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Hearts and Minds: Afghan Opinion on the Taliban, the Government and the International Forces

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Since the election of new leaders and the establishment of a new constitution, the government of Afghanistan has been trying to prove its legitimacy and ability to foster stability, security, and the rule of law. The Taliban resurgence is playing a major role in public perception of the government's competence and the role of the international forces. Understanding current trends in public opinion can aid in tailoring the international intervention to ensure that prior progress is not lost and that elements corroding the strength of the state are diminished.

Opinion polls, focus group results, and interviews in Afghanistan were discussed by a panel of experts at a [meeting](#) of the Institute's Afghanistan Working Group on July 18, 2007. Panelists included Craig Charney, principal, Charney Opinion Research; and Tom Periello, consultant, International Center for Transitional Justice and fellow, the Century Foundation. [J Alexander Thier](#), senior rule of law advisor, U.S. Institute of Peace, served as moderator. Following is a summary of the views expressed by the speakers and the audience during the meeting. It does not necessarily represent the views of the U.S. Institute of Peace, which does not take policy positions.

The Situation

There is significant variation in political views throughout Afghanistan and different ideas about priorities to address the current situation. Overall, popular views of President Hamid Karzai and the U.S. remain positive, although some serious slippage has occurred in the last year and a half. Since 2004, security and the economy have rated as the key concerns of Afghans at the national level. Significantly, however, both the Taliban and corruption have risen from almost non-existent concerns in 2004 to major concerns today. At the local level, electricity, the economy, roads, education, and health care are ranked as greater concerns than security.

President Karzai tends to be held responsible for problems with the economy, and urban men under the age of 35, who are largely unemployed, are losing confidence in him. Urban women and Uzbeks in the North are the two groups that most doubt the positive direction of the state. Notably, the biggest decline in confidence was among the skilled professionals and those not in conflict areas, as they perceive newly gained economic and political progress as being under threat. In the North, people generally view the state as relatively strong. In the Southeast, people view the state as weak.

The U.S. and international forces are held responsible for security. In areas where the U.S. and international forces are perceived to be strong, opinions of them are high even if security is poor. In locations where international forces are deemed weak, they are much less popular, even if security is good. Afghans tend to view the U.S. as overwhelmingly powerful, and therefore see the security situation on the ground as a direct reflection of U.S. choices and priorities. Mr. Periello reported that many Afghans assume that rather than poor management of the war and state-building, the resurgence of Taliban, al Qaeda, and warlord forces is an intentional gambit by the U.S. to support Pakistan and/or to show cause for establishing permanent bases in Afghanistan.

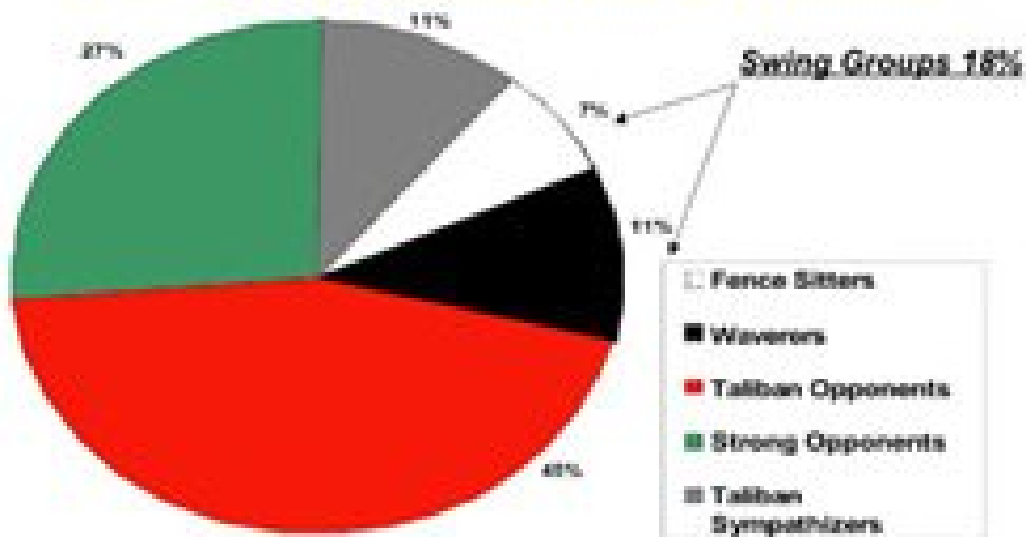
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The Fence-Sitters

