



# SPECIAL REPORT

2301 Constitution Ave., NW • Washington, DC 20037 • 202.457.1700 • fax 202.429.6063

## ABOUT THE REPORT

This report draws on the results of an in-country survey of politically engaged and influential Afghan citizens. It was conducted by the United States Institute of Peace (USIP) and the Institute for Rethinking Politics (IRP), a Kabul-based research and analysis organization.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Omar Samad is a former Afghanistan Senior Expert in Residence with the Center for Conflict Management at USIP (2012–13) and a former Afghan Ambassador to France (2009–11) and to Canada (2004–09) and spokesperson of the Afghan Ministry for Foreign Affairs (2001–04). An advocate for freedom and democracy in Afghanistan throughout the 1980s and 1990s, he founded the Afghanistan Information Center, launched Azadi Afghan Radio, and was an analyst for CNN and other international media. Ambassador Samad earned his MA in international relations from Tufts University and was assisted in this report by research aides Maral Noori and Atta Nasib.

*Omar Samad*

## Perceptions of Politically Engaged, Influential Afghans on the Way Forward

### Summary

- Most influential Afghans surveyed for this report are positive about the international engagement in their country since 2001.
- Most consider that security has deteriorated and are skeptical about the 2014 end date of international combat operations.
- Most are in favor of a small contingent of international forces to be deployed after 2014.
- Mistrust of neighbors seen as interfering is widespread, as is the belief that regional dynamics have a major impact on Afghan stability.
- The majority are equally critical of Afghan foreign policy but do not think that Afghanistan is a threat to others.
- Border demarcation issues, most believe, should be addressed through a consultative process, as should water rights through international mediation, to help de-escalate regional tensions and act as confidence-building measures.
- Terrorism is deemed as sourced outside the country, and the Taliban's strength is seen as tied to external factors.
- A negotiated political end to the conflict is considered ideal, as is a U.S. role in that process.
- Most do not believe that the Taliban would agree to the current political order or constitution, but some are willing to negotiate elements of democratic values and gender rights.
- Afghans do favor free, fair, and transparent elections for 2014 but ask for more consultation and transparency.

© 2013 by the United States Institute of Peace.  
All rights reserved.

SPECIAL REPORT 325

MARCH 2013

### CONTENTS

Introduction	2
Methodology	3
Findings and Analysis	4
Taliban, Reconciliation, and Terrorism	9
Political Order, Democracy, and Elections	10
Conclusion	11

## ABOUT THE INSTITUTE

The United States Institute of Peace is an independent, nonpartisan institution established and funded by Congress. Its goals are to help prevent and resolve violent conflicts, promote postconflict peacebuilding, and increase conflict management tools, capacity, and intellectual capital worldwide. The Institute does this by empowering others with knowledge, skills, and resources, as well as by its direct involvement in conflict zones around the globe.

## BOARD OF DIRECTORS

**J. Robinson West** (Chair), Chairman, PFC Energy, Washington, DC • **George E. Moose** (Vice Chair), Adjunct Professor of Practice, The George Washington University, Washington, DC • **Judy Ansley**, Former Assistant to the President and Deputy National Security Advisor under George W. Bush, Washington, DC • **Eric Edelman**, Hertog Distinguished Practitioner in Residence, Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies, Washington, DC • **Joseph Eldridge**, University Chaplain and Senior Adjunct Professorial Lecturer, School of International Service, American University • **Kerry Kennedy**, President, Robert F. Kennedy Center for Justice and Human Rights, Washington, DC • **Ikram U. Khan**, President, Quality Care Consultants, LLC., Las Vegas, NV • **Stephen D. Krasner**, Graham H. Stuart Professor of International Relations at Stanford University, Palo Alto, CA • **John A. Lancaster**, Former Executive Director, International Council on Independent Living, Potsdam, NY • **Jeremy A. Rabkin**, Professor of Law, George Mason University, Fairfax, VA • **Judy Van Rest**, Executive Vice President, International Republican Institute, Washington, DC • **Nancy Zirkin**, Executive Vice President, Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights, Washington, DC

## MEMBERS EX OFFICIO

**Michael H. Posner**, Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor • **Kathleen Hicks**, Principal Deputy Under Secretary of Defense for Policy • **Gregg F. Martin**, Major General, U.S. Army; President, National Defense University • **Jim Marshall**, President, United States Institute of Peace (nonvoting)

The views expressed in this report do not necessarily reflect the views of the United States Institute of Peace, which does not advocate specific policy positions.

