

## **Preface**

# **2001: A Lost Window of Opportunity**



## 2001: A Lost Window of Opportunity

***In 2001, Afghanistan presented the international community two golden opportunities: the opportunity to destroy Al Qaeda's safe haven by ousting the Taliban regime; and the opportunity to successfully rebuild the strategically critical nation of Afghanistan, creating a model of positive engagement between the West and an Islamic nation***

Five years ago, the events of 11 September 2001 threw two global cultures together in the most dramatic way possible. The United States led the international community's response, launching extensive military operations in Afghanistan. Yet Afghanistan represented a window of opportunity for the international community to successfully collaborate in a powerful and far-reaching manner with an Islamic state. Its stated commitment to removing the perpetrators of terrorism in Afghanistan generated a largely enthusiastic welcome from the Afghan people, providing the international community with an excellent chance to address the real and immediate needs of Afghans. In turn, this could have positively influenced the perceptions of the global Islamic community, opening a window for further collaboration to address the root causes of extremism.

***US and UK-led failed counter-narcotics policies have led directly to the return of the Taliban, by creating security and hunger crises in southern Afghanistan***

Five years later, large areas of Afghanistan, particularly in the South, are not under central government control. Insurgency is present in half of the country: the Taliban are back and advancing rapidly towards Kabul. The Taliban's return is directly connected to a number of failures on the part of the international community, many of which are linked to the formulation and implementation of failed counter-narcotics policies.

Although the events of 11 September 2001 are perceived by many in the Muslim world as embodying the clash of two global cultures, recognition of this underlying cultural clash has not been evident in the international community's subsequent responses in Afghanistan. There has been a profound failure on the part of the international community to appreciate that the majority of Afghans have a completely different "world view" to that of the 'Western' world. The Afghan population identifies itself first and foremost as Muslim, and its sense of cultural identity is very closely tied to Islam and the global Islamic community - the *Umma*.<sup>1</sup>

*"That religion was, and to an extent still is, so deeply part of the personal identity and worldview of Afghans that it is hard for a secular, atheist Westerner to comprehend. I can remember standing in the early evening by the side of the road between Kabul and*

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<sup>1</sup> Initial Findings, Senlis Afghanistan Survey on Afghans' Perceptions of the West, Kabul, August 2006.

*Kandahar in the summer of 1998. The road is so bad that for long stretches, the drivers prefer to drive along dry riverbeds rather than the linked potholes and craters that pass for a road surface. We had stopped at the crest of a hill and could see for miles in every direction. I could see the passengers casting their pattus (traditional blankets) down in the fine dirt to kneel in prayer. The koochis too were facing Mecca beside their livestock. That night we slept on the floor of a Chaikhanna, a basic roadside inn. In the morning, fifty men took their blankets and lined up for dawn prayers in the road outside. The equivalent in the West would be the guests of a motorway motel congregating for an outdoor service at 5am.”<sup>2</sup>*

**Across Afghanistan, the international community’s militaristic responses to the security and development crises are seen as linked to a war on Islam**

The US Administration lacks understanding of this Afghan world view, and has failed to appreciate the reality Afghans are experiencing: that aggressive security-focused stabilisation and ‘nation-building’ responses are perceived as a war against Afghan culture and religion. The implications of such a world view are enormous, and disinterest of this view is proving increasingly deadly for international security forces in the country. There is a widespread and growing perception among Afghans that the international community in Afghanistan are crusading “Christian invaders,” waging war on Afghan Islamic culture.<sup>3</sup> This perception has strengthened support for the insurgency in southern Afghanistan, and has informed Afghans’ views of suicide bombings in the country. Previously unheard of, suicide bombings against international military forces are increasingly accepted as a valid means of ‘self-defence’ against attacks on Muslims. Further, support for the central government institutions established by the international community is rapidly decreasing.

There is a clear belief among Afghans of all ages in southern Afghanistan that the current conflicts in Palestine, Lebanon and Iraq are all manifestations of a wider conflict between the ‘West’ and the Muslim world, by which the West, led by the United States, is attempting to ‘re-colonise’ Islamic States in order to expand its global control.<sup>4</sup> A recent survey on Afghans’ perceptions of the West indicates that such beliefs are widespread throughout Afghanistan.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Burke, Jason, “Al Qaeda” Penguin, 2004, p.62.