When strategizing to win hearts and minds, it is most effective to address the concerns of those who are on the fence, the 'swing voters' so to speak. According to Charney's survey, this swing group is made up of eighteen percent of the population (see slide 1 below). This

group is predominantly in conflict zones, uneducated, and poor. Ethnically they tend to be made up disproportionately of Uzbeks, Turkomen, and Tajiks. Their friends and family are their most common source of information, followed by local radio, which provides clues about how to reach them.

About 18% of the Afghan public are “swing voters” in the contest with the Taliban.



Charney Research

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Courtesy of Charney Research and ABC News Poll, October 2006.

Overall, the fence-sitters are positive about President Karzai and the direction of the country and believe that Islam and democracy can happily co-exist. They are even overwhelmingly in favor of women’s representation in parliament and half report that they have daughters attending school. They are ambivalent, however, when it comes to the role of the U.S. in Afghanistan, the fight against the Taliban, and the ability of international forces to provide security. The fence-sitters are no friends of the Taliban either. They do not like the Taliban’s destructive attacks on recently rebuilt infrastructure. However, they would prefer not to be fighting the Taliban, but rather talking to them.

How and where are the Taliban making inroads? The Taliban have been most effective where security and governance vacuums exist, and there is a strong inverse correlation between the strength of the government presence and the strength of the Taliban. Where the government is seen to be present, the vast majority of Afghans feel the country is going in the right direction. The Taliban operate in areas where there is little control by the police or the international forces. Where the presence of the police is relatively strong, the presence of the Taliban is weak and visa versa. Attacks against the police are increasing and, compared to the army, the police are under-trained. According to Periello, widespread allegations of corruption have made Afghans somewhat less sympathetic to the police. However, Charney's polling demonstrates that in a situation where the choice is not between good policing and bad policing, but rather bad policing or no policing, Afghans are grateful even for bad policing.

The fence-sitters abhor civilian casualties and the tactics used by some of the international forces such as breaking down doors and threatening the privacy and integrity of their homes. Charney stated that the real danger with the fence-sitters is that, while they are warm to Karzai and favor a government that is chosen by Afghans and responsive to their needs, their unease with U.S./NATO forces requires the foreign military presence to walk a fine line, providing a strong enough presence to ensure security while avoiding alienating the "swing" group through civilian casualties, intrusive searches, etc. Periello asserts, however, that many Afghans do not see themselves on the side of the Taliban or the government. In other words, they see the government as simply another faction, and feel that they do not have a strong stake in the outcome of the conflict.

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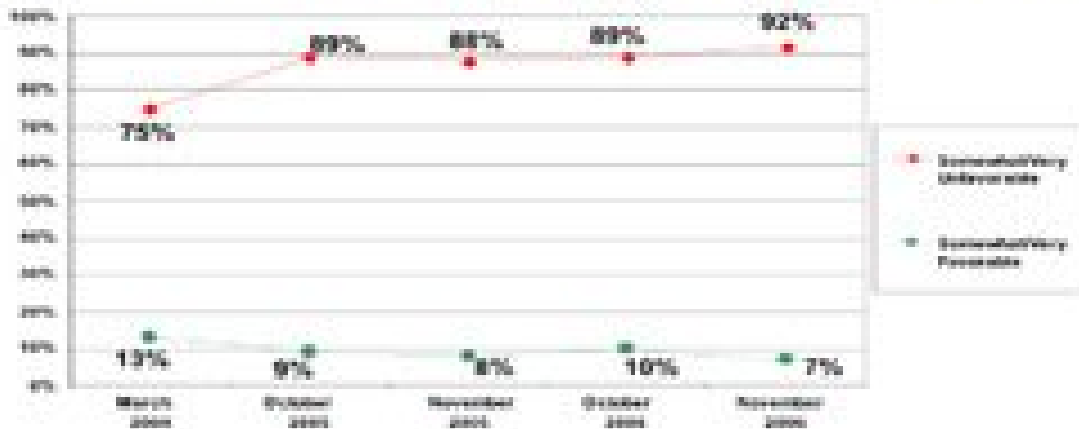
What Will Influence the Fence-Sitters?