To request permission to photocopy or reprint materials, e-mail: [permissions@usip.org](mailto:permissions@usip.org).

- The majority do not believe that the current political system was imposed and consider democratic values essential for social and political stability.
- Approximately half of the respondents demand a more decentralized regime through a constitutional review and reform process but do not believe the country is ready for political parties.
- Corruption, weak governance, militant attacks, foreign meddling, narco-business, and criminality are agreed to be among major challenges facing the country.
- Most of those surveyed pin their hopes on concepts of peace, tolerance, democratic rule, education, rule of law, employment, and international support. They do not see an alternative to democratic governance.

## Introduction

The international engagement to stabilize and help rebuild war-torn Afghanistan after the U.S.-led military intervention in 2001, in response to al-Qaeda's September 11 attacks, has had a transformative effect in helping Afghanistan reemerge from two decades of conflict.<sup>1</sup> It has also helped pave the way for a nascent constitutional order, a revitalized economy, and a fast-paced social and generational mobility.

These achievements have been accompanied, however, by numerous challenges and setbacks. No consensus has yet been reached on the extent to which the United Nations (UN)-mandated mission in Afghanistan, which has been part of a wider international effort to help with stabilization, state building, and reconstruction, has achieved its primary objective of weakening the threat to global security from transnational actors that use terrorism as a tool.

The United States has not experienced another terrorist attack on its homeland since 2001. However, the cost of this war, which has now become the longest in U.S. history, has been steep in terms of human losses, both Afghan and foreign, and of civil-military expenditures.<sup>2</sup>

Furthermore, signs of chronic insecurity, weak governance, impunity, and corruption on the Afghan side are evident, causing anger and resentment in the population, most of whom viewed the international engagement as a unique opportunity to put an end to years of conflict and help rebuild their country.

In terms of regional dynamics, as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) mission comes to an end in 2014, countries are hedging to deal with a diverse set of emerging scenarios. Relations are complex and driven by differing priorities. The Afghan transition process could either help reduce conflict and weaken the hold of radicalized groups by facilitating regional stability and growth or have the opposite effect.

On the international donors' side, fatigue compounded by global economic constraints and the gradual loss of public support have undermined political backing for the mission and are expected to contribute to reduced funding levels.

Relations between the Afghan government and the West have experienced both highs and lows, affected by issues ranging from civilian casualties to prisoner transfers and fraudulent election claims.

Despite varying perceptions about the past decade of engagement and the current state of the mission, the future of Afghanistan in terms of stability, better governance, and economic sustainability will, to a large extent, depend on decisions that Afghans, regional actors, and international stakeholders make as the 2014 NATO withdrawal deadline nears and on how the intermediate transitional period will be managed.

Although some Afghans express cautious optimism, most are concerned that they have much to lose in terms of relative security, better livelihoods, and new opportunities. If the state is too weak to manage the transition or if security forces fragment, Afghans fear that the gains of the last decade will either be seriously diminished or lost.

As all sides enter the current mission's endgame phase, actors are being forced to reevaluate their strategies and tactics. Afghans in particular are confronting a daunting set of challenges, including the handover of security responsibilities to Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF), the political process that includes elections (presidential and provincial council in 2014 and parliamentary in 2015), attempts at reconciling with armed opposition groups, and, finally, the impact of less foreign aid to support the economy and perform state-building functions.

Although a certain level of tension exists between the camp that portrays the future as murky and the one that paints it as rosy, the aim of this report is to shy away from political rhetoric and instead use a set of ground-level perceptions to highlight strategic and tactical imperatives during mission drawdown.

This report assesses the perceptions of a small sample of politically engaged and influential Afghans, who represent a segment of society that will play a key role and be in a strong position to affect the course of events. Such perceptions on past performance and the way forward had not previously been captured or reflected in other research and analysis. This study is therefore based on a comprehensive survey in which respondents were asked to provide their views on a wide range of issues that are both topical and seen as strategic. The findings are aimed at providing new insights and enriching the public and policy debates on lessons learned and the way forward.

## Methodology

The analysis is based on an in-country survey conducted in August 2012. The vehicle included fifty questions—forty-two multiple choice and eight short answer—and covered four areas: international engagement; regional relations; Taliban, reconciliation, and terrorism; and political order, democracy, and elections. Drafted in English, the survey was translated and presented to participants in both official Afghan languages, Dari and Pashto. The goal was to capture the views of politically engaged and influential Afghan men and women from various walks of life, representing the country's main ethnic and religious groups (see table 1).

