
No opinion	0%	1%	1%
No answer	1%	8%	4%

Consequently, and worrying for the future of the coming Afghan generation, 60% of the respondents said they would leave the country if given an opportunity.



The majority would emigrate to Iran or Pakistan where there are already large numbers of displaced Afghans. Relatively small numbers would move to Europe or the United States, whilst a few would like to move to other Muslim states such as Saudi Arabia, Central Asia or the Gulf.

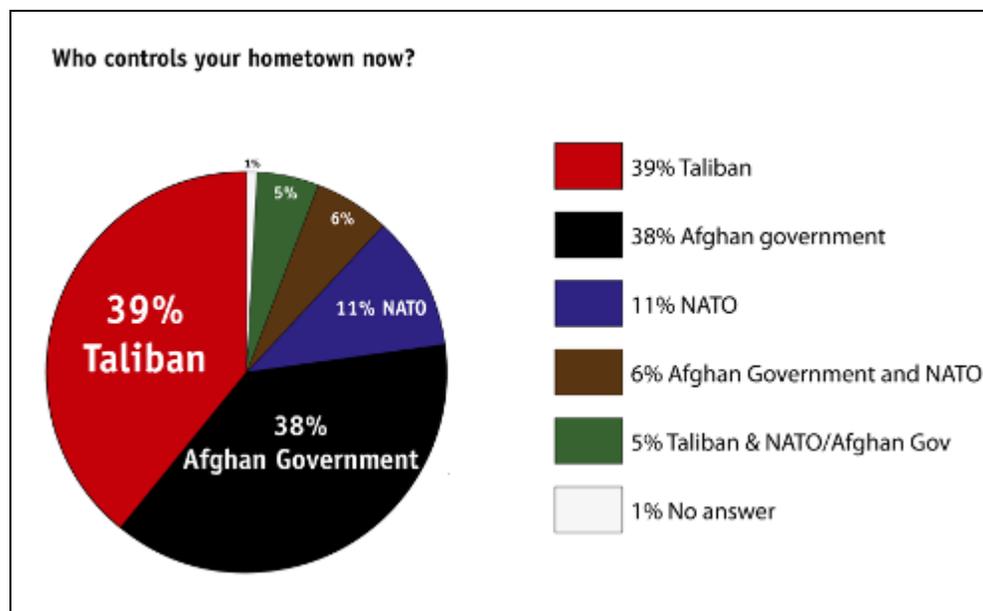
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D WIDESPREAD BELIEF IN TALIBAN STRENGTH AND RETURN OF AL QAEDA

Taliban perceived to have considerable presence in rural areas

Perceptions of Taliban presence are often a key factor influencing one's decision to seek services, protection and jobs with the Taliban or, at the very least, a discouragement from open opposition to the insurgents' presence in the area. In this regard it is alarming that 39% of Afghans interviewed said that the area they lived in was controlled by the Taliban, slightly outnumbering those whose hometown was under the control of the Afghan government.



The district breakdown of the responses on territory control clearly reveals the divide between the countryside and the towns. In Kandahar City and Lashkar Gah, perceptions of insurgent control are low, an average of 11%. In other, more rural districts this figure is much higher: an average of 50% over the rural districts in both provinces. The districts of Marjah and Khakrez stand out with an average of 88% of interviewees saying their area was under insurgent control.

Helmand	Taliban	Afghan Government	Kandahar	Taliban	Afghan Government
Garmsir	32%	35%	Khakrez	87%	9%
Marjah	89%	2%	Kandahar City	10%	73%
Nawa	16%	39%	Panjwayi	73%	11%
Lashkar Gah	12%	55%	Spin Boldak	4%	63%
Helmand	44%	29%	Kandahar	33%	49%

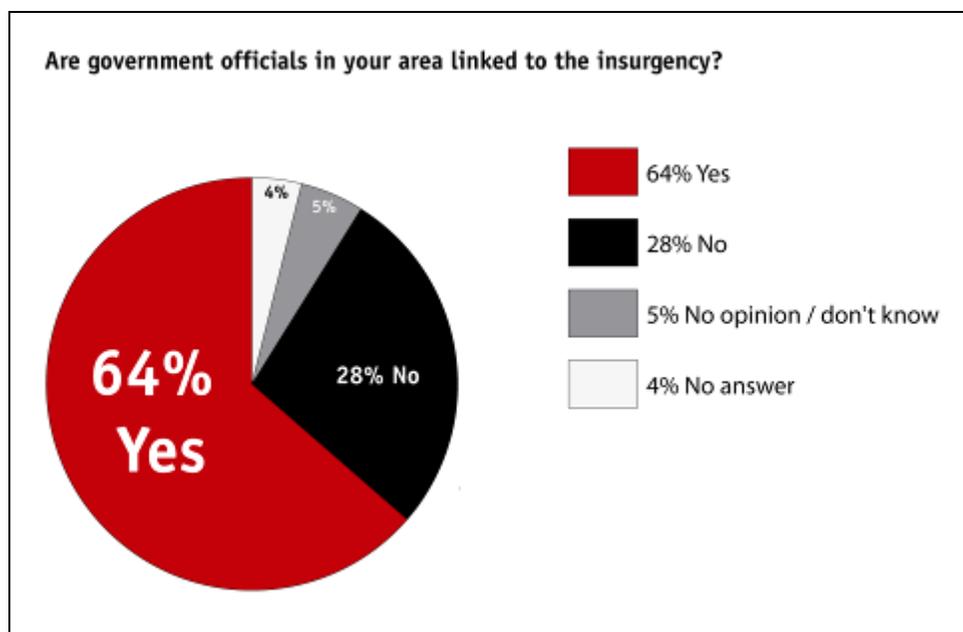
That such a strong Taliban presence was reported in Marjah, supposedly cleared of insurgents in March following Operation Moshtarak, is of particular concern. The rapid deployment of essential services and security in Marjah, described as “a government in a box”, has demonstrably failed to remove the Taliban’s control. These figures attest the difficulty of implementing the international community’s strategy of “Shape, Clear, Hold, and Build”.¹⁵

It is somewhat encouraging for the international community, which is seeking to turn security and administration over to local authorities, that the Afghan government is generally perceived as having more control than the international military forces. Only 11% of Afghans interviewed said that it was NATO-ISAF in charge of their area.

However, the main issue remains the ability of the Afghan government to withstand Taliban attempts to infiltrate territory. Both the military capacity of the Afghan National Army and the ability of the central government to establish a strong institutional presence, with tangible positive impacts for the local economy and basic infrastructure, are of key importance to the future success of the international community’s mission.

Majority says local government in collusion with the insurgency...

It is therefore discouraging that 64% of the Afghans interviewed believe government officials in their areas have links to the insurgency. The proportion is especially high in Helmand, with 76% of respondents associating their local government with the Taliban, compared to 46% in Kandahar. This discrepancy highlights the challenges of building credible Afghan state institutions: in Marjah, this negative view of local government was shared by 88% of respondents.



¹⁵ Cordesman, A, *Shape, Clear, Hold, and Build: The Uncertain Lessons of the Afghan and Iraq Wars*, Centre for Strategic and International Studies, August 17, 2009. Available at: <http://csis.org/files/publication/Afghan-IraqLess.edit.7.8.pdf>

It is believed that some government officials establish mutually beneficial business links with the Taliban, such as drug-trafficking, which helps to supplement their meagre state salaries. Local government officials will also sometimes be compelled to tolerate the Taliban's activities in their area. Deals will be cut with individual insurgent commanders to keep the violence to a minimum and ensure that local business interests are not hurt. With the central government in Kabul having limited influence on the ground, both sides have little taste for bloody confrontation.

A farmer who relies on the poppy trade as his only source of livelihood is usually willing to sell his seeds to any buyer: his village or tribal elders may then pay the Taliban protection money but this does not necessarily imply severing their links with local state institutions. An extended family may have members both in the insurgency and in local government and security forces. In these circumstances, the concept of legitimate political authority is becoming ever less tangible in southern Afghanistan.

Are government officials in your area linked to the insurgency?				
	Yes	No	No opinion/Don't know	No answer
Garmsir	70%	9%	16%	6%
Marjah	88%	10%	2%	0%
Nawa	80%	16%	2%	2%
Lashkar Gah	8%	87%	0%	6%
Helmand	76%	13%	7%	4%
Khakrez	51%	44%	2%	2%
Kandahar City	49%	44%	4%	3%
Panjwayi	46%	46%	0%	8%
Spin Boldak	42%	54%	2%	2%
Kandahar	47%	47%	3%	3%
Total	64%	28%	5%	4%

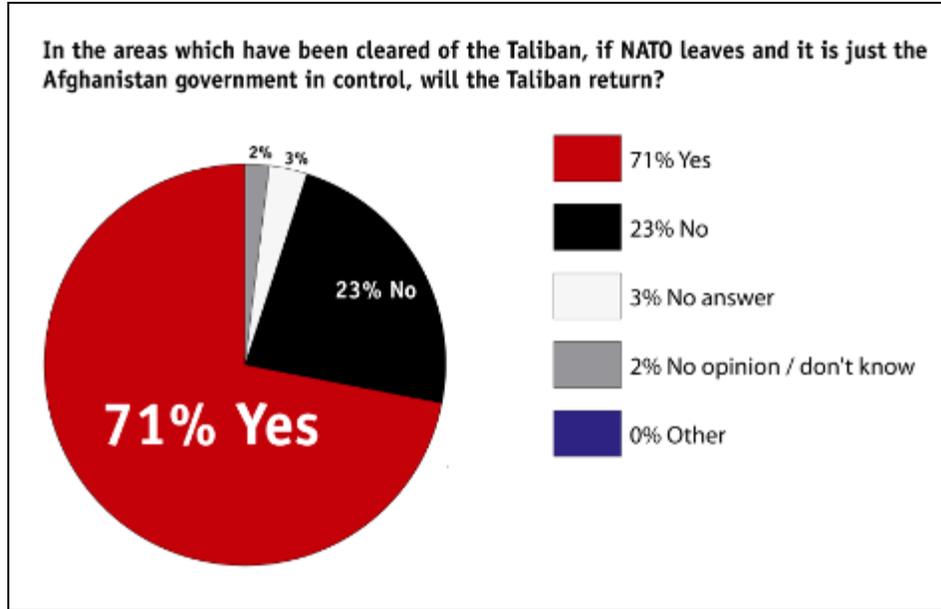
Lashkar Gah was exceptional in that interviewees were confident that local officials were not linked to the Taliban. Their positive attitude indicates that Governor Mangal, the Helmand district governor who has his offices in Lashkar Gah, is not viewed as colluding with the insurgents. This reinforces his credentials as a reliable ally in the complex environment of southern Afghanistan.

In spite of good news stories such as Governor Mangal, the Taliban is increasingly expanding its social reach, contending to become a serious political and economic player in some parts of the country. Interview data shows that the Taliban has significant appeal, whether due to intimidation or the provision of security, economic assistance and other services to the population.

...and unable to withhold the Taliban pressure without NATO-ISAF help

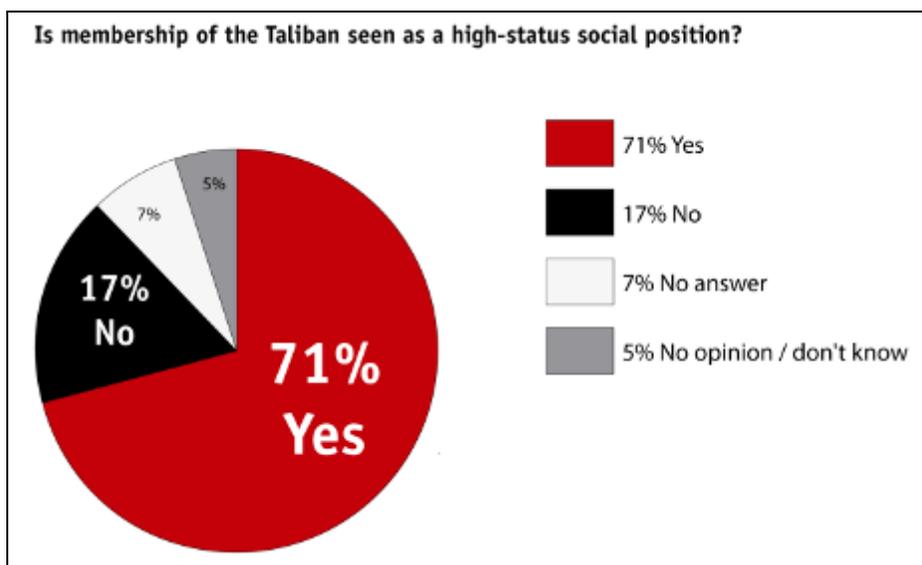
Following on from this perception of the government's collusion with the insurgency, 71% of the interviewees believe that in the areas cleared of insurgents, the Taliban will return if NATO-ISAF

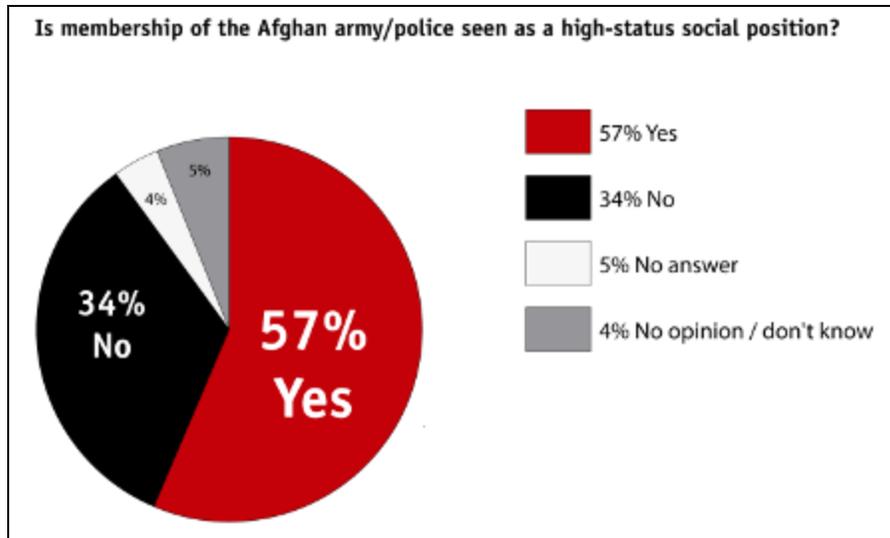
pulls out and leaves the Afghan government in sole control over security. In Helmand province, for example, more than three quarters of interviewees in both the provincial capital and in Marjah expressed doubt in the ability of government forces to hold on to recently secured territories.



The Afghan security forces often struggle to match the Taliban's appeal. This is particularly true of the police force, widely resented for its corruption and inefficiency.

71% of the interviewees said that membership of the Taliban was a high status social position, compared to 57% who thought so about the state security forces.

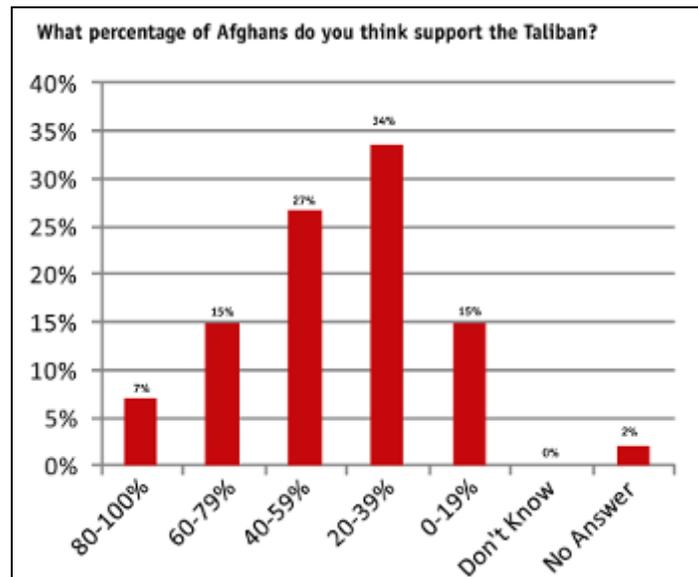




Membership or association with the Taliban in the areas where the insurgents possess a high degree of influence can bring employment. Moreover, it may also enhance one's social standing, by siding with the most powerful and admired local actor. To some Afghans, joining the Taliban may seem like being, at least for present, on the winning side.

