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Nine Years in, Afghans Don't Trust US

Posted By [Jim Lobe](#)

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On the ninth anniversary of the U.S. military intervention in their country, a new report released here Thursday finds that Afghans remain deeply distrustful and resentful of the impact and intent of foreign forces there.

Based on dozens of interviews and focus group sessions in seven provinces in western, eastern, and southern Afghanistan over the past year, the report by the Open Society Foundations (OSF) found that Afghans tend to blame U.S.-led forces as much or more than the Taliban for the country's continuing violence and instability.

"This reflects a growing divide between the perceptions of the Western public and policymakers and those of Afghan citizens about the intentions and accomplishments of international forces in Afghanistan," according to the 25- page report, titled 'The Trust Deficit: The Impact of Local Perception on Policy in Afghanistan.'

Moreover, policy changes adopted over the past year by U.S. and other foreign forces aimed at reducing civilian casualties and protecting the civilian population have not succeeded in reducing local perceptions of Western indifference or even malevolence.

"Overcoming Afghan resentment toward international forces and the Afghan government has been a key concern in the new counterinsurgency strategy, and recent policies have

reduced civilian casualties, improved detention conditions, and increased strategic communications in an attempt to win Afghan 'hearts and minds,'" the report said.

Indeed, a U.N. report issued in August found the Taliban and its allies responsible for 76 percent of the more than 3,000 civilian casualties registered in the first six months of this year, while U.S.-led forces were responsible for only 12 percent – down from 30 percent during the same period in 2009.

But "...these policy reforms have often been too little, too late," the report said, noting that the "build up of mistrust and grievances from the past nine years" will make any western-backed short- or long-term policy initiatives in Afghanistan, including possible efforts at reconciliation and re-integration of Taliban forces, much more difficult.

The report comes amid growing public pessimism here about the outcome of what has become Washington's longest foreign war in its history.

That pessimism has been fed by a steady flow of reports regarding high-level corruption on the part of the government of President Hamid Karzai and his family; ballot-stuffing and other abuses in last month's parliamentary elections; and, more recently, a sharp deterioration in relations between Washington and the Pakistani military – particularly its intelligence arm, the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) agency which the U.S. believes is not only providing the Taliban a safe haven, but is aiding and abetting the insurgent group, as well.

Tensions between Pakistan and the U.S. spiked last week after U.S. helicopters, purportedly engaged in "hot pursuit" of Taliban forces, briefly crossed the border and hit a checkpoint on Pakistan's side of the border, killing three soldiers.

Islamabad immediately shut down one of two major supply routes through its territory for international forces based in land-locked Afghanistan and, despite a series of official apologies by the U.S. and NATO, has yet to re-open it.

Without Pakistan's full cooperation in denying the Taliban and its affiliates safe haven – let alone intelligence and material support – most experts here believe Washington and its NATO allies will find it nearly impossible to definitively turn the tide in the war in Afghanistan in their favour, particularly by July 2011, the date when President Barack Obama has pledged to begin drawing down the 100,000 U.S. troops who are currently deployed there.

The new study also comes as the U.S. military is mounting a major counter- insurgency drive aimed at weakening and eventually evicting the Taliban from its traditional stronghold in and around Kandahar, which is also the heartland of Afghanistan's Pashtun population.

The offensive is aimed at capturing or killing mid- and senior-level Taliban militants in the area, while enhancing the security of the local civilian population – a model that U.S.

forces used with inconclusive results in the farming region of Marjah in neighboring Helmand Province over much of the past year.

But the new report raises serious questions about whether that approach can work, given the deep-seated distrust that has built up about western forces not just in Kandahar, but in non-Pashtun areas of the country, as well.

"In the course of this research, the [OSF] found few meaningful differences in perceptions of international forces, regardless of the ethnicity of the Afghans interviewed, their level of education, political affiliation, or proximity to conflict," the study, which was carried out with the collaboration of local Afghan civil-society organizations, concluded.

While Western policy-makers believe their forces are in Afghanistan to improve the situation, the report said, Afghans, have an entirely different impression, based in important part on their experience of the last nine years.

"Incidents of civilian casualties, night raids, wrongful or abusive detentions, deteriorating security, and the perceived impunity of international forces have generated negative stereotypes of international forces as violent, abusive, and sometimes, deliberately malevolent in their conduct and nature," it found. "Many [of the interviewees] were even suspicious that international forces were directly or indirectly supporting insurgents," it went on.

"These suspicions, in turn, have fed into broader shifts toward framing international forces as occupiers, rather than as a benefit to Afghanistan. Today, each incident of abuse, whether caused by international forces or insurgents, reinforces these negative perceptions and further undermines any remaining Afghan trust."

"Though stories about international forces supporting insurgents or planting IEDs are often dismissed as conspiracy theories or propaganda, they offer a reality check on just how strained the international community's position is in Afghanistan," said Erica Gaston, the report's co-author, whose previous work in Afghanistan helped persuade U.S. commanders to tighten their rules of engagement.

Her views were echoed by Michael Semple, an expert at the Center for Human Rights at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government, who has spent much of the past decade in rural Afghanistan. "This is extremely resonant," he said of the report's conclusions. "This is the discourse you pick up when you go out and talk to people in the countryside."

In some cases, he said, elite sectors, including Karzai himself, contribute to these perceptions. "Karzai personally doesn't like the idea of waging war against a section of his people. He's very comfortable with the idea that NATO is fighting the war."

In order to rebuild trust, the report called for a series of measures, including extending the policy reforms to minimise civilian casualties; reversing the increased use of night raids

as the main tactic for capturing or killing suspected Taliban fighters; exercising tighter control and accountability over Special Operations and non-military forces involved in night raids; and ensuring greater transparency and responsiveness to allegations of abuses against Afghans.

The report also urged international forces to exercise greater caution in undertaking new initiatives to arm, train, or equip local militias and to reconsider the new U.S. strategy of pushing foreign troops closer to local inhabitants before they can be "meaningfully protected" from insurgent violence or collateral damage.

Afghans often blame the presence of international forces for provoking Taliban attacks in which the local population is caught in the middle, according to the report.