IRP research assistants travelled to ten Afghan provinces—Kabul, Herat, Kandahar, Balkh/Mazar-i Sharif, Ningarhar, Bamyan, Ghazni, Parwan/Kapisa, and Logar—and conducted face-to-face interviews with seventy-seven respondents. The interviews included verbal (taped) and written versions, which were subsequently translated back into English under USIP and IRP supervision by four students affiliated with the American University of Afghanistan.

Respondents were given the option to remain anonymous. The pool was made up of politicians, business people, religious and traditional leaders, civil servants, political and civil society activists, and women and youth leaders (see table 2).

The survey focused on Afghans living inside the country and did not reach out to refugee and expatriate communities. Security concerns and access to certain rural regions, even in the vicinity of Kabul, hampered our goal of reaching out to more rural leaders. Almost 50 percent of respondents reside in Kabul and represent most ethnic groupings.

**Table 1. Respondent Personal Demographics**

Category	Frequency	Percentage
Gender (n=77)		
Male	58	75
Female	19	25
Generational (n=70)*		
21–30 years old	12	17
31 and over	58	83
Urban vs. rural (n=77)		
Urban	53	69
Rural	24	31
Ethnicity (n=77)		
Pashtun	32	42
Tajik	24	31
Hazara	9	12
Uzbek	3	4
Other **	9	12

\* Respondents do not add to 77 because 7 respondents withheld their ages.

\*\* Several individuals of mixed heritage comprising Pashtun ethnicity identified themselves in this category.

**Table 2. Respondent Professional Demographics**

Category (n=77)	Frequency	Percentage
Politicians or political party members and parliamentarians	14	18
Civil servants and military officers	7	9
Academics/intelligentsia	15	19
Private sector	6	8
Civil society, including NGOs and media	18	23
Traditional society	9	12
Others	8	10

## Findings and Analysis

### *International Engagement*

Most respondents in the sample have a relatively positive view of the eleven-year international involvement in their country. However, more than half believed the scope and intensity of the military intervention should have decreased over time. This sentiment reflects a certain level of frustration with the inability of NATO and the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) to weaken the insurgency to more manageable levels despite a consistent escalation of troop numbers between 2002 and 2011 (see table 3).

On the other hand, more than half called for an increase in nonmilitary international commitments, indicating concern regarding the decline of international attention and funding expected after 2014.

Most of those interviewed disagreed with the decision made at the NATO summit in Lisbon, which called for a complete disengagement from combat by the United States and ISAF in 2014.<sup>3</sup> They also widely believed that the U.S. preoccupation with the Iraqi campaign beginning in 2003 shifted priorities and resources to a different theatre and facilitated the reemergence of insurgents in the Afghanistan-Pakistan (Af-Pak) tribal belt by 2005.

Although complimentary of overall ANSF progress, respondents displayed a sense of uncertainty about the cohesiveness and ability of ANSF to withstand Taliban attacks after 2014 if international assistance is reduced sharply (see table 4).

Many referred to the 1992 downfall of the Najibullah regime soon after the Russians stopped providing financial resources to the Kabul regime as an example. A majority believe that the military intervention has not fully achieved its objectives as initially defined in 2001.

**Table 3. Has International Military Engagement Since 2001 ...**

Responses (n=75)*	Frequency	Percentage
Fully achieved its objectives?	1	1
Partially achieved its objectives?	44	59
Not achieved its objectives?	30	40

\* Responses do not add to 77 because two respondents did not answer the question.

**Table 4. Will the ANSF Be Ready to Take Over by 2014?**

Responses (n=74)*	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	10	14
No	43	58
Not certain	21	28

\* Responses do not add to 77 because two respondents did not answer the question.

**Table 5. Approval of Smaller Contingent of International Forces**

Responses (n=77)	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	54	72
No	14	19
No opinion	7	9
<b>Gender analysis</b>		<b>Of those surveyed in category</b>
Yes (n=54)		
Male	38	66
Female	16	84

Fewer respondents, especially those in the safest regions of the country, expressed satisfaction with their security conditions. However, even in these safer regions, some said that security was jeopardized by local warlords and illegal armed groups. Meanwhile, the vast majority of respondents were in support of the 2012 U.S.-Afghan Strategic Partnership Agreement. They consider it as a guarantor of enhanced stability and long-term growth.