The insurgency integrates into local society

It is difficult to assess the extent to which Taliban presence translates into, or is conditioned by, actual local support for the insurgency. Opinion polls conducted over the past year reported low levels of overall popular support for the Taliban, suggesting that the insurgents rely heavily on the use of violence and intimidation.¹⁶

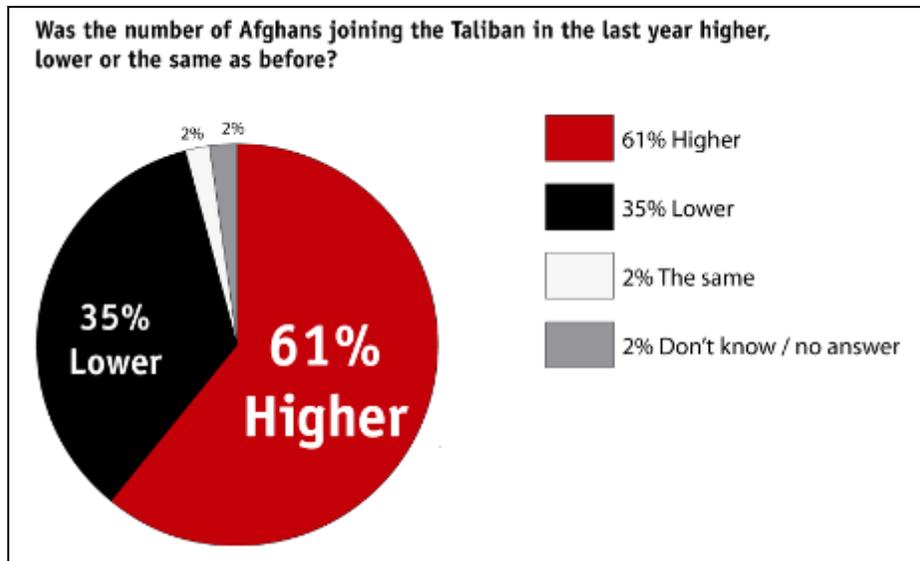


¹⁶ BBC, ABC, ARD. *Afghanistan National Poll*, January 2010.

Afghans interviewed by ICOS, on the other hand, speak of an insurgency which is perceived to be much more entrenched in certain sections of the society. Their estimates varied but only 15% of the respondents said that the support for the insurgency was anything lower than 20%. More than a third said that popular support for the Taliban ran between 20-39% and more than a quarter of respondents provided figures that fall between 40 and 59%.

Taliban ability to find new recruits on the rise

A majority of interviewees reported an increase in the number of Afghans joining the insurgency over the past year, compared with previous periods.



According to the latest research, the motives of young men in southern Afghanistan for joining the insurgency are more complex than commonly assumed and go beyond ideological affinity. The presence of foreign forces, which are often viewed – rightly or wrongly – as a “Christian army”, coupled with civilian casualties that often result from counter-insurgency operations, undoubtedly serves as a powerful mobilisation tool. In other areas, the weak reach of the government enables the Taliban to establish itself as the only viable authority. It has been argued that in the conditions of civil war in particular, the people, regardless of their ideological inclinations, will tend to give their support to strong local actors who control the territory, provide protection and enforce a set of rules.¹⁷

By using methods of both cooptation and violent intimidation, well-organised militant groups such the Taliban implant themselves in local communities. Using violent action and propaganda campaigns, the insurgents deliberately seek to provoke an outside intervention, government or foreign. Once the intervention occurs, the local community, initially often opposed to the insurgent presence, will tend to coalesce to counter this outside intrusion. This phenomenon has been referred to as the “Accidental Guerrilla”.¹⁸

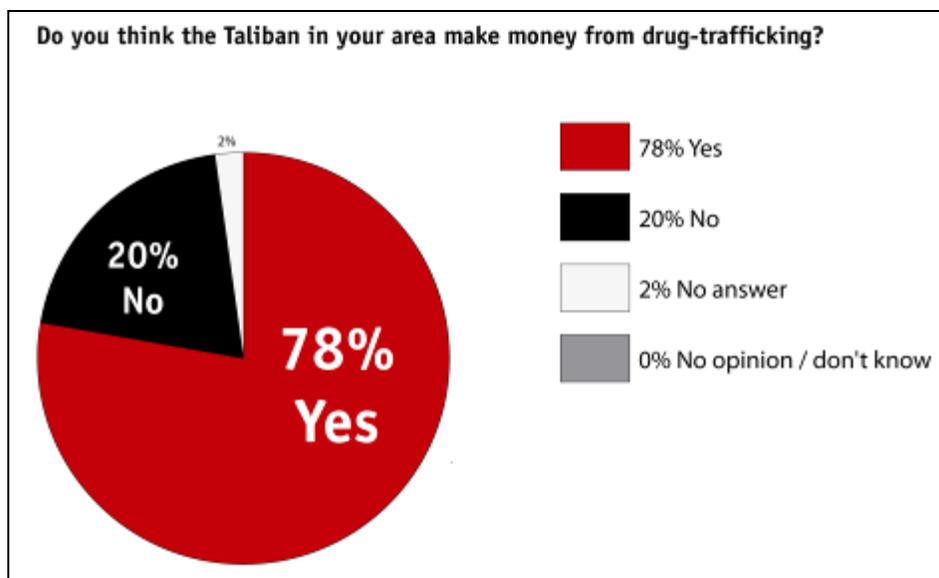
¹⁷ Kalyvas, S, *The Logic of Violence in Civil War*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006.

¹⁸ Kilcullen, D *Accidental Guerrilla: Fighting Small Wars in the Midst of a Big One*. Oxford University Press: USA, 2009

This may partly explain why the Taliban are still able to attract new recruits. Recruitment is one key area where the international community and the Afghan government have failed to tackle the insurgency. Financial incentives play a role, and the Afghan security forces often cannot match the regular income the Taliban offers its recruits and part-time helpers.

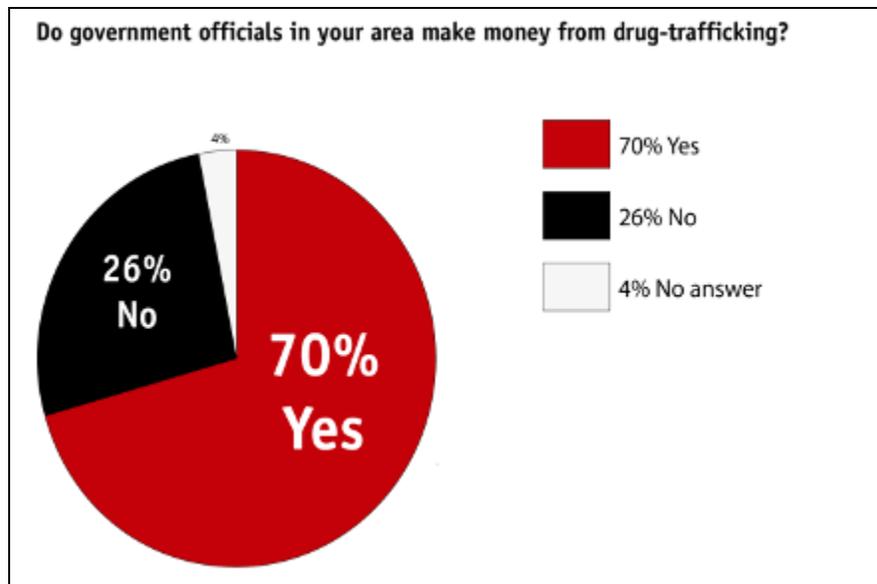
The insurgency-government-opium nexus

More than three quarters of the interviewees reported that in their areas the Taliban were profiting from drug-trafficking activities.



The number of these reports was particularly high in Helmand province where 89% of the interviewees spoke of Taliban involvement in the local drug trade, compared with 64% in Kandahar province. Most of the drug trade is concentrated in the countryside with the higher numbers reported in the Marjah and Garmsir districts.

Most alarmingly, 70% of the respondents, and 81% of the interviewees in Helmand, said that the drug trade in their areas involved local government officials.



These results back up well-known assertions about the nexus linking farming communities in southern Afghanistan and criminal organisations, with local insurgent commanders and some government officials profiting from the proceeds of the trade. This nexus undermines stability and governance in southern Afghanistan by tying government officials to the Taliban. In such an environment, strengthening legitimate state institutions requires innovative and creative policies.

A substantial portion of Taliban operations is funded through the trade in opium. According to the 2009 report by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), 900 tons of opium and 375 tons of heroin are trafficked from Afghanistan every year, with devastating consequences for drug addiction levels in neighbouring countries and in Europe.

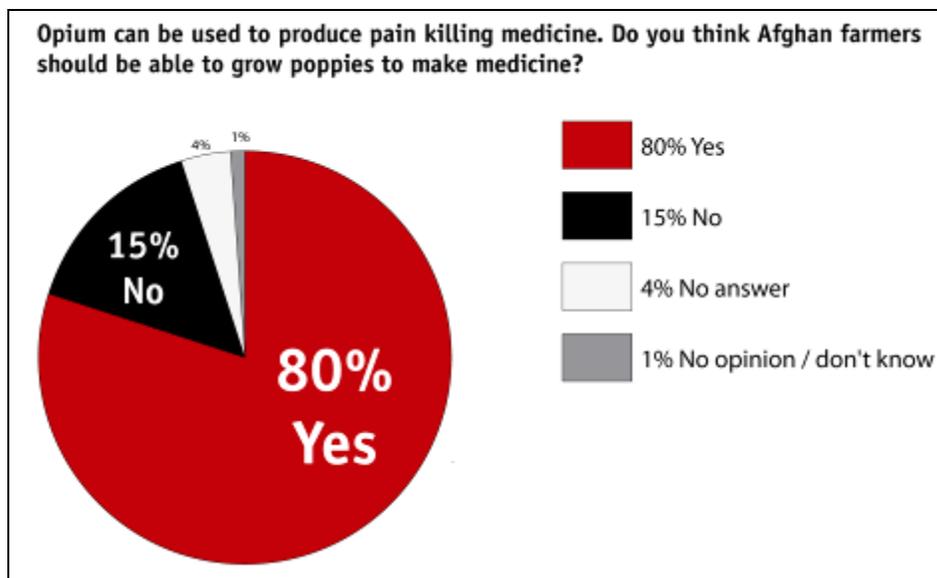
In southern Afghanistan, poppy farming has traditionally been part of the local agriculture but the security and political situation has in recent years created a dangerous triangular relationship between the opium trade, the insurgency, and corrupt local officials. The data from UNODC estimates that since 2005, insurgent groups in Afghanistan have derived \$90-160 million per year just from taxing opium production and trade.¹⁹

Poppy for Medicine

Untangling the networks which link corrupt officials, drug-traffickers and the Taliban requires a radical change of approach in the international community's counter-narcotics policy. ICOS has proposed the implementation of a *Poppy for Medicine* scheme, which would provide village licenses to selected farmers to grow poppies for the local production of essential medicines such as morphine under a tightly controlled system. While boosting the rural economy and diversifying it over time, *Poppy for Medicine* also integrates farmers and their entire communities into the legal economy, thus driving a wedge between these farming communities and the insurgency. This would reduce the Taliban's funding base and also their pool of potential recruits.

¹⁹ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC). *Addiction, Crime and Insurgency: The Transnational Threat of Afghan opium*, October 2009. Available at: <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/4ae1660d2.html>

A *Poppy for Medicine* scheme is strongly supported by Afghan interviewees; over three-quarters approve of the project.



Poppy for Medicine would be an effective counter-insurgency and counter-narcotics tool. It would help to build positive relationships with Afghan communities by providing a sustainable alternative to the international community's current ineffectual counter-narcotics policies.²⁰

At present, the result of the nexus between criminals, insurgents and corrupt officials contributes to a very complex political situation in the south of the country. There are no sharp lines separating state institutions, the insurgent networks, and local society, with blurred distinctions between competing levels of authority and power.

Taliban believed to have continuing links with Al Qaeda

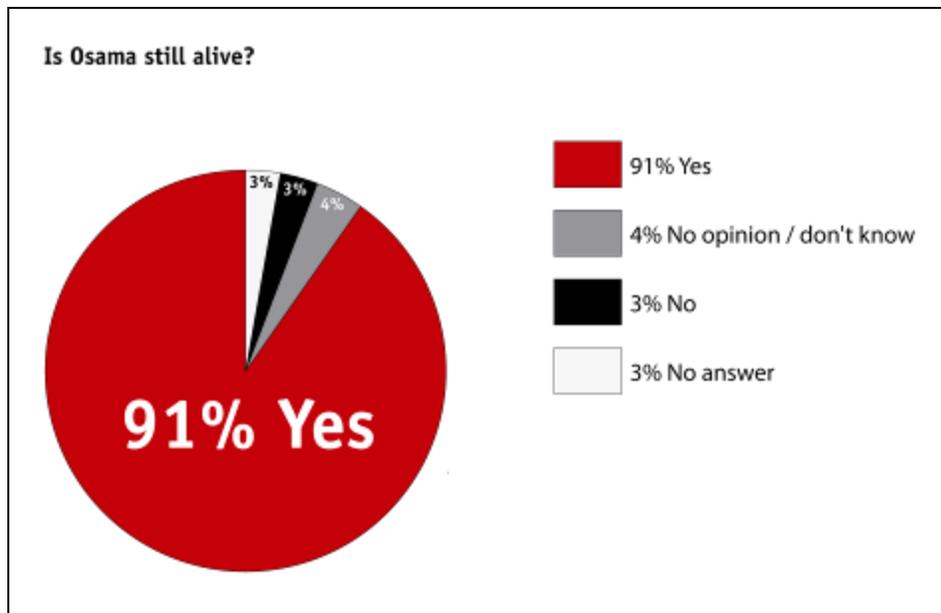
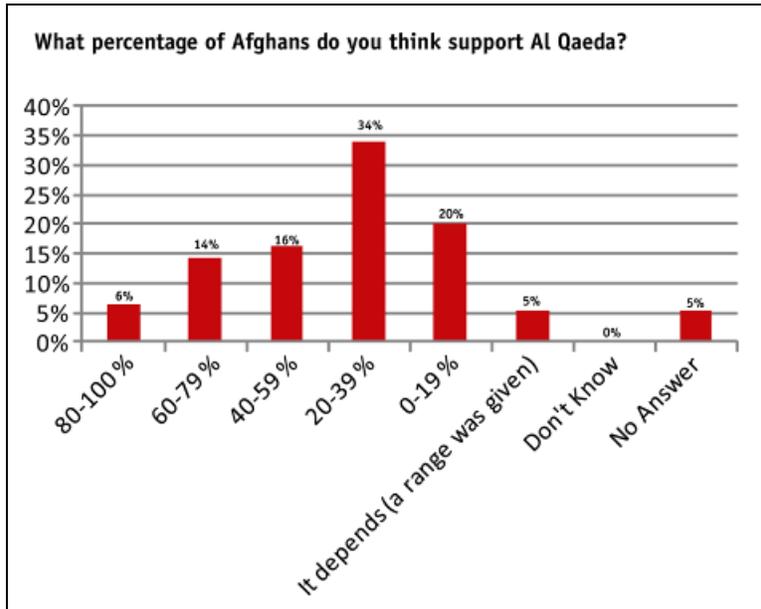
It is assumed that there is little love lost between ordinary Afghans and the mostly Arab fighters whose activities provoked a foreign intervention. It is well known that prior to the terrorist attacks in 2001, many senior ranking Taliban considered Al Qaeda's presence in the country as damaging to the government's stability and international image, and wanted Osama Bin Laden to leave the country.²¹

However, perceptions of popular support for Al Qaeda are considerably higher than expected. More than a third of the interviewees said that between 20% and 39% of Afghans support Al Qaeda and a further 16% suggested figures in the 40-59% margin. Interestingly, more than 90% of the Afghans believe that Osama Bin Laden is still alive.

²⁰ ICOS is currently calling for a scientific *Poppy for Medicine* pilot project in a few selected areas to see how such a project model could effectively boost rural development. ICOS has been investigating the *Poppy for Medicine* model on the ground since 2005 and has come up with a detailed blueprint with concrete implementation protocols. For more information about the *Poppy for Medicine* project, visit www.poppyformedicine.net

²¹ Bergen, P, *The Osama Bin Laden I Know*. New York: Free Press, 2006.