The fence-sitters' desire for the U.S. to remain in Afghanistan hinges on the U.S. ability to protect, but their support will be given to the group that meets their needs. This is an area where the Taliban has great difficulty competing, since it can destroy but not build, while the Karzai government has succeeded in (re)building many schools and clinics since 2001.

Support for the Taliban has steadily decreased since 2004 (see slide 2 below). Suicide bombings have doubled since this time last year (a ten-fold increase from two years ago), and attacks on civilians,

schools, and infrastructure have decreased the Taliban's popularity (see slide 3 below). Support for the Taliban tends to grow either out of a desire for security or out of a combination of religious views and nationalist, ant-foreigner sentiment. The Taliban are capitalizing on this by portraying themselves as the new mujahideen, bent on waging jihad against what they perceive to be foreign infidel occupiers. This storyline has deep religious and historical resonance for Afghans.

Since 2004, Afghan public opinion has swung against the Taliban and not moved.



Courtesy of Charney Research and ABC News Poll, October 2006.

There is some serious disagreement about the approach the Afghan government should take. Some advocate a process of national reconciliation that would bring in all actors, regardless of past acts or affiliations. Others feel that confidence in the government is plunging precisely because of its association with corrupt officials, warlords, and drug traffickers, and that the government needs to end impunity and move strongly toward an agenda of justice and accountability. This call for accountability also applies to the international forces, particularly on the issue of civilian casualties – in terms of both compensating for and reducing them.

Afghans are repelled by Taliban tactics.

Do you think the following things can be justified or not?

Tactics	Justified	Not Justified
Attacks against government officials	2%	97%
Attacks against the police	3%	96%
Attacks against teachers or schools	4%	95%
Attacks against civilians.	5%	94%
Suicide bombings	8%	89%
Attacks against US Military Forces	13%	78%

Courtesy of Charney Research and ABC News Poll, October 2006.

Anti-corruption efforts already in place should be bolstered and expanded. The wide praise for the Attorney General's proposed campaign against corruption shows that Afghans are hungry for such efforts. However, this task will not be easy. Small-scale corruption – small bribes paid by citizens to public servants for routine tasks or favors – is widespread and endemic. Low salaries and lack of oversight contribute to this. Large-scale corruption by local and regional powerholders including land-grabbing, collection of illegal taxes, and the opium trade is perverting the entire system of governance at the highest levels. There are persistent accusations that one of President Karzai's brothers is a drug kingpin in the south of the country. Whether or not true, this is widely believed to be true, further damaging the government's reputation. The U.S. is seen to be

supporting several of the most corrupt and unaccountable leaders, damaging U.S. credibility as well.

Periello pointed out that the fear of prosecution is one source of leverage that could prove to be valuable for the Afghan government and the U.S. When prosecutions began taking place in Sierra Leone, the biggest offenders made their best attempts to appear on the right side of the law. In Serbia, the Milosevic indictment led, in part, to his being voted out of office. When Saddam Hussein's hanging took place in Iraq, Afghan warlords were scared because the idea of being held accountable was suddenly palpable. Shortly after, an amnesty law was passed by the warlord-dominated parliament, granting themselves shelter from the law, at least temporarily. The lack of political will on all sides is a hindrance that might prevent the formation of some type of tribunal on war crimes, but the development of a special crimes unit addressing corruption and/or drugs has more potential for Afghan buy-in. Recent discovery of several more mass graves has reignited support for justice initiatives among the population. The U.S. would benefit from supporting local justice initiatives, including public education and outreach.

Hearts and minds can still be won, but Afghans need to see better security achieved with less brutality against the civilian population, as well as tangible change that improves their hope for the future and their everyday struggles. If the Afghan government wants to strengthen its legitimacy in the eyes of the people, it needs to address corruption from within and seek out ways to improve the economy and public services. And the Afghan and international forces need to distinguish themselves from the Taliban by providing greater emphasis on the needs of the people and the value of their lives. There is still great potential for positive change in Afghanistan, but only if all the actors begin addressing these critical issues now.

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