The majority was also in favor of the presence of a smaller contingent of U.S. and allied forces to perform specific duties after 2014—a reference to the sensitive bilateral security agreement (BSA) talks under way between the United States and Afghanistan since November 2012. The BSA's main focus is on residual troop numbers, scope of duties, judicial immunity, and time lines for training and advising activities (see table 5).<sup>4</sup>

When asked which sectors needed an increase in international engagement, respondents pointed to an array of target areas, mostly focused on improving the training and equipping of security forces, better governance, effective counter-corruption measures, enhanced antiterrorism and counternarcotics policies, and job creation as part of large-scale public works projects. They also point to civil society, media, public health, and education as fields that have benefitted from ongoing international assistance since 2001.

When asked to identify the factors that influence either improvement or deterioration in the security sector, respondents pointed to the need for the Taliban to stop fighting, meddling from certain neighboring countries, illegal armed groups, the nexus between insurgency and the drug business, and better governance and rule of law. They also saw correlation between improved security conditions and education and a stronger economy.

***The vast majority of respondents were in support of the 2012 U.S.-Afghan Strategic Partnership Agreement.***

**Table 6. Development Aid in Economic Growth**

Category (n=77)	Frequency	Percentage
Effective	10	13
Partially effective	60	78
Not effective	7	9
No opinion	0	0

***Most influential Afghans interviewed had similar views about the security threats facing the country.***

Unease about domestic political polarization and a growing trust deficit between the people and the current government leadership was palpable.

External and neighbor factors were considered an important cause for the deterioration of security conditions in the country and as part of wider geostrategic and geoeconomic tensions and rivalries seen as difficult to tackle for a poorer country like Afghanistan.

The lack of a clear reconciliation strategy with respect to the armed insurgents was also seen by some as a cause for the rise of an emboldened Taliban. Most viewed this as a long-term danger to a region already infested with various shades of extremist groups who pursue an agenda that calls for the establishment of an emirate-style government. Some saw the linkages between radicalism and terrorism, whereas others considered the Taliban as indigenous and distinct from groups such as al-Qaeda.

Regardless of ethnicity or rural-urban divide, most influential Afghans interviewed had similar views about the security threats facing the country. Whereas the Pashtun dominated south and east remain less stable and more preoccupied with Taliban intimidation and menace resulting in slower progress, the country's northern, western, and central regions are experiencing more rapid economic growth but share a high degree of uncertainty and apprehension about the future.

Consequently, the majority of those surveyed were eager to see Afghan forces and institutions perform better. However, given the reality on the ground, they expected that the international community, especially the United States and NATO, would continue to be involved in training, advising, and equipping once the combat mission has ceased.

### ***Economy and Development***

On the development side, many interviewees believed that the growing unemployment rate and the reliance on a drug business that feeds predatory mafias have also contributed to insecurity. However, some respondents also pointed to serious shortcomings in governance, rule of law, and the justice system, coupled with low capacities, as contributing factors for insecurity and low productivity.

Few respondents favored a sharp decrease in international assistance. For most, socio-economic indicators in the education and health domains have improved over the last decade. But, when asked about the effectiveness of growth and overall aid, most described it as "partially effective" (see table 6).

Areas that respondents perceived to have been positively affected by foreign funding and technical assistance were telecommunications, media, information technology, road building, transportation, banking, public health, rural development, civil society, and women's rights.

Most interviewees believed that despite a large infusion of capital and aid money (estimated at more than \$50 billion since 2002) to build infrastructure, engage in state building activities, and reduce poverty levels, aid effectiveness has been lacking. They blame, in part, shoddy contracting practices, weaknesses in governance and rule of law, and corruption as contributing factors. Most agreed that the divide between poor and rich had widened—even though the country's middle class is larger than it ever was.

The majority view expressed in the survey about the country's economic prospects makes it clear that, aside from the nagging problems associated with corruption, Afghans are somewhat hopeful about their economic future. They believe that given the right level of stability the country has potential to grow and become self-reliant, as long as foreign commitments made in Bonn (2011),<sup>5</sup> Chicago (2012),<sup>6</sup> and Tokyo (2012)<sup>7</sup> are met over the coming decade.

For most surveyed Afghans, future revenue and wealth generation will have to rely on mineral wealth, trade and transit, and enhanced agricultural productivity. These respondents also see a correlation between politics and development, through better leadership and management of the economy as a result of credible elections and less systemic cronyism and patronage.

### ***Regional Relations***

Much of Afghanistan's history has been shaped by its geography, which has put its landmass at the crossroads of empires and often turned the country into a strategic pawn of great