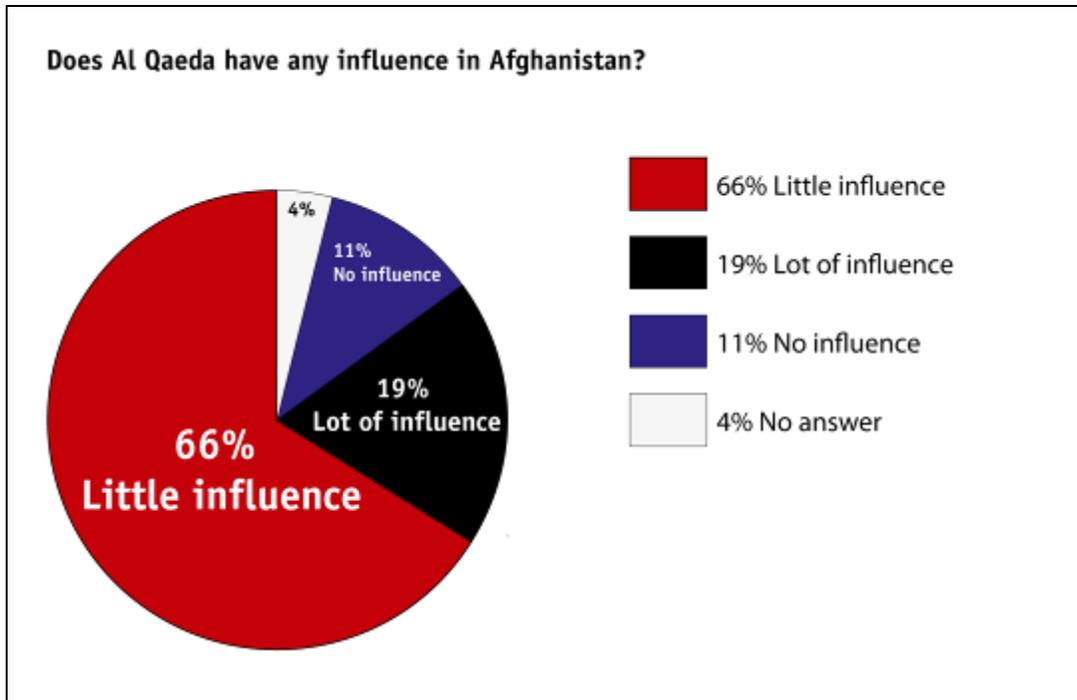
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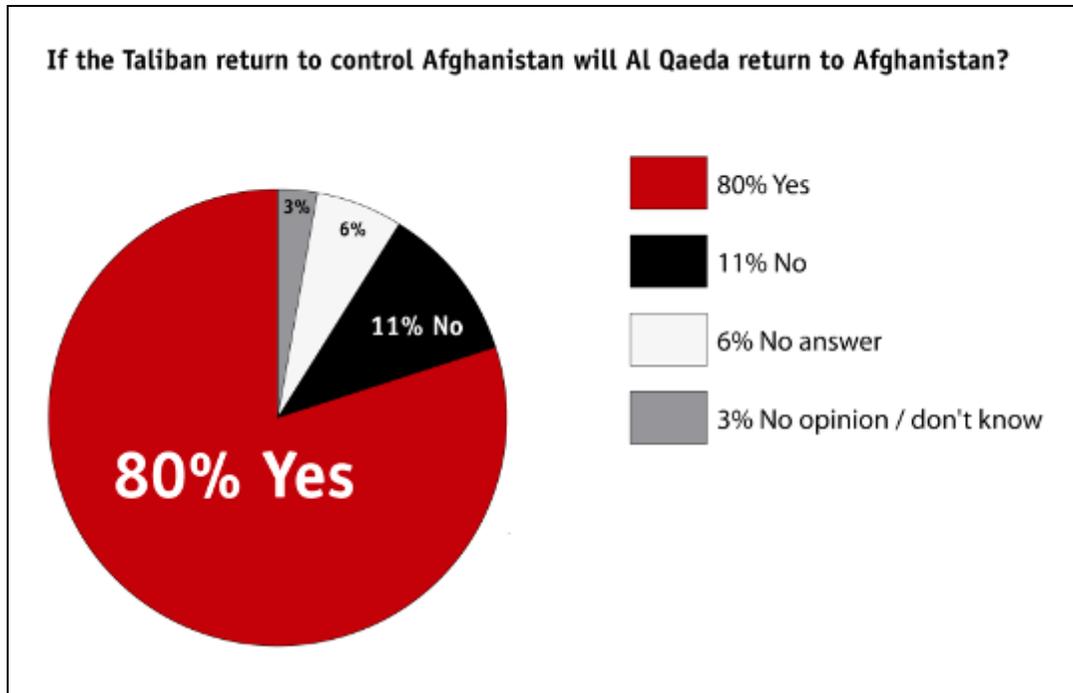
The Taliban's relationship with Al Qaeda is one of the major issues in the debate on negotiations with the Taliban. Preventing Al Qaeda from re-establishing its presence in Afghanistan is the fundamental objective of the international community's mission in the country. The possible return of Al Qaeda-affiliated cells to Afghanistan following the withdrawal of foreign forces is a fundamental long-term concern.

Regardless of the differences between coalition members regarding the strategy and the withdrawal timeline, there is a common understanding that Afghanistan cannot become a lawless terrain attracting foreign militant groups. It is of paramount importance that any future

government in Kabul provides guarantees on basic security concerns of the International coalition. The following research data shows that Afghans are well aware of Al Qaeda's influence:



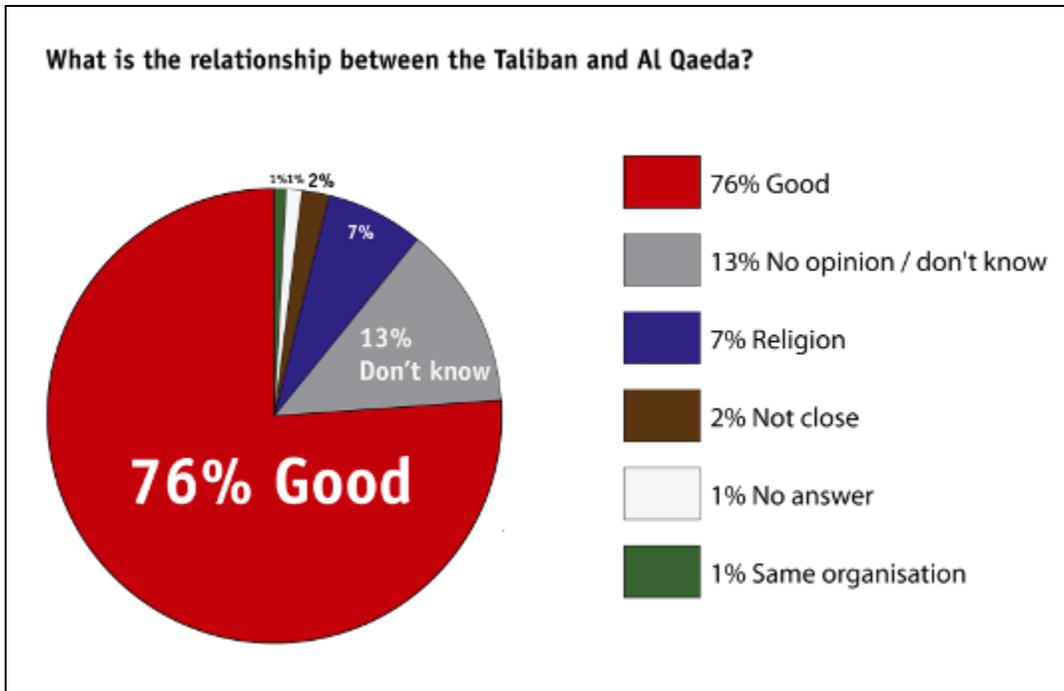
A fifth of the interviewees thought that Al Qaeda had significant influence in the country: a considerable number considering that the terrorist network's infrastructure in Afghanistan is believed to have been largely dismantled.



A large majority of the interviewees expressed a belief that Al Qaeda will return to country in the event of a Taliban take-over.

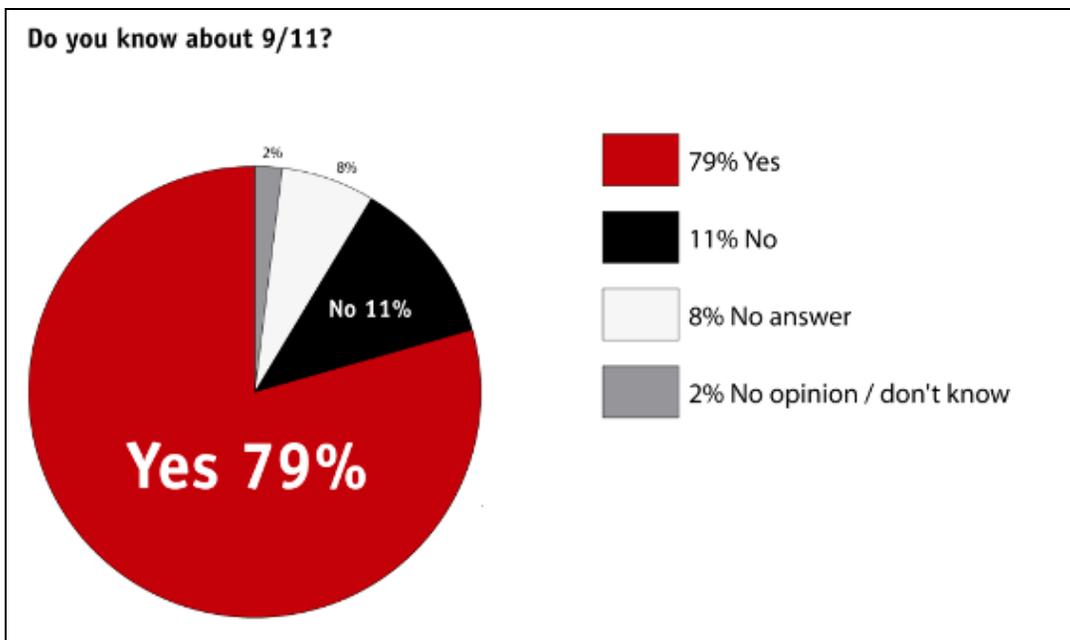
Relationship between the Taliban and Al Qaeda believed to be “good”

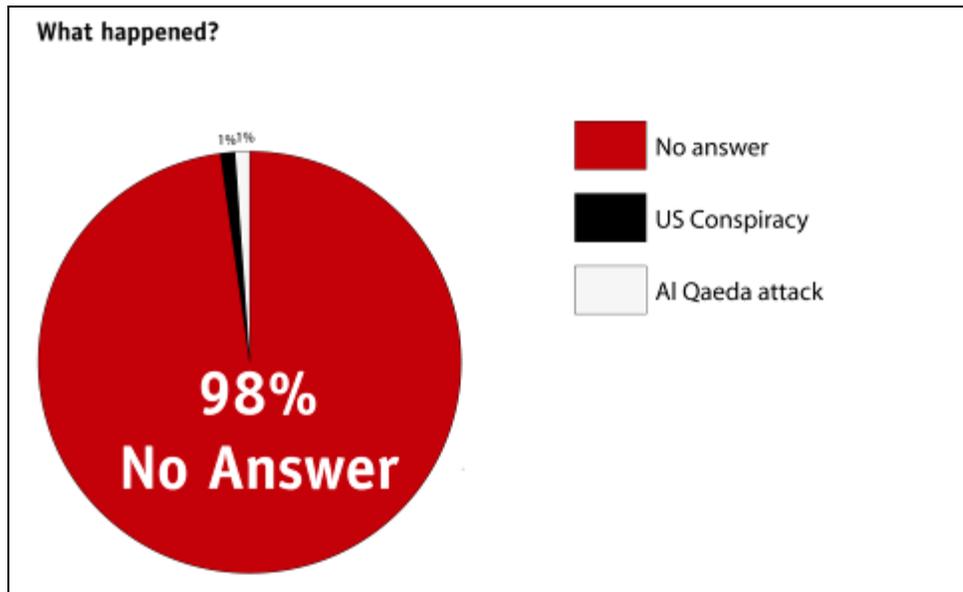
When asked to describe the relationship between the Taliban and Al Qaeda, more than three quarters of respondents said that the relationship was “good”. Some interviewees emphasised a common religion as the defining element of the relationship, but very few thought that the Taliban and Al Qaeda were one entity or shared a command structure.



This data shows that many Afghans understand the Al Qaeda threat. Nevertheless, it is less than clear whether the population in the south understands the basic objective of the NATO-ISAF mission, considering the negative perceptions of foreign forces.

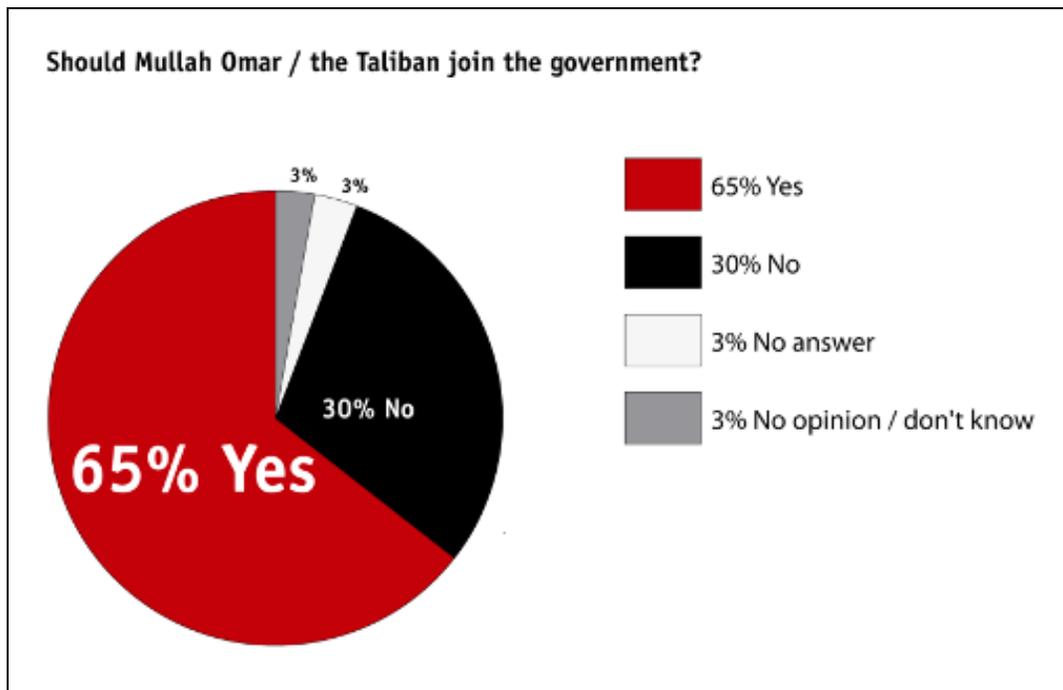
A large majority of the interviewees stated that they know about the events on 9/11 but very few offered any explanation on what actually happened or made a connection between the attacks and the NATO-ISAF presence in Afghanistan.