<sup>3</sup> Senlis Afghanistan Field Team Investigations, Kandahar and Helmand, August 2006

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> Initial Findings, Senlis Afghanistan Survey on Afghans’ Perceptions of the West, Kabul, August 2006.

***Why is the international community waging war on Afghans?***

The “war on terror” has itself exacerbated and recreated the exact situation it intended to diffuse in southern Afghanistan. Led by the United States, the international community persists in labelling its military efforts in Afghanistan a “war against terror”. Yet Afghans perceive this as nothing less than a war against a desperately poor region of defenceless civilians. The threat posed by the international community’s military operations in Afghanistan has effectively created what Afghans in southern Afghanistan call *asabiya* – the Arab word for a unified group identity. Afghans in southern Afghanistan are identifying with those the international military coalitions are seeking to destroy, namely, the Taliban. The activities of the international community in southern Afghanistan have strengthened this *asabiya*.

***Afghans’ Perceptions of the West: A Contained Resentment***

The recent survey on Afghans’ perceptions of Western foreigners in their country revealed significant levels of distrust towards the international community’s motives for engaging in Afghanistan.<sup>6</sup> Five years of international presence in the country has failed to generate a stronger sense of solidarity between Afghans and the West, with a majority of Afghans perceiving a profound struggle between the aspirations of modernism and Islam. Unless the international community takes urgent action to engage seriously and respectfully with local Afghan communities and to address their real concerns, the chasm between Afghanistan and the international community will deepen.

***A startling 88% of the male population in Afghanistan blame the West for increasing general tensions between Islam and the West<sup>7</sup>***

As indicated by the growing insurgency currently consuming half of Afghanistan, more than half of Afghanistan’s population consider the relationship between Muslims and the West to be problematic. Two thirds of those surveyed expressed a belief that the February 2006 publication of the Danish cartoons depicting the prophet was a display of disrespect for Islam, although several interviewees condemned the violent protests that followed the publication of the cartoon.

Regarding the personal attributes of Westerners, nearly two thirds of those Afghans interviewed regard Westerners as intolerant, and more than half expressed a belief that Westerners are devout Christians. Such a view stems from the perception that the current wars between the West and Islamic nations are an expression of Christian devotion.

<sup>6</sup> Initial Findings, Senlis Afghanistan Survey on Afghans’ Perceptions of the West, Kabul, August 2006.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

**Nearly half of the Afghan population sees Westerners as disrespectful to women (46%), dishonest (50%), selfish (48%), immoral (46%) and violent (40%).<sup>8</sup>**

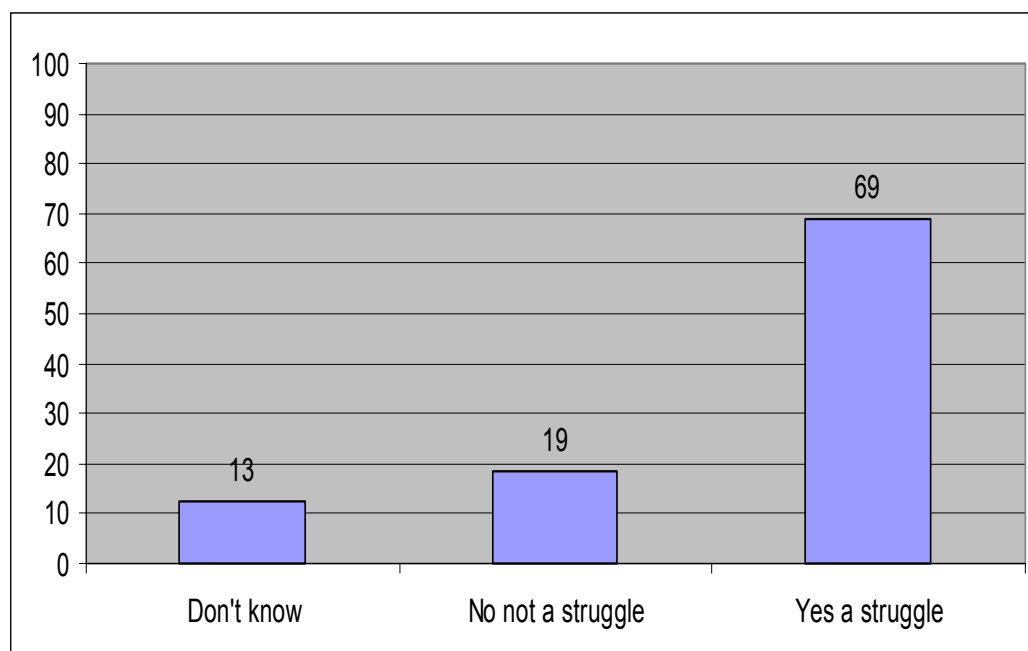
Although Afghans clearly disapprove of the ongoing insurgent violence against Afghan civilians, more than half of the respondents believe that some acts, such as suicide bombings, are justified when politically motivated.

