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## Afghanistan War: Public opinion turns sharply against US forces

By Jean MacKenzie

12/09/2010

**Analysis: New poll says US has all but lost battle for hearts and minds in Afghanistan.**

KABUL — First the good news: U.S. forces are still more popular in Afghanistan than Osama bin Laden. Fully 6 percent of respondents in a new poll expressed a “very favorable” opinion of American troops, versus just 2 percent for the fugitive Al Qaeda leader.

To be fair, the United States scored much higher in the more grudging “somewhat favorable” category, outstripping the world’s most wanted man by 36 percent to just 4. But more than half of all Afghans — 55 percent — want U.S. forces out of their country, and the sooner the better.

Add it all up, and it is pretty bad news for the U.S. military as it examines its options ahead of next week’s Afghanistan strategy review.

During U.S. President Barack Obama’s lightning visit to Kabul on Dec. 3, White House aides said confidently that no major adjustments were expected to the present strategy, which, in the minds and words of most military leaders, is now firmly on course.

That strategy has foreign troops in Afghanistan for at least another four years, while the focus turns to training and equipping Afghan forces to handle their own security, the much-vaunted “transition” to full Afghan sovereignty.

But the poll, commissioned by The Washington Post, ABC, the BBC and Germany’s ARD, and conducted by the perennial survey organization ACSOR (Afghan Center for Socio-Economic and Opinion Research), shows a nation yearning for an end to hostilities.

While human rights organizations and women’s advocacy groups mount a spirited campaign against any accommodation with the Taliban, 73 percent of those polled said it was time to negotiate with the insurgents. While the Taliban do not enjoy much popularity in the country — only 9 percent said they would prefer them to the current government — it seems that the appetite for conflict has waned among Afghans, who mainly just want to get on with their lives.

Those who moan about the lack of readiness among the Afghan National Security Forces might be surprised to learn that more than twice as many Afghans think the police are better able to provide security in their areas than U.S. or NATO forces. Of those polled, only 36 percent said they trusted the foreigners to protect them, while 77 percent voted for their local police.

They show a lot more optimism than Gen. David Petraeus, who told ABC news over the weekend that it was far from a sure thing that Afghan troops would be able to take over from the United States and NATO by 2014, the new target date set by the NATO summit in Lisbon last month.

“I don’t know that you say confident. I think no commander ever is going to come out and say 'I’m confident that we can do this,'" Petraeus said in answer to a question about the likelihood that Afghan forces would be competent to assume the burden four years from now.

Consistency is not a particularly strong suit among Afghans, if the poll data is to be trusted. The same respondents who lauded the Afghan troops complained bitterly about corruption in the police, with 85 percent of respondents saying it was a big or moderate problem in their area.

Polls are tricky tools, especially in conflict zones. ACSOR itself freely acknowledges that there were many areas it could not go to because of security concerns. That real estate would, of course, include the south, where U.S. and NATO forces are now battling the Taliban.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that the popularity of U.S. forces would be even lower in these areas, given the higher incidence of civilian casualties from airstrikes, and the greater frequency of night raids, in which U.S. Special Forces descend on housing compounds, often with a mission to kill or capture alleged Taliban fighters.

The latter was a bitterly disputed topic last month, when Afghan President Hamid Karzai told the media that he wanted the night raids stopped, prompting Petraeus to say that such an attitude risked making his own position “untenable.”

The poll shows that Afghans are implacably against airstrikes by U.S. or NATO troops, with 73 percent saying that they opposed them even if they help to defeat the Taliban.

There is, of course, some doubt as to the validity of any public opinion surveys in a country with a largely uneducated and unsophisticated population, suspicious of strangers and unwilling to share personal information for fear of possible consequences.

But to the extent that ACSOR’s data is deemed reliable, it paints a fairly depressing picture for the international community hoping to gain public support in their struggle with a surprisingly resilient insurgency.

Fewer than half of respondents — 49 percent — support the U.S. troop surge that added 30,000 pairs of boots on the ground over the past year. The same number opposed the surge.

More troops almost always means more violence; 39 percent of respondents said that civilian casualties had increased over the past 12 months; 30 percent thought they had decreased, while 31 percent said there had been no change.

In fact, civilian casualties are up sharply, according to a United Nations report released in August. And the poll shows that Afghans primarily blame the international forces, rather than the Taliban, when innocent people are caught in the crossfire.

Of those polled, 35 percent said that U.S. and NATO troops bore responsibility, 32 percent blamed the “anti-government forces,” and an equal number assigned blame to both.

As the recent WikiLeaks revelations have shown, Karzai is not the U.S. government’s favorite international partner. He is seen as weak, unpredictable, often paranoid and incapable of effective governance, according to the leaked cables.

None of that holds sway with the Afghan people, though, 82 percent of whom judged Karzai favorably. Only 62 percent gave his government as a whole such high marks, however.

Perhaps most striking is the sense of lost opportunity revealed in the poll. While the vast majority of Afghans — 74 percent — still support the U.S.-led invasion that toppled the Taliban, they are now convinced that they would be better off alone.

This, according to Western observers, is part and parcel of Afghan psychology.

“They just do not want us here,” said one foreign diplomat, speaking on condition of anonymity. “The Western troops, when they came here [in 2001] said ‘the Soviets were invaders, we are liberators. But for Afghans it is all the same — we are all ‘foreigners.’ They will fight anyone who comes here.”