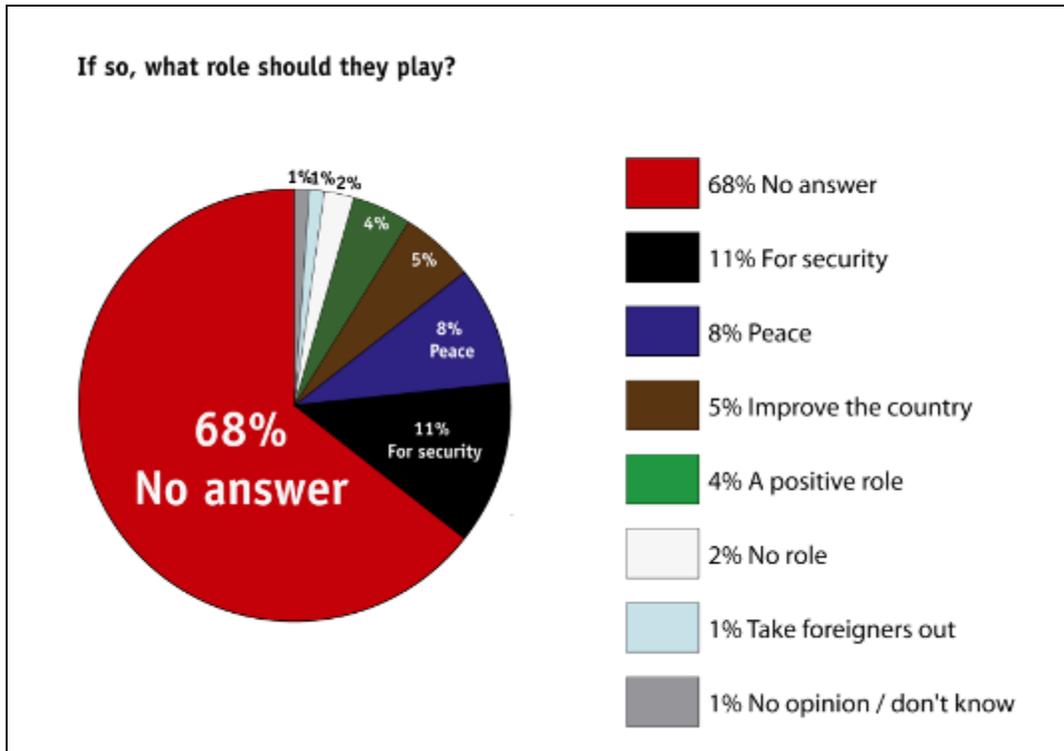
Support for negotiations with the Taliban...

While perceptions of Taliban strength and the actual support for the movement vary, subject to a number of factors in each particular area, there appears to be overwhelming support for negotiations with the Taliban. Moreover, the research data suggests strong endorsement of a political agreement that would see the Taliban integrated into the existing political system. 65% of interviewees said that Mullah Omar and the Taliban should join the government.



Not all of these figures should be translated into support for the Taliban: it can credibly be argued that support for negotiations could be seen as simply a desire for peace and an end to fighting.

A large majority of those who expressed support for negotiations failed to elaborate the nature of the agreement and the exact role the Taliban should have in the government: the most common answer provided was peace and security. Not surprisingly, the issue of how the Taliban could or should be integrated into the government was not a question many had a ready or specific answer to.



...but the insurgency is seen as controlled by foreign actors

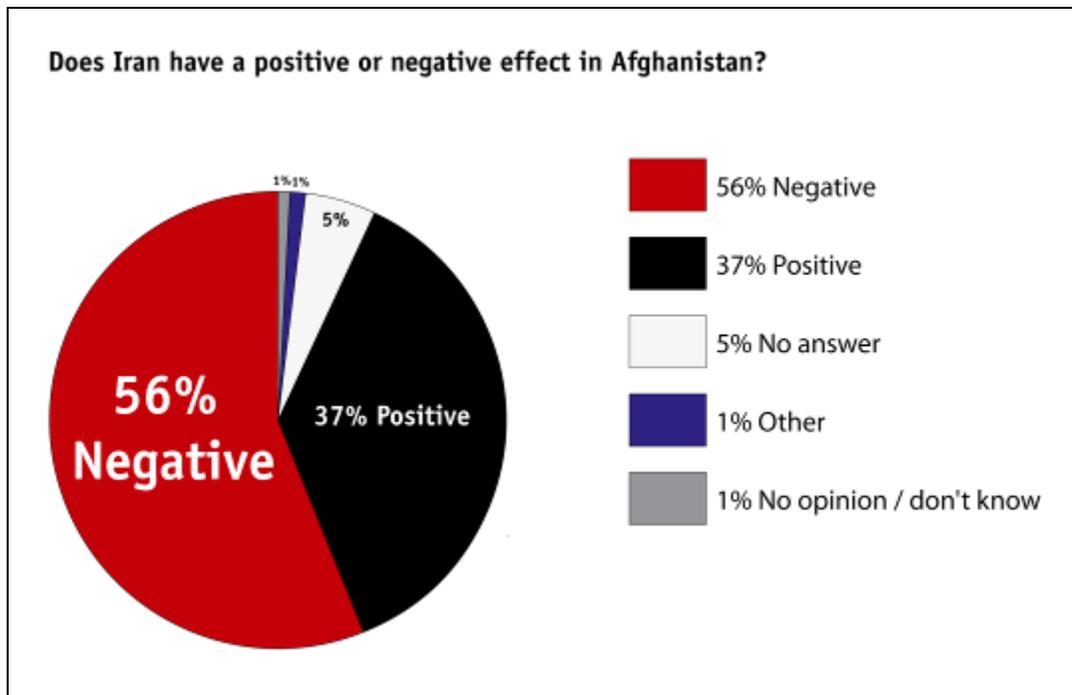
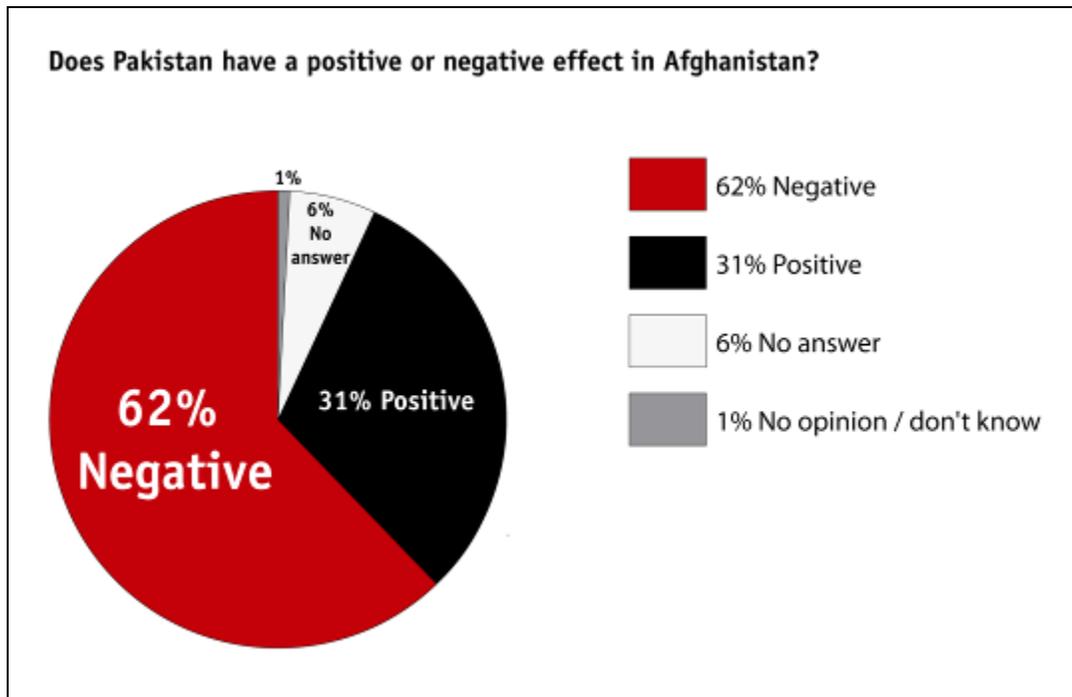
Moreover, it appears that the Taliban have not been entirely successful in projecting the image of a home-grown resistance movement. The perceptions on who controls the insurgency are revealing. Most interviewees thought that the Taliban are controlled by Pakistan. Interestingly, only 10% identified Mullah Omar as the ultimate leader of the Taliban.

However, in a sign of strong potency for conspiracy theories in the unstable and confusing environment of southern Afghanistan, almost a quarter of Afghan interviewees (24%) believe that NATO-ISAF, the US or other 'foreigners' – often taken to mean the West - control the Taliban to justify their continued presence in Afghanistan.

Who controls the Taliban?			
	Helmand	Kandahar	Total
Pakistan	20%	40%	29%
US	17%	3%	11%
Don't Know	5%	18%	11%
Foreigners	11%	12%	11%
Mullah Omar	11%	9%	10%
Iran	12%	3%	8%
Osama Bin Laden	11%	1%	7%
No Answer	4%	4%	4%
NATO-ISAF	2%	1%	2%
Saudi Arabia	3%	0%	2%
A foreign Islamic government	0%	2%	1%
Neighbouring Countries	0%	2%	1%
Pakistan & Other Countries	0%	2%	1%
Pakistan & Iran	0%	1%	1%
Afghan Government	2%	0%	1%
Afghan National Army	1%	0%	1%
Afghan people	2%	0%	1%
China	0%	1%	0%
Pakistan & US	0%	1%	0%
Al Qaeda & Pakistan	0%	0%	0%
UK	0%	0%	0%

NATO-ISAF's inability to contain the Taliban insurgency has clearly fuelled fear and suspicion about their motives. Why else, the Afghans may argue, has the world's most powerful military failed to defeat a ragtag insurgency after almost a decade?

Many Afghans are also suspicious of the intentions of their two most influential neighbours. Over half of interviewees had negative views of Pakistan (62%) and Iran (56%).



The higher negative perception of Pakistan may reflect the proximity of Kandahar and Helmand to that country, rather than Iran; however, it also likely reflects the close linkages between the Taliban on both sides of the Afghan-Pakistan border, and Pakistan's historic role in supporting insurgent groups in Afghanistan.²² This is supported by the fact that 29% of respondents believe that Pakistan controls the Taliban (8% believe that Iran controls it).

In any case, these results indicate that hostility in Afghanistan is not directed solely against NATO-ISAF forces, but also other outside actors. The international coalition can use this as an opportunity to prove itself more trustworthy with the Afghan peoples' welfare. It also underscores the need for a truly regional strategy for Afghanistan, one that involves neighbouring states as well as NATO.²³

²² Waldman, M *The Sun in the Sky: the relationship between Pakistan's ISI and Afghan Insurgents*, Discussion Paper 18, Crisis States Research Centre 2010. Available at: <http://www.crisisstates.com/download/dp/DP%2018.pdf>

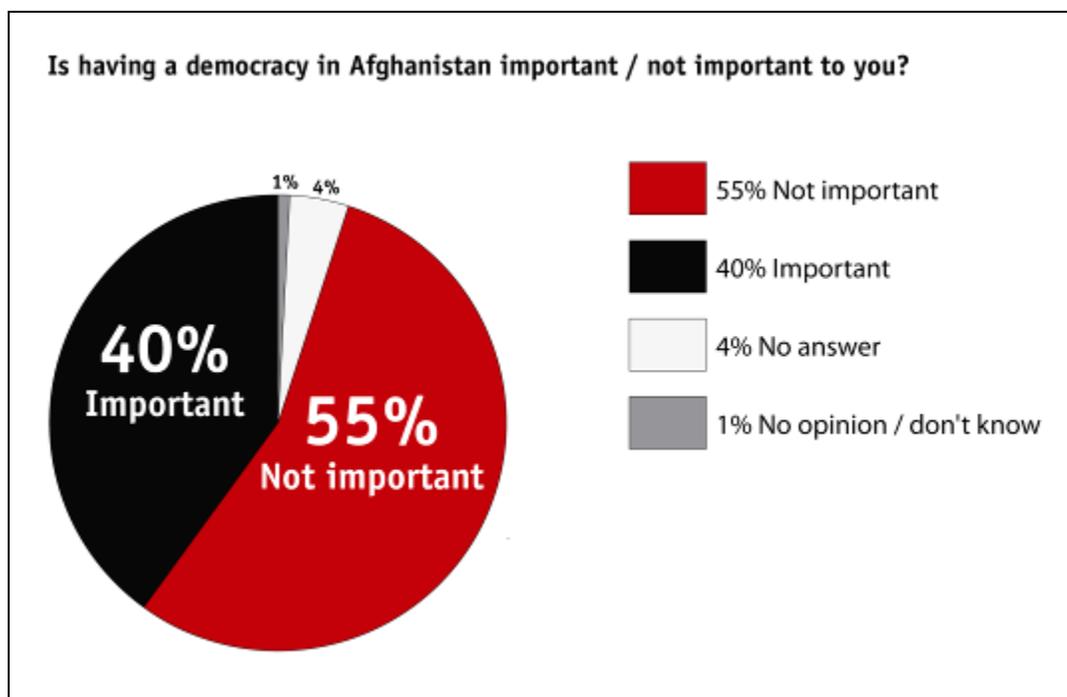
²³ Mukharji A, and Tellis, A, eds. *Is A Regional Strategy Viable in Afghanistan?* Carnegie Endowment for International Peace 2010. Available at: http://carnegieendowment.org/files/regional_approach.pdf

2. Good News: Positive Attitudes an Opportunity for the International Community

Support for democracy and women's rights

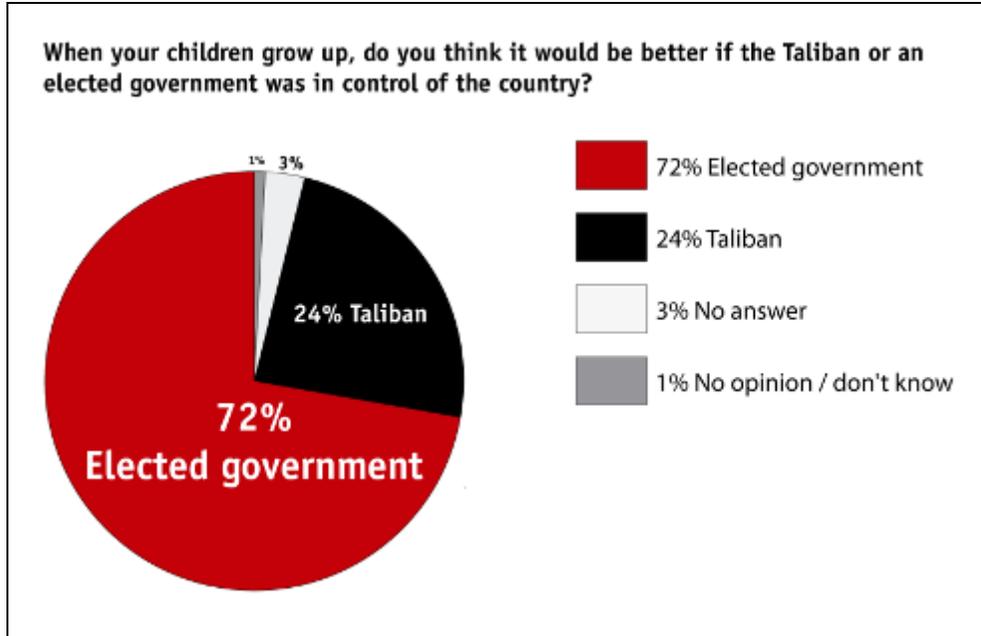
The past eight years have not turned Afghanistan into a vibrant, healthy democracy. Polls have been marked by violence, fraud, corruption, low turnout, and political wrangling. The most recent vote, the presidential elections in August 2009, were alleged to be heavily rigged in favour of President Karzai and witnessed hundreds of Taliban attacks which only the deployment of tens of thousands of Afghan and the international community forces could fend off.

In light of all of these problems it would not be surprising if the Afghan people rejected democracy outright. However, the field research found that democracy was still considered important by nearly half of Afghans interviewed.



Although this is not a majority, it is still positive that 40% of Afghan interviewees value democracy, one of the original aims of the US-led invasion in 2001. Afghan people continue to support forms of democratic governance, and prefer this to the possibility of rule by unelected military factions as so often in Afghanistan's recent history.

The term 'democracy' may have become tainted by association with the recent elections, but when offered a stark choice between elected government and Taliban rule, a significant majority of 72% supported an elected government.