**Nearly half (49%) of those surveyed expressed confidence in Osama bin Laden to act in their interests in world affairs, with 47% rejecting evidence that the 11 September 2001 attacks were carried out by Arabs.**

### ***Scepticism towards nation-building efforts in Afghanistan***

Forty-one percent of survey respondents believe that democracy would not work well in Afghanistan. Nearly three-quarters of those surveyed expressed frustration that Muslim nations are not as prosperous as they could be. One-quarter of those surveyed blamed US and Western policies for this lack of prosperity, although limited education opportunities were also blamed. Nearly half (49%) of survey participants declared that there is a natural conflict between being a devout Muslim and living in a modern society. A much smaller percentage believed that such a conflict exists for devout Christians. Nearly one-third of those interviewed expressed support for Islamic fundamentalism, although the global rise of Islamic extremism worried 67% of participants.

**Figure 1: Strong perceptions of a struggle between modernisation and Islamic fundamentalism**



<sup>8</sup> Initial Findings, Senlis Afghanistan Survey on Afghans' Perceptions of the West, Kabul, August 2006.

## Re-opening the Window of Opportunity in Afghanistan

In September 2001, the world witnessed what is believed by some to be an event symbolising the clash of two global cultures. Five years later, these two cultures are clashing once again, in Afghanistan. It is clear that these current clashes stem from not having developed an *effective* blueprint for cooperation and collaboration in Afghanistan. Lacking this *effective* blueprint, the US-led nation-building efforts in Afghanistan have been characterised by misplaced priorities, misguided policies, and the misled implementation of these policies. As such, it is necessary to develop a model for effective cross-cultural collaboration to address the problems arising from the last five years of international efforts in Afghanistan.

***Cultural diversity is a strength in our response to these issues, not a reason to wage war***

The first step in developing such a model lies in recognising and appreciating the extent and importance of the cultural differences between Afghans and the international community. It is necessary to find a way of working with these cultures in such a way that the cultural diversity itself becomes part of the formula integral to the solutions.

The West has different models for managing cultures that must co-exist. Immigrants to the United States are quickly assimilated in a great *melting pot*, whereby from the East Coast to the West, everybody becomes American. Canada and the United Kingdom follow a *mosaic* model, in which each culture remains distinct but combine to make a whole. In recent years, European countries have discussed, negotiated and struggled with different ideas, many of which are still under experimentation. All countries, however, seek to find ways to incorporate separate cultures so that together, they are stronger than when apart.

In Afghanistan we must find a way for the West and the Muslim world to be linked together in a cooperative venture, to respond as partners to the hunger, poverty and security crises that threaten this strategically important country.

***Europe and Canada can take lead on re-building relationships with Afghans***

It is imperative that the international community generates innovative approaches to building the necessary collaborative relationships with Afghanistan. Given that Canada and Europe have positive experiences in building and developing collective cultural relationships, their experience should lead the international community's efforts to develop, with Afghanistan, the blueprint necessary for further cooperation and collaboration. Europe has an extensive historical relationship with the Islamic world, and as such, Europe must stop seeing itself as a "junior" partner to the United States and take leadership of the international community in Afghanistan. However, until there is real and meaningful engagement on the over-riding issue of Afghans' and Westerners' widely divergent world views, it will not be possible to repair the situation in Afghanistan.