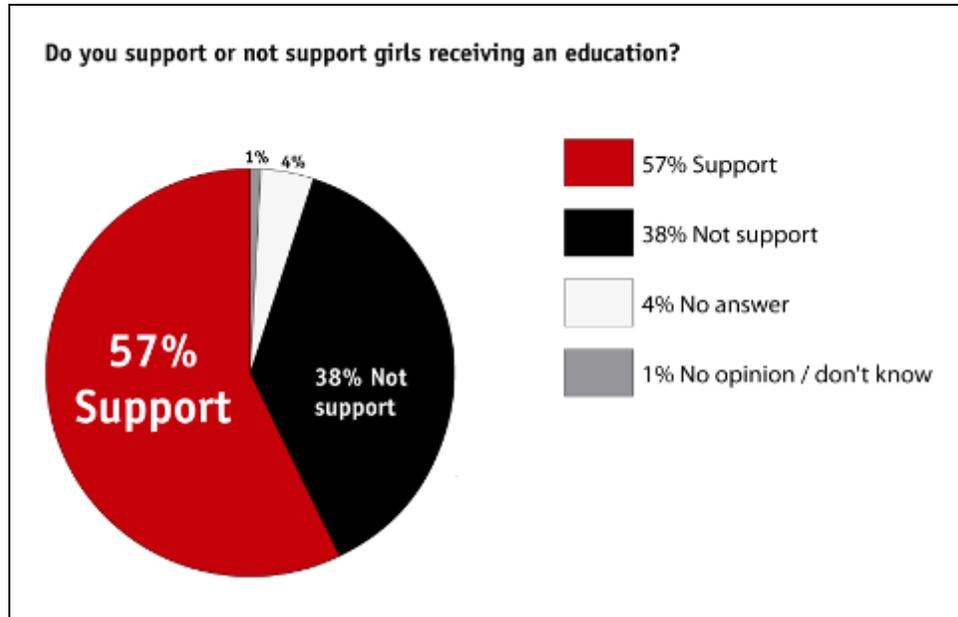
This clearly demonstrates that many Afghans have no wish to return to the Taliban's theocracy, even if they are doubtful about democracy in its current tainted form.



Children at a madrassa in Kandahar City

There is also some progress on another area championed by the international community since the intervention in 2001: women's rights. Afghanistan remains a patriarchal and extremely

conservative society, but the resources invested in promoting female schooling have had an effect. A majority – 57% of respondents – support girls receiving an education. This is a considerable proportion, considering that the interviewees are men, and most of them come from rural districts.



This figure demonstrates that one of the original goals of the international community in Afghanistan is salvageable. This may also indirectly indicate a low level of support for certain aspects of the Taliban's moral code. Although the movement has moderated its stance recently in order not to alienate the population, its core ideology gender issues remains uncompromising. Insurgents have repeatedly burnt down girls' schools and intimidated or executed teachers.

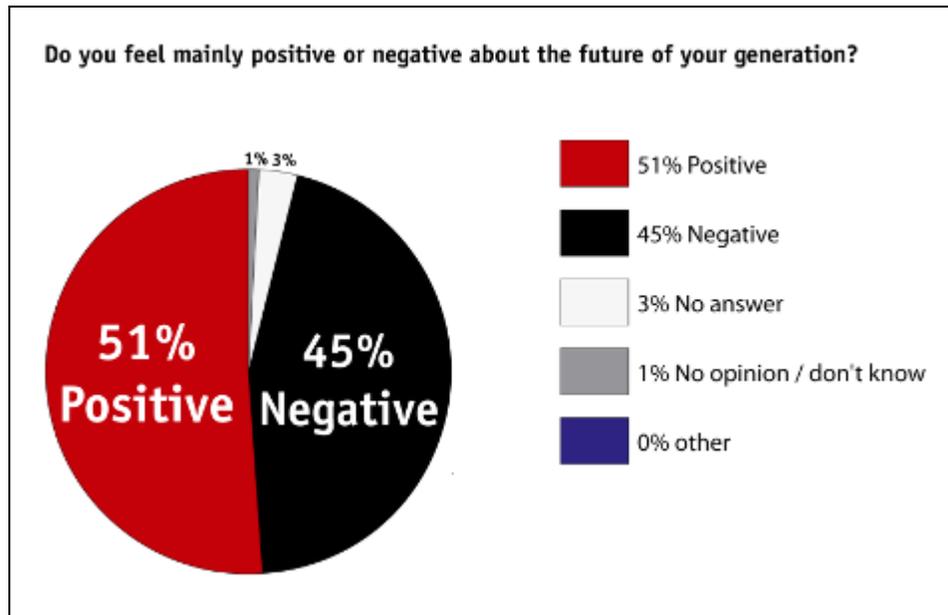
Support for female education amongst the Afghan people could therefore also indicate a partial rejection of the Taliban's ideology. Identifying such gaps between the insurgency and the civilian population creates an opportunity for the international community to share values and objectives with local populations.



Billboard in Kandahar City, promoting girls' education: "*Today's students, tomorrow's teachers*".

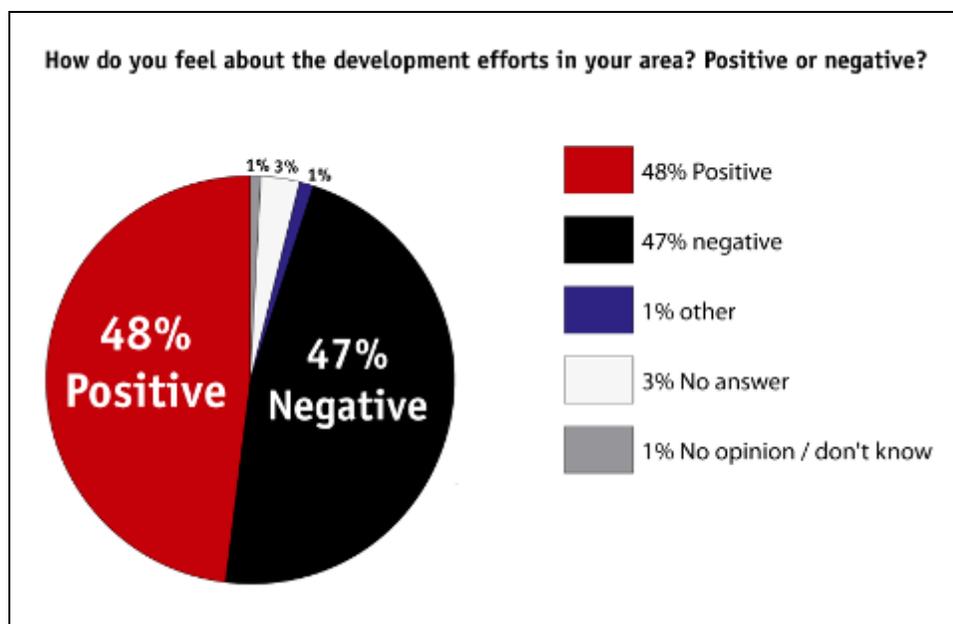
Economic development and the next generation present clear opportunities

In building this connection the international community should also pick up on another surprising finding: that on balance Afghans are more positive than more negative about the future of their generation.



Given the insecurity, poverty, corruption and lack of opportunities in Afghanistan, this is a remarkable result. It shows that there is still a degree of optimism amongst the Afghan people about the future. At the same time, it needs to be remembered that after years of conflict the benchmark of expectations among Afghans is very low.

Currently, attitudes towards reconstruction and development are mixed, but there is a genuine desire amongst the Afghans interviewed to take charge of their own economic future. Respondents were evenly divided with regards to the success of local development efforts.



This shows that the current system of development – divided up between military, civilian, NGO, and Afghan agencies – is failing to deliver real results to local communities.

The attitudes of interviewees on how they would spend \$5000 also offer some important information on how development efforts could better engage its beneficiaries.

If you had 5000 USD what would you use it for?			
	Helmand	Kandahar	Total
Setting up or expanding a business	38%	31%	35%
Marriage	26%	13%	21%
A car/motorcycle/truck	17%	10%	14%
On a house	10%	8%	9%
Helping refugees/ the poor/ disabled/ orphans	1%	11%	6%
Spend it on family	0%	11%	5%
No answer	4%	4%	3%
Education	0%	4%	2%
A farm	1%	3%	2%
Other	1%	2%	1%
Land	3%	0%	1%
On a better life	0%	2%	1%
Help the Taliban	0%	0%	0%

Greater attention could also be paid to boosting the private sector. The field research reveals that 35% of Afghans would, if given the significant sum of \$5000, establish a business or expand their current business. Significant proportions of respondents would also use the money for a house or for a car or other form of transport.

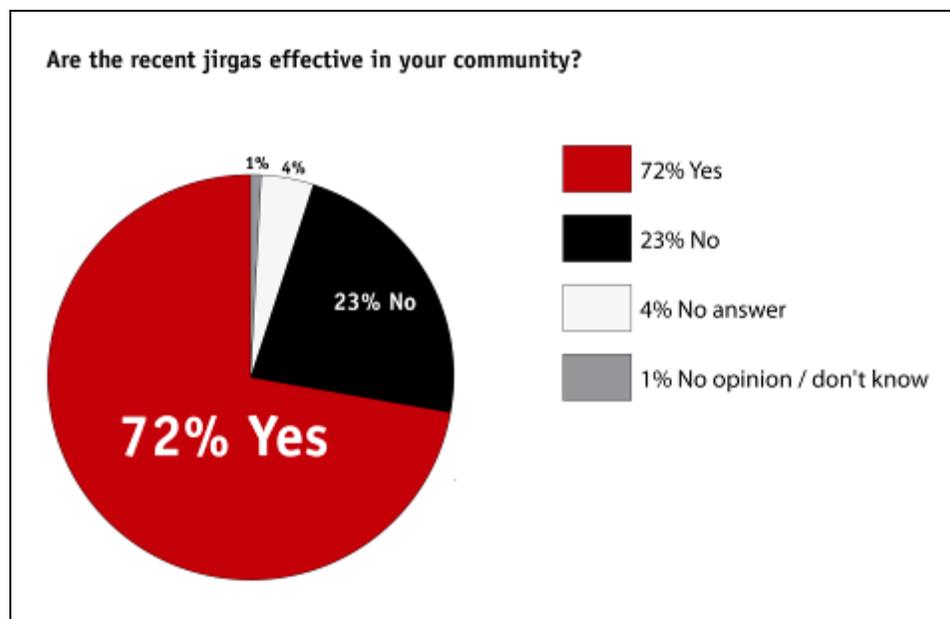
This indicates clear material aspirations amongst the Afghan people. Kick-starting economic development by encouraging entrepreneurialism could generate wealth, providing increased means for businesses such as car dealers and building companies to flourish would also further the potential for Afghans to fulfil these aspirations. Integration into legitimate economic life drastically diminishes the incentive and opportunities for joining the insurgency.



Afghan men in Lashkar Gah

Centrality of traditional social structures

Life at the local community level continues to be regulated through traditional communal meetings such as the *jirga*. Almost three-quarters of the interviewees said that *jirgas* remain an efficient form of decision making in their areas.



Province	Yes	No	Province	Yes	No
Helmand	85%	7%	Khakrez	42%	53%
Marjah	76%	24%	Kandahar City	65%	0%
Nawa	84%	14%	Panjwayi	70%	11%
Lashkar Gah	79%	17%	Spin Boldak	54%	38%
Helmand	81%	15%	Kandahar	59%	33%

This proportion was considerably higher in Helmand province, while Khakrez and Spin Boldak districts in Kandahar province expressed the lowest level of confidence in the *jirga* institution.

The international community has emphasised the importance of *jirgas* as a successful way of engaging with local communities. Consulting traditional leaders and heads of extended families, in particular in the build-up to military operations, is crucial to reducing the mistrust of local communities toward the international community.

Some confidence in the Afghan government

Another piece of potentially good news is relative confidence in the Afghan government and security forces, as well as in the progress being made in the war. Trust in the authorities is still extremely low, but the Afghan government was rated the most trustworthy of a range of different institutions and actors.

Who do you trust?			
	Helmand	Kandahar	Total
Afghan government	33%	24%	27%
Afghan National Army and Police	21%	32%	24%
Your tribal leaders / elders	21%	23%	20%
Taliban	9%	13%	10%
Afghan National Army only (but not the police)²⁴	4%	14%	7%
None	5%	4%	5%
International organisations (such as the UN)	1%	4%	2%
No answer	0%	5%	2%
NATO-ISAF	2%	0%	1%
Al Qaeda	1%	1%	1%
No opinion / Don't know	1%	1%	1%

The Afghan security forces were rated the second most trustworthy. Together with those interviewees who said that they trusted the army but not the police, the national security forces as a whole actually come on top with 31%. Local elders were rated the third most trustworthy, indicating that the international community should seek to build positive relationships with grassroots community leaders.

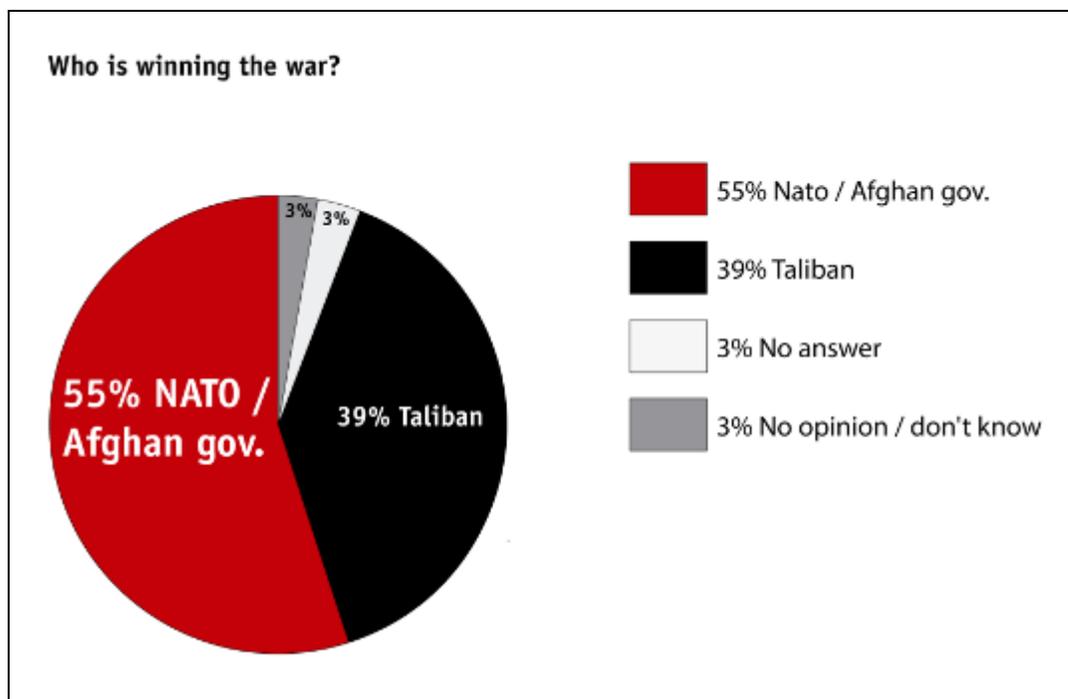
²⁴ The answer category on offer to the interviewees was the “Afghan National Army and Police”. However, 7% of the respondents specifically chose the army, reflecting the widespread resentment of the police in the south.

Trust in NATO-ISAF and the UN was almost non-existent, thus in a long-term view local institutions stand a better chance of successful engagement with local populations through adequate support.²⁵ Encouragingly, support for the Taliban is also low, at 10%, and support for Al Qaeda is very marginal, at 1%.

However, Taliban are ahead of international organisations and the foreign forces. The fact that Al Qaeda and NATO-ISAF share an equally low ranking is another alarming indicator of the need for new trust-building measures.

Battle of perceptions remains open

NATO-ISAF and the Afghan authorities also appear to be winning the battle of perceptions with regard to the war itself.



A slim majority (55%) of respondents believe that international and Afghan forces are winning the conflict; just 39% believe that the Taliban is winning. This is still an alarmingly high figure for a war in its ninth year, but majority belief in NATO-ISAF and the Afghan government's odds should be encouraging.

²⁵ Office of the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, *Actions Needed to Improve the Reliability of Afghan Security Force Assessments*, SIGAR Audit-10-11, June 29, 2010. Available at: <http://www.sigar.mil/pdf/audits/SIGAR%20Audit-10-11.pdf>

Winning the battle of perceptions would have a significant effect on the battlefield itself.²⁶ By persuading the Afghan people that they are winning, NATO-ISAF and the Afghan forces can entice neutral or wavering communities to support them rather than the Taliban. Backing the winner is often the safest course of action for many civilians in a complex insurgency – the narrative that pro-government forces are succeeding can become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

²⁶ 'Afghanistan conflict an 'information war'', *BBC News*, Thursday, 11 February 2010. Available at: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/8511477.stm>

3. Interesting News: Cultural Mapping

A FIRM COMMITMENT TO TRADITION

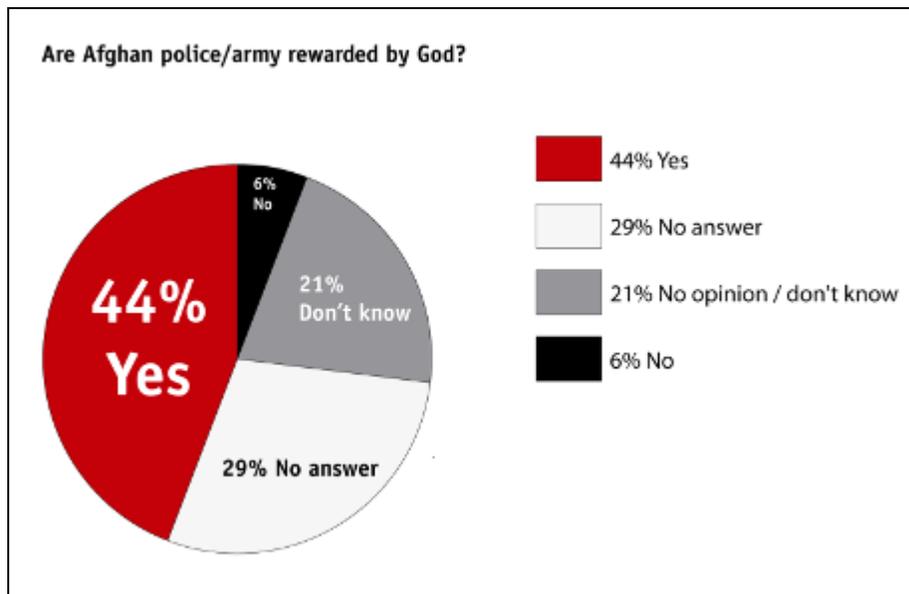
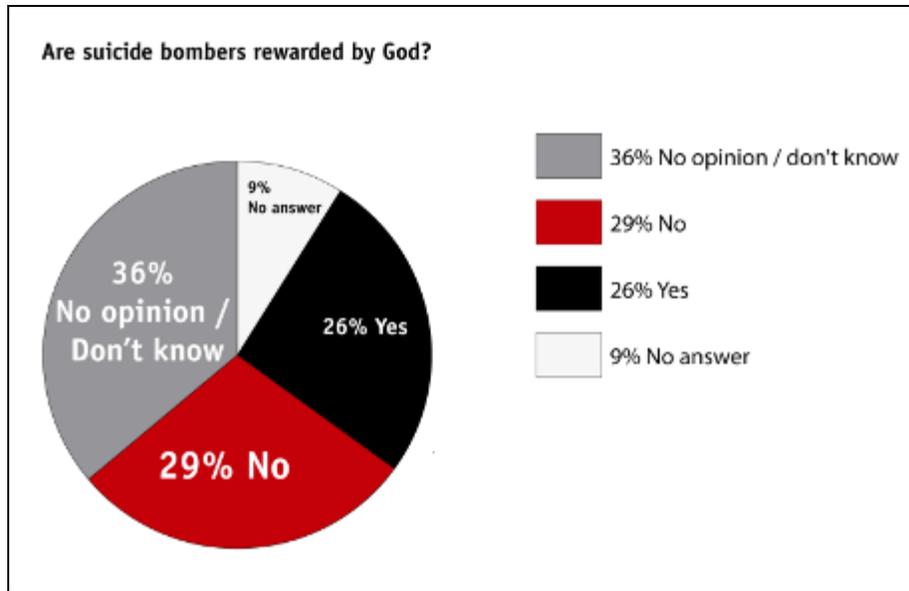
A better understanding of the social terrain in southern Afghanistan is of key importance to improved communication channels with the local population. Afghans often cite the cultural insensitivity of the foreign forces as one of the main causes of their resentment and mistrust. Southern Afghanistan is a deeply religious and socially conservative terrain, where local communities traditionally reject outside interference, either from other communities, central government, or foreign actors.

Which of the following identities is the most important to you?			
	Helmand	Kandahar	Total
Muslim	98%	67%	84%
Afghan	28%	37%	32%
Tribal	2%	9%	5%
Ethnic	1%	4%	2%
Town/Village identity	1%	2%	1%
No answer	1%	0%	1%
No opinion	0%	1%	0%

When asked about the focal point of their identity, many interviewees chose multiple answers, highlighting the fluidity of identity in a multi-ethnic state with a regionally and tribally fragmented society. However, the answers indicate that the people's worldview and self-perception are firmly embedded in religion.

To most interviewees religious identity clearly takes precedence over other forms of group identification. Nevertheless, the fact that 32% of the interviewees chose the Afghan nation as the main, or one of the main, sources of identity, is significant, considering the exacerbation of ethnic tension under the Taliban rule. Only a small minority of the Afghans interviewed chose ethnically or locally defined loyalties.

Although in practice tribal and ethnic fault lines continue play a major role in Afghan politics, and are regularly utilised as channels of mobilisation by all political actors, the interviewees still prefer to declare themselves as first and foremost Muslims and / or Afghans. These two identities are not mutually exclusive: 71% of respondents that see themselves as Afghans also expressed the importance of religious identity.

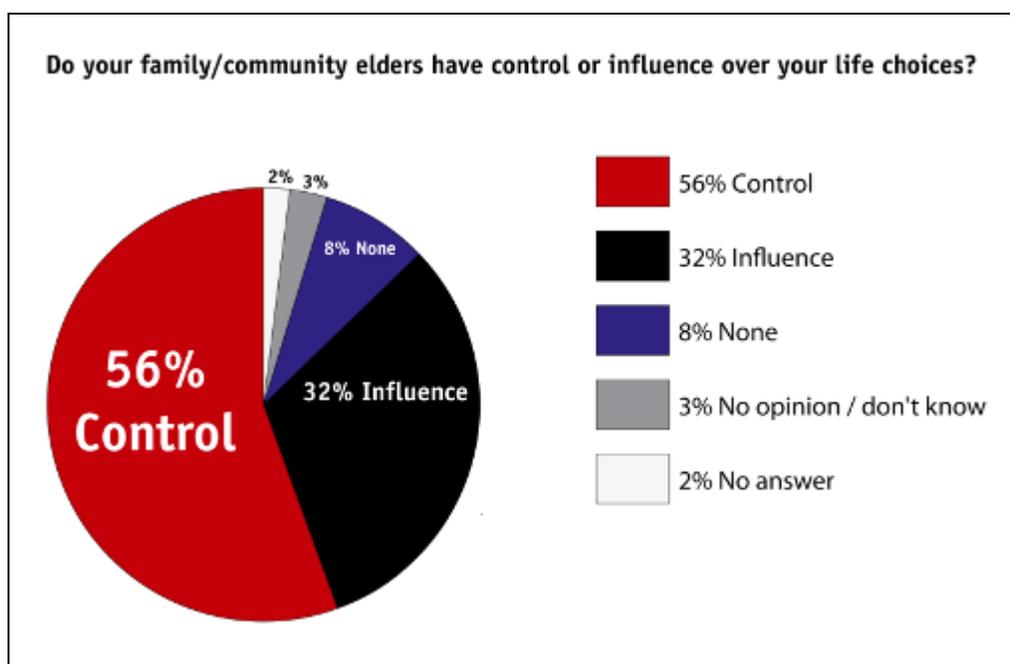


Religious rewards for fighting

A substantial number of the interviewees believe that the struggle between the Afghan government and the insurgency is rewarded by God. More than a quarter said that suicide bombers were rewarded by God while 44% of the interviewees thought that God would reward the national security forces.

However, rather than an indicator of support for one or the other side – more than half of those who thought that God was on the side of the insurgency said that members of the army and the police would *also* be rewarded by God – this shows the centrality of religion in interpreting the events of everyday life.

Who is winning the war?				
	NATO / Afghan government	Taliban	No answer	No opinion/ Don't know
Garmsir	58%	28%	6%	8%
Marjah	34%	65%	1%	0%
Nawa	80%	12%	4%	4%
Lash City	71%	23%	2%	4%
Helmand	56%	36%	4%	4%
Kandahar City	71%	24%	3%	2%
Khakrez	29%	71%	0%	0%
Panjwayi	41%	54%	5%	0%
Spin Boldak	46%	52%	2%	0%
Kandahar	53%	44%	2%	1%
Total	55%	39%	3%	3%



Changing degree of social control through family structures

Family and traditional social structures play a major role in one's life, a fact that must be acknowledged by any "population-centric" counter-insurgency campaign. The family sanctions the behaviour of its members, choice of marriage partners, business investments and, often, political loyalties. Only 8% of the interviewees said that their family plays no major role in their life. More than a half said that their family had *control*, and almost a third said that family had *influence* over their life choices.

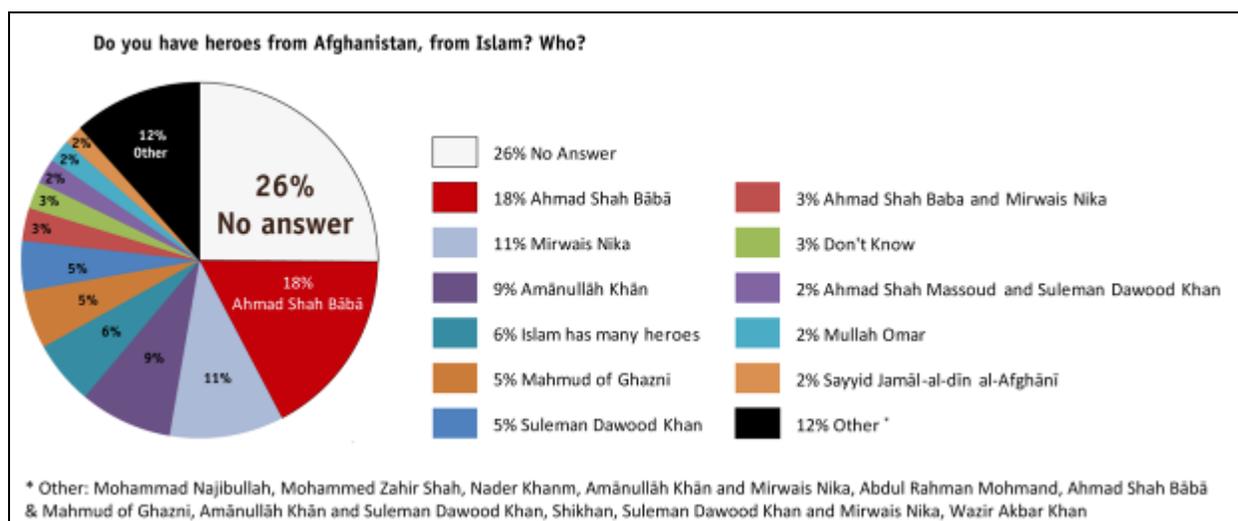
However, the fact that 32% said their elders influenced them, rather than controlled them, is interesting when thinking about the next generation of Afghans and their place within the traditional social structures. This, and the anecdotal evidence collected through conversations with community leaders, suggests that the degree of family control today is lower than it was ten

years ago in many parts of the country. This is partly a results of new social freedoms acquired in the post-2001 period and new forms of media having an effect on the society.

At the same time, there are few signs of any significant generational clash in southern Afghanistan yet. The responses provided by the age group of 18-25 year-olds on a range of issues do not deviate from the overall sample. Quite the contrary, age appears to play almost no role in influencing the attitude toward a particular issue.

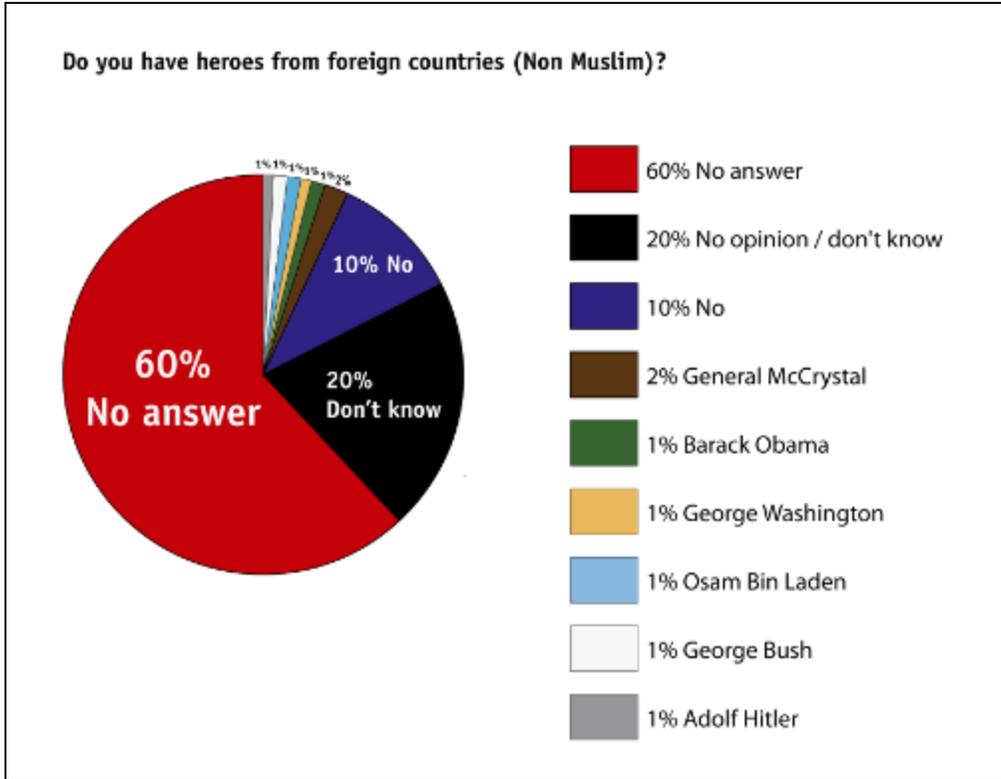
Limited knowledge of non-Afghan culture

When asked to name admired historical personalities from the Afghan and Muslim tradition, the interviewees offered a range of responses, with Afghan national heroes coming on top.



Some of the Popular Afghan Personalities

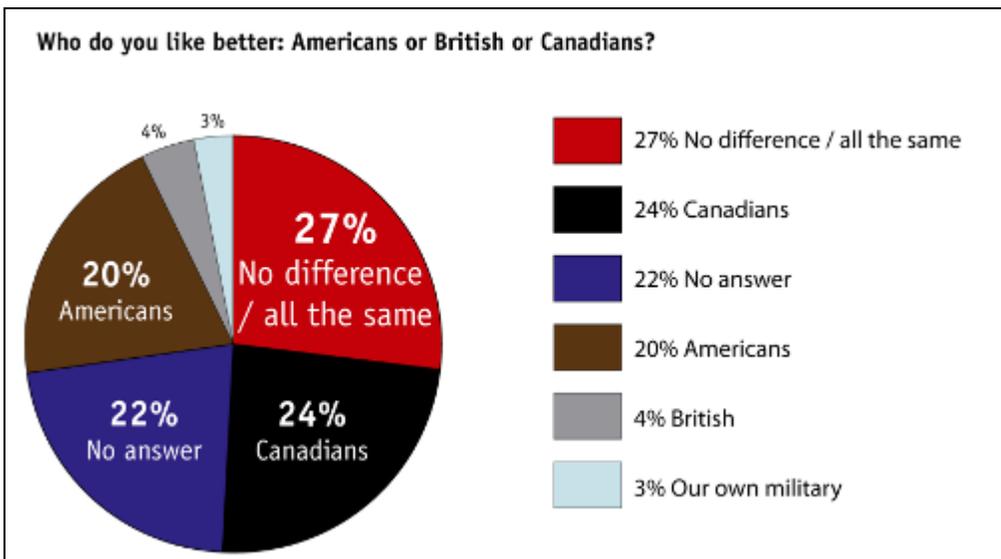
- **Ahmad Shah Baba** is considered to be the founder of modern Afghanistan. He established the Durrani Empire (18th Century) that stretched from the Punjab in modern India to northern Iran, with a capital in Kandahar and Kabul. He is a symbol of anti-interventionism, especially known for his efforts to protect Uygur independence against Chinese expansion.
- **Mirwais Nika** (Mir Wais Hotak) rose against the Safavid dynasty of Persia in Kandahar City, to found the Hotaki dynasty that subsequently ruled a wide area in Persia and Afghanistan from 1709 to 1738.
- **Amānullāh Khān** ruler of the Emirate of Afghanistan (1919-1929). Khan gained Afghanistan's independence over its foreign affairs from the United Kingdom winning the Third Anglo-Afghan War. He was also a great moderniser, drawing up a constitution that gave equal rights to women, which sparked a backlash.
- **Mahmud of Ghazni** (971-1030) was the most successful ruler of the Ghaznavid empire which dominated most of Afghanistan and parts of Iran, Pakistan and India.
- **Mohammed Daoud Khan** overthrew the king in 1973 and established the Republic of Afghanistan. He was progressive and supported women's rights, and was also a nationalist. He was killed in the uprising in 1978.
- **Mullah Omar** – Leader of the Taliban; a religious preacher.
- **Sayyid Jamāl-al-dīn al-Afghānī** was a political activist and Islamic nationalist active in Persia (Iran), Afghanistan, Egypt, and the Ottoman Empire during the 19th century. He was one of the founders of Islamic modernism, and an advocate of pan-Islamic unity.



In stark contrast, the respondents struggled to name foreign personalities; yet another indicator of a lack of understanding towards the cultural background of foreign forces. 80% of the interviewees either did not answer or had no opinion on this question.

No perceived differences between foreign forces

The respondents do not see any differences between foreign troops from member countries of the NATO coalition.



Afghanistan: The Relationship Gap
July 2010

Who do you like better: Americans or British or Canadians?						
	Americans	British	Canadians	No answer	Our own military	No difference / All the same
Garmsir	20%	3%	30%	40%	0%	7%
Marjah	27%	2%	28%	1%	0%	42%
Nawa	31%	24%	18%	0%	0%	27%
Lash City	35%	2%	10%	4%	0%	50%
Helmand	26%	6%	24%	16%	0%	28%
Kandahar City	17%	1%	23%	39%	16%	5%
Khakrez	4%	2%	31%	36%	0%	27%
Panjwayi	3%	0%	3%	41%	0%	54%
Spin Boldak	19%	0%	29%	0%	0%	48%
Kandahar	13%	1%	23%	31%	7%	25%
Total	20%	4%	24%	22%	3%	27%

Canadians were viewed most positively, but over a quarter of interviewees said that they believed that there was no difference at all between the soldiers from different NATO-ISAF states operating in southern Afghanistan. Another 22% did not answer the question.

Social Profiles

Drawing on the field research data, 'social profiles' have been developed which compile attributes and responses and amalgamate them into recognisable social types. These individual profiles are not intended to reflect a specific individual; they are composites of common answer clusters.

These social profiles can provide clear, evidence-based examples of Afghanistan's social landscape. Currently, the diversity of social types, and their respective political inclinations and social attitudes, is often underestimated. There is considerable variety between the attitudes of farmers and small traders in the countryside and merchants and government employees.

Understanding the variations between these different social types is key to understanding the human terrain of Afghanistan, and has significant implications for counter-insurgency operations. In the coming months, ICOS will continue its work on the social profiling of the Afghan local communities.

Najibullah, 20 Unemployed, from Marjah

Najibullah is an unemployed twenty year old from Marjah in Helmand province, and he sees Islam as the most important identity to him.

Like many others in Marjah, Najibullah feels more negatively about the foreign forces compared to one year ago after members of his family were killed during Operation Moshtarak; he is insistent that NATO-ISAF does not protect the local population. He believes that foreigners disrespect his religion and customs due to their aggressive behaviour in Marjah, which involved searching houses and entering women's quarters without permission. They have also opened a number of girls' schools in the region, to which Najibullah is deeply opposed.

For these reasons he thinks that working with foreign forces is wrong; he would prefer Muslim forces to be protecting his town, but would rather see that no foreigners at all were in his country. The experience of Operation Moshtarak has led him to strongly oppose a future operation in Kandahar.

Najibullah's main personal aspiration in life is to see peace in Afghanistan. For him this will only be achieved with the participation of the Taliban. He believes Mullah Omar should join the government to unite the Afghan people, as he would prefer his children to grow up under Taliban rule rather than with an elected government.

Currently Najibullah feels pessimistic about the future of his generation. He gets angry frequently, and worries about feeding his family. When there is no food he becomes even more frustrated. He would like to buy a house if he had the money, but he is unemployed, so he is considering his options. Najibullah says that in his area, where the Taliban are in control, the Afghan National Army is an unappealing career choice; Taliban fighters on the other hand enjoy high status and are respected. Joining the insurgency and fighting the foreigners is an increasingly attractive prospect.

Mohammed Khan, 26
Shopkeeper, from Kandahar City

Mohammed Khan is a twenty-six year old shopkeeper who was born in Kandahar city, where he still lives and works.

On the whole, Mohammed is positive towards the foreign forces. He believes that recent military operations had been good for the Afghan people and is confident that NATO-ISAF and the Afghan government are winning the war. He is broadly satisfied with local development efforts. However, Mohammed is still resentful of the foreign forces' attitude towards Afghan religion; he has heard a number of stories and rumours about disrespectful behaviour by foreigners. He is also unconvinced that NATO-ISAF adequately protects the local population from the Taliban.

Mohammed feels concerned that the number of Taliban recruits has increased compared to last year. This, coupled with the number of displaced people he regularly sees in the city, especially around Lowalh, worries him about the future of his generation.

Mohammed would much prefer an elected government over Taliban control, although he is disillusioned with the current brand of 'democracy' in Afghanistan, and he would oppose Taliban participation in the government (partly since he believes they are controlled by Pakistan).

Mohammed's main aspiration is to marry, but insecurity has been bad for business and he cannot afford to do so. A wedding, even for a poor family in the south, costs around \$5000 USD (\$3000 of which is spent on the dowry and \$2000 of which is spent on the wedding itself). For middle-class families the cost is higher still, around \$7000 USD. These costs are punishingly high in a country where the average annual wage for a man is just \$1825 USD.²⁷

If the security in Kandahar, and Mohammad's own personal situation, does not improve, he will take the money he does have and move to Pakistan.

²⁷ The equivalent figure for females is just \$442. UN Human Development Reports, Male Estimated Earned Income 2009. Available at: <http://hdrstats.undp.org/en/indicators/123.html>

Provincial Overviews

Kandahar Province Assessment²⁸ – The Rural/Urban Divide

Rural districts more negative towards NATO-ISAF

The data from Kandahar province clearly **illustrates the urban/rural divide in Afghanistan**, and suggests that focusing efforts on urban areas is having an effect on Afghan perceptions. On balance, interviewees in **Kandahar City were more positive towards NATO-ISAF and the international presence than in outlying districts:**

- In Kandahar City 49% of respondents believed that **working with foreign forces** was right, and 52% wrong. In Khakrez district, these figures were 8% and 80% respectively. In Panjwayi 19% believed that it was right, and 76% that it was wrong.
- In Kandahar City, nearly three-quarters believed that **the war was being won by NATO-ISAF and Afghan forces**, with just a quarter judging that the Taliban was winning.²⁹ In Khakrez these figures were almost reversed.³⁰
- Just 7% of interviewees in Khakrez thought that **NATO-ISAF forces protected the local population**; 84% disagreed. In Kandahar the positive figure increased markedly; 36% believed that international soldiers protected the population.

Taliban presence stronger in the countryside

This situation calls for more resources to be invested in counter-insurgency efforts in rural districts:

- **87% of respondents from Khakrez, and 73% from Panjwayi, stated that the Taliban controlled their hometown.** Just 10% and 4% from Kandahar City and Spin Boldak believed this to be the case.

Widespread belief that foreign troops disrespect local religion and traditions

A quarter stated that foreigners respect Afghan culture, whilst **three quarters stated that foreigners disrespect it.**³¹

- Panjwayi and Khakrez interviewees were most negative on this issue; even in Kandahar City, positive on a number of other indicators, just 30% believed that foreigners treated Afghan culture and religion with respect. In any case, **even Kandahar City is far from friendly towards NATO-ISAF operations:** positive indicators here rarely exceed 50%.

Scepticism about local reconstruction efforts

- Across the province, **a slim majority feels positive about development** (47% to 45% who feel negative). **Once again Khakrez district was very distinct:** 20% of interviewees felt positive, and 71% were negative.

²⁸ ICOS research team conducted 238 interviews in Kandahar: 108 interviews were conducted in Kandahar City; 45 in Khakrez district; 48 in Spin Boldak district; and 37 in Panjwayi.

²⁹ 71% and 24% respectively. 3% did not answer, and 2% did not know or had no opinion.

³⁰ 29% believed that NATO was winning; 71% thought the Taliban had the upper hand.

³¹ 24% and 74% respectively; 1% did not answer and 1% do not know.

Helmand Province Assessment – Unintended Effects of Operation Moshtarak

Operation Moshtarak, the major NATO-ISAF offensive launched in February 2010, has had a directly **visible impact on the people of Marjah**. It is alarming that Marjah – scene of a showpiece operation to demonstrate the new counter-insurgency strategy - produces **more negative and hostile results than any other district**. Results from Marjah suggest that trust urgently needs to be rebuilt in the aftermath of any military operations through targeted confidence-building measures to change the local political dynamics.

High level of Taliban control and strength in Marjah

- An overwhelming **88% of respondents from Marjah stated that the Taliban was in control** there, in contrast to Nawa and Lashkar Gah where over 80% of respondents said that NATO-ISAF, the Afghan government, or both were in control
- **Just 1% of respondents in Marjah said that the recent military operation had been good for the Afghan people**, compared with 27% in Lashkar Gah.³²

Negative perceptions of foreign forces

- **26% of Marjah respondents have become more favourable to NATO-ISAF in the past year**, compared with an average of 50% in Garmsir, Nawa and Lashkar Gah.
- Respondents in Marjah were also far more negative about the course of the war. **34% believed that NATO-ISAF was winning, and 64% that the Taliban were winning**. In other districts, majorities believed that NATO-ISAF and the Afghan government were winning³³.
- Perhaps bearing in mind their own experiences of Operation Moshtarak, **opposition in Marjah to a new Kandahar offensive was high – 80%** (against an average across the other three districts of 56.2%).
- **When asked whether working with foreign forces is right or wrong, just 2% of interviewees in Marjah thought it was right**. In other districts, the percentage who believed it was right was higher (between 16% and 36%), although still quite low. The result from Marjah suggests that the Taliban's campaign to intimidate and assassinate Afghans working with foreign troops or the local government is succeeding³⁴.

Deep mistrust of international objectives in Helmand province

- **Over half (57%) of interviewees in the province believe that foreign forces are in Afghanistan to occupy or destroy Afghanistan, or to destroy Islam**.
- More generally there is **serious pessimism over the current situation**. 85% of respondents in Helmand believe that there could be a **new civil war** in Afghanistan; 92% state there are **people displaced** by fighting in the area; and 81% are **worried about feeding their family**.

³² Nawa and Garmsir produced results which are comparable to Lashkar Gah.

³³ 79% in Nawa; 72% in Lashkar Gah; 57% in Garmsir.

³⁴ 'Knocked out of power in Afghan town, Taliban turn to intimidation' *McClatchy*, March 14 2010. Available at: <http://www.mcclatchydc.com/2010/03/14/90350/knocked-out-of-power-in-afghan.html>

Conclusions: Closing the Relationship Gap

Security in Afghanistan needed to assure security in the West

One of the clearest lessons of the 9/11 attacks was that global security cannot be disentangled from security in the world's ungoverned spaces, from Afghanistan to Somalia. The lack of international interest in Afghanistan after the Soviet withdrawal in 1989 allowed the Taliban to rise, and created the space for the Al Qaeda bases in Afghanistan.

Any international withdrawal from Afghanistan must emphasise this lesson – Al Qaeda and other international terrorist groups cannot be allowed a safe haven in Afghanistan, regardless of its political terrain.

Similarly the Taliban and its affiliates must be prevented from fomenting chaos in other neighbouring states, particularly in Central Asia.³⁵ If either of these scenarios comes to pass, the international community will have failed in Afghanistan – an outcome which would raise serious questions about the very future of NATO and the international order.

Concerns regarding future fidelity of Afghan government.

The coalition needs to leave behind an Afghanistan which shares and is aligned with the international community's security concerns. It is now well-established that building up the capacity of the Afghan state and security forces is the only realistic way to permit a NATO withdrawal, but a stable Kabul government and a well equipped Afghan army are not sufficient. The West needs **a guarantee of fidelity** by both the Afghan government, and the Afghan people, that they will not tolerate Al Qaeda or other hostile groups to operate from Afghanistan's territory. Currently the support and alliance of the Afghan government is not assured. President Karzai, fearing a rapid withdrawal, is already reaching out to other states – Pakistan, Iran, and China, amongst them.

We could be confronted with a situation where the international community will have invested an enormous military, financial and political effort into an ally which is not entirely reliable and which may not entirely share our determination to defeat Al Qaeda. A reliance on the Afghan government as an ally is not sufficient.

Good relationship with Afghan people necessary

The Afghan people must also be committed to and aligned with the security goals of the International coalition. If there is broad popular support for the Taliban and Al Qaeda, the Kabul government will find itself on a collision course with its own citizens. It is, therefore, essential to build a sustainable grassroots political relationship with the Afghan people.

The Relationship Gap

The field research clearly demonstrates a **relationship gap** between international forces and the civilians

Overall, 74% of those interviewed believe that working with foreign forces is wrong. This may be one factor involved in the high desertion rates in Afghan security forces and the difficulties in recruiting adequate civil servants and other officials. Another serious concern is the 75% of

³⁵ Afghanistan was used as a base by the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan for their attacks in Central Asia in 1999-2000.

interviewees who believe that foreigners are disrespectful towards their religion and customs. Islam is extremely important to Afghans – 84% of respondents say that it is the most important identity to them – so perceptions of disrespect are very significant indicators for the international community.

This taps into a wider problem. Nearly nine years after foreign forces entered Afghanistan, many Afghans have almost no real knowledge or understanding of the motivations of the international community. The research overall indicate a lack of communication between the international community and the Afghan people; a failure to communicate facts and values, and respond to the emotional content of the local population.

The lack of communication fuels suspicion and mistrust. For instance, the international community's inability to contain the insurgency has led nearly a quarter (24%) of interviewees to believe that the West controls the Taliban, creating and fuelling the insurgency to justify its perceived 'occupation' of Afghanistan. 55% of interviewees also believe that foreign troops are fighting for reasons which could be classed as conspiracy theories: to occupy or to destroy Afghanistan, for their own personal benefit, or to destroy Islam.

Conspiracy theories and mistrust of foreigners flourish in the uncertain political atmosphere of southern Afghanistan. In Kandahar, the NATO operation currently building up has led to a significant increase in tension, as the Taliban respond with a wave of assassinations and intimidation. Our ally - the Afghan government - is rife with corruption and links to narcotics trafficking, served by a police force often preying on the local population. This atmosphere has created a polarised and highly politicised community: people do not know who to trust, and some might say with good reason.

Taliban becoming a popular political force

In this atmosphere, the Taliban has positioned itself as a legitimate alternative to the failing institutions of the Afghan government: freedom fighters in a David and Goliath struggle against a corrupt government and an occupying military force hostile to the local population. Where reconstruction efforts fail to create jobs and visible signs of economic progress on the local level, the Taliban provide recruits and a broad network of part-time collaborators with a regular monthly income and, in some rural communities, a high level of social status in some rural communities.

Where the understaffed state courts fail to resolve disputes and criminal cases, the Taliban offers its own institutions which dispense swift justice, based on traditional mechanisms of dispute-resolution. The ability to provide security and justice was among the key elements of the Taliban movement's initial success in southern Afghanistan in the 1990s.

While the reputation of President Hamid Karzai's government has been tainted by widespread corruption and dependence on foreign protection, the Taliban have campaigned to project themselves as a home-grown, virtuous movement that champions traditional values and true religion: standing at a forefront of a just and divinely-sanctioned fight against foreign invaders.

By this virtue, the Taliban has inserted itself into the local society and created an effective, political narrative: much more than an armed guerrilla insurgency, the Taliban today is a political force and a political player. The movement is waging a war of attrition on foreign forces, aiming to force NATO into a withdrawal from Afghanistan, which is aided by a domestic political backlash in the West fuelled by the perceived lack of progress in the war.

The Taliban wages a similar information campaign among its domestic constituency, attempting to create an impression that NATO-ISAF forces lack momentum on the ground, the ability to secure larger areas of territory, and the resolve for a long-term commitment to the country. This information campaign is coupled with a real or perceived capacity to exact retribution against Afghans who collaborate with foreign forces or hold positions in the local government.³⁶

As a result, support for negotiating with the insurgents is growing. Almost two-thirds of respondents (65%) would support a final political settlement that would see Mullah Omar and other Taliban figures join the Afghan government.

This dovetails with the current international strategy, which recognises the clear and urgent need to negotiate with the insurgency.³⁷ Following the Afghanistan Conference in London in January 2010, Britain, Japan and America made pledges of more than \$160 million to fund the Afghan Peace and Reconciliation Programme. So far, there have been few results to this strategy. In June this year the Afghan government convened a peace conference in Kabul but in the absence of senior insurgent figures. Failure to reach any sort of tangible political progress will exacerbate the frustration of the civilian population bearing the brunt of the fighting.

Importantly pressure to negotiate with the insurgents should not lead to an acceptance of Al Qaeda's return. According to 80% of interviewees, the return of the Taliban to power would lead to Osama Bin Laden's terrorist network regaining its foothold in Afghanistan. **This would undermine the coalition's ultimate goal, and reinforces the urgent and overriding need for a genuine and lasting political success against militant groups.**

Knowing the Afghan people better, and explaining ourselves better

The international community must address the root causes of local support for the Taliban, by knowing the Afghan people better. Understanding and addressing the needs of local communities is necessary if we are to build the lasting alliance that is necessary to assure our security interests in Afghanistan in the future.

The now-chronic problem of effective development and humanitarian efforts should be finally addressed. This is absolutely essential to build a positive relationship with the Afghan people. In areas where NGOs and government actors are unable to deploy, the military should be tasked with coordinating reconstruction and aid efforts.

NATO and the international community must explain their presence to reduce the suspicions of many Afghans. We must clearly communicate what occurred on 9/11, and that the international coalition is in Afghanistan to stabilise the country, prevent the return of Al Qaeda and, in turn, reduce the risks of another terrorist attack on Western soil. Pushing back on Taliban propaganda which claims that destroying Islam or occupying the country is the international community's goal is critical to reducing the current tensions.

To support these affirmations more effort should be invested in genuine respect and empathy for the Afghan people. Actions should be taken to support Afghanistan's religion and culture – for instance by restoring mosques or acknowledging the celebration of Afghan heroes. In

³⁶ Dorransoro, G, *The Taliban's Winning Strategy in Afghanistan*, Carnegie Endowment For International Peace, 2009. Available at www.carnegieendowment.org/files/taliban_winning_strategy.pdf

³⁷ Dorransoro, G, *Searching for Political Agreement*, Carnegie Endowment For International Peace, April 2010. Available at http://carnegieendowment.org/files/searching_polit_agreement.pdf

addition any actions which result in undue suffering or hardship to Afghan citizens must be compensated through public, widely disseminated, forthright demonstrations of regret.

In a previous report we proposed the following Counterinsurgency Equation:

**Balance any negative impact with a positive impact;
Ensure that the positive impact is greater than the negative impact.**

Military operations, by their very nature, have a negative impact on the community. Unless those negative impacts are managed by balancing them with positive impacts on the community before, during and after an operation, it can be no surprise that those operations drive the local population away from our alliance with us.



A busy market street in central Lashkar Gah

Making the case for a better future with the West

At present, there is little understanding amongst ordinary Afghans of the tangible benefits provided by the West. Although the international community still has a great deal of work to do, it has indeed brought many real improvements in critical fields – in health, in education, in infrastructure, and in economic development. Some Afghans do recognise this, with 48% viewing recent reconstruction efforts in their area positively.

However many of these benefits are taken for granted or are not fully understood as a consequence of the international presence. For instance, in Kandahar City, diesel for generators is supplied by USAID, but is commonly perceived as being provided by the Afghan government.

The US encourages this misconception to give the Afghan government a degree of credibility and legitimacy for providing services; however, an unintended consequence is that many Afghans now assume that the fuel will always be provided, regardless of whether or not the Taliban come back to power. Therefore electricity, whilst still intermittent, is now taken for granted, instead of being viewed as a benefit of the US presence.

The interview data supports this assessment. Just 21% of Afghans interviewed cited peace, security, roads, schools, and general reconstruction as good things about the foreign presence.³⁸ By contrast, 57% either did not know good things, refused to answer or felt that there were no good things about foreigners.

This clearly demonstrates the fact that the international community has not made the benefits of its presence fully understood. **Therefore the international community must make a clear case that there is a better future for Afghans and their families if Afghanistan is aligned to the West and its security concerns (in other words, no Al Qaeda bases on Afghan soil) rather than to the Taliban and Al Qaeda.**

The West must make Afghans more aware of the services and benefits provided by the international community and make it clear what would be lost if it immediately withdrew, and the Afghan people made their future by allying with the Taliban and Al Qaeda.

The Afghan people have clear material aspirations, as identified in the field research. 35% of Afghans would, if given the significant sum of \$5000, establish a business or expand their current business. 21% would use the money to get married, and significant proportions of respondents would use it for a house or for a car or other form of transport.

The West should underline that we, not the Taliban, have the capacity to encourage and support these social and economic aspirations. Greater attention could therefore be paid to boosting the private sector and unlocking the potential of Afghan entrepreneurs, through microfinance and other economic schemes. The international community should also provide funds for marriage allowances, enabling Afghan men to pay the costs of a dowry and wedding. This would enmesh these individuals into strong social support networks and would create incentives for them to find a legitimate form of income rather than working for the Taliban.

The return of the Taliban – a grim scenario for Afghans

All of these possibilities are contingent on the international community remaining in Afghanistan. However if NATO forces and international agencies pulled out of Afghanistan in the near future, the consequences for many Afghans would be bleak. The billions of dollars of aid and development money which pour into Afghanistan would be lost. Economic initiatives – from microfinance to cash-for-work schemes - would falter, infrastructure projects would stagnate, government salaries would dry up, and contracts for local companies would cease.

In addition, the Taliban would almost certainly return to local power. Some Afghans may initially welcome the return of these ‘resistance fighters’. However, it would soon become apparent that the former insurgents are unable to provide anything other than basic security and harsh justice. The interview data revealed that many Afghans have material aspirations – for marriage, a house, or a business – which the Taliban would be completely unable to provide. The movement would be likely to re-impose its draconian moral code, which was marked by severe restrictions on human rights, the rule of law, girls’ education.

³⁸ A further 21% cited ‘help and assistance’ but provided no concrete examples.

Poverty levels would climb even higher and, without easy access to the international community's humanitarian and medical relief, disease and malnutrition would become severe.

With the return of the Taliban, Al Qaeda is also likely to regain its foothold in Afghanistan. 80% of Afghans interviewed believe that Osama Bin Laden's movement would return to the country if the Taliban took power again. Although only 19% believe that Al Qaeda has significant influence at present, this figure would certainly rise if it was able to re-establish bases and rebuild its close relationship with the Taliban.

This would be a grim scenario even for those Afghans who currently respect the Taliban as pious freedom fighters. For the moment, the benefits which the coalition provides might seem inadequate and outbalanced by the negative effects of the international presence. However, without the bulwark of security provided by NATO forces, the situation in Afghanistan would deteriorate on almost every indicator.

This message should be made extremely clear to the Afghan people. The current assumption that a NATO-ISAF withdrawal would solve Afghanistan's problems must be challenged. Afghanistan was in dire straits during the 1990s, when there were no foreign forces in the country. A sudden pull-out by the international coalition now would, in all likelihood, plunge Afghanistan back into a state of civil war and even greater poverty.

In addition, research data indicates that negative sentiment in Afghanistan is not just directed towards NATO and the West, but also other outside actors such as Pakistan and Iran. This can be an opportunity for the international coalition, if it can differentiate itself from other states by being trustworthy and genuinely concerned with the Afghan peoples' welfare. It also underscores the need for a truly regional strategy for Afghanistan.³⁹

Building a new partner in NextGenAfg

Preventing this scenario in the long run will require focusing positively interacting with 'NextGenAfg', the youth of Afghanistan who must be empowered to become a new generation of responsible and peaceful citizens. Efforts must be made to help separate this new generation from the previous decades of violence. Above all this involves providing opportunities: economic, social, and political chances for today's young Afghans to make the most of their lives and avoid engaging in corruption and violence.

Young, untainted political leaders must be nurtured. Relying on the existing elites will only prolong the current cycle of grievances, revenge, and jockeying for power. These new leaders must also be accountable to the people. They must be linked to grassroots communities but, unlike the current elites, they must transcend narrow ethnic and tribal boundaries.

By persuading young people that the international community respects and empathises with them – and provides the best chance for the future they aspire to - the international coalition can reduce the current pool of potential Taliban recruits and can create a long-term relationship with the Afghan people, rather than a short-term and uncertain political strategy which focuses solely on the current, unreliable political elites.

³⁹ Mukharji, A, and Tellis, A, eds., *Is A Regional Strategy Viable in Afghanistan?* Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2010. Available at: http://carnegieendowment.org/files/regional_approach.pdf

Only by making radical changes to close the current relationship gap in southern Afghanistan can the international community build a sustainable grassroots connection with local communities. Reaching out to the Afghan people is not just essential for short-term counter-insurgency operations, it is also critical to allow an eventual NATO withdrawal, a stable Afghanistan aligned to the security interest of the international community and the preservation of our overriding goal – denying Al Qaeda a safe haven on Afghan soil.

Closing the Relationship Gap – Three Key Elements

The international community needs to focus on three key elements in order to close the relationship gap with the Afghan people:

- **Know the Afghan people better; explain ourselves better:** We must make greater efforts to understand and respond to the concerns, needs and desires of the Afghan people. The international community must effectively explain our aims and objectives in Afghanistan.
- **Winning the narrative – making the case for a better future with the West than with the Taliban:** It is essential that the international community makes a clear case that siding with it, and sharing its concerns regarding Al Qaeda, will lead to a better future for Afghans and their children. The benefits of the international presence must be emphasised, and the inability of the Taliban to bring development or freedom must be highlighted.
- **NextGenAfg:** Building a sustained grassroots political relationship with the Afghan people is impossible without reaching out to the next generation. Young Afghans must be provided with social, economic and political opportunities. These will empower them to bring the country out of its cycle of violence and political corruption, and will reduce the current pool of potential Taliban recruits.

The research outlined in the report reveals a serious “**Relationship Gap**” between the international community and its interests in Afghanistan and the Afghan people themselves. We must close this “**Relationship Gap**”.

Much more work must be done on understanding and meeting the needs of Afghans at the grassroots level; explaining ourselves, why we are in Afghanistan and what our goals are, and what we can bring which the Taliban cannot. The international community must be clear what the exchange we propose is – what an alliance with the West would bring to the Afghan people, and the futures of their families, and how that differs from a future aligned to the Taliban and Al Qaeda.

Recommendations: Closing the Relationship Gap

The international community should begin the immediate deployment of short and long-term initiatives to fill the social, economic and political vacuums which currently exist in southern Afghanistan. These initiatives should constitute a Full-Spectrum (covering military, aid, developmental, and political aspects) process, which would address the various necessary elements.

Interfering with Taliban Recruitment Through Non-Violent Security Instruments⁴⁰

- **Marriage Allowance Scheme.** A marriage-allowance scheme should be implemented for the young men in Kandahar and elsewhere. Providing financial assistance to cover the high costs of a dowry and a wedding would provide them with a stable family situation and socio-economic responsibilities, reducing the risks of Taliban recruitment.
- **Land Allowances.** Providing poor rural Afghans with parcels of land would give them a strong stake in the future of the country. This would be widely welcomed amongst the landless poor.
- **Poppy for Medicine Pilot Project.** *Poppy for Medicine* pilot projects should be implemented in southern Afghanistan before the upcoming growing season (starting in October- November 2010). Village licences would be allotted to grow opium poppies which would be processed into morphine in local facilities, and used to meet the global short of pain killing medicines.
- **Supporting the Afghan Private Sector.** Unlocking the potential of local entrepreneurs will tap directly into Afghans' material aspirations. Through dramatically expanded microfinance and other schemes, the international community can integrate Afghans into legitimate economic activity, reducing the incentives to join insurgent groups.

Refugee Aid and Support

- **Fully-Resourced Aid Initiatives** should be deployed. These should include the deployment of ambulances and field hospitals for the civilian population in the conflict zone to provide flexible and accessible medical treatment. Existing medical facilities, such as Mirwais Hospital in Kandahar, should be urgently renovated.
- **Establishment of "Camps in a Box".** These should be pre-designed facilities for those displaced by the fighting containing all necessary elements – food, clean water, flexible medical treatment (including ambulances), shelter, and above all security.
- **Active Engagement with Displaced People.** Research teams in Helmand in March 2010 found that many Afghans displaced by Operation Moshtarak had not been actively sought out by Afghan or international representatives. Refugees from any new Kandahar operations should be encouraged to move into purpose-built camps, which must be highly publicised.

⁴⁰ Non-Violent Security Instruments are policies and measures which empower or enfranchise young men, such as marriage allowances and jobs. These should be integrated into classic military responses alongside traditional elements such as military force and intelligence.

- **Provision of Food Aid Surge and other Emergency Relief.** Displaced people must be provided with essential supplies to secure their basic humanitarian needs.
- **Integration of Local Aid Agencies into Humanitarian Efforts.** Locally-based relief organisations should be fully resourced and financially supported by the international community.
- **Military Delivery of Aid.** In areas where relief agencies are unable or unwilling to operate due to security issues, NATO should support and implement development and aid projects.

Closing the Relationship Gap: Building Greater Understanding

Dramatic Positive Local Actions are needed to alter dynamics of Local Relationships

- **Address Immediate Needs.** The international community must do much more to address the short-term needs of the Afghan people, in particular food security issues.
- **Recognise Afghan Culture.** Implementing a programme to restore local mosques and religious facilities and/or distribute Qurans would demonstrate that the international community respects the religion and culture of the Afghan people. Acknowledging and celebrating Afghan heroes and religious figures would also help to integrate the efforts of the international community into the local customs and dynamics.
- **Widespread Public Apologies for Civilian Casualties:** These should demonstrate respect and empathy towards local communities and should be much more widespread and publicised.

Winning The Narrative

- **Emphasise Achievements.** The international community's current presence in Afghanistan generally, and Kandahar specifically, suffers from many chronic problems in effectiveness. There are still many challenges and shortcomings; however, progress has been made in a number of areas. For instance, the electricity supply has improved in Kandahar. All too often this progress is taken for granted, especially since the international community minimises its public involvement to give credit to the Afghan government. These successes – from commerce to roads and from schools to credit loans – must be emphasised in public pronouncements and in the wider narrative. Successes should be measured, tracked, and emphasised.
- **Highlight Taliban Failures.** As a flipside to emphasising its own achievements, the international community should highlight what the Taliban cannot and will not bring to Kandahar. They could not, for instance, provide the electricity supply that the United States and others in the international community are providing. This should be made very clear to the Afghan people. So should the failings in education, trade, development and social life which would all occur if the Taliban were to take power.

Creating A New Partner in 'NextGenAfg'

- **Empower Youth.** The international community should seek to build up a new generation of Afghans, one which is not linked to the current generation of Afghan leaders (which has been tainted by association with the conflicts and corruption of the previous decades), and which is accountable to the people. This will create a wave of positive pressure against the entrenched and unaccountable current elites.
- **Youth Leadership Training Programmes.** Attached to schools and universities, these programmes will train the most capable Afghans – of all genders, ethnic groups, and income levels – to become a new generation of Afghan leaders, and broaden Afghanistan's political society.
- **Reducing the Pool of Taliban Recruits.** As well as serving as the international community's best hope for a stable future Afghanistan, the next generation is also the Taliban's prime recruiting pool. Inoculating these young Afghans from becoming susceptible to insurgent recruitment is key to a secure and stable Afghanistan. Tools should be deployed (see above) which neutralise or marginalise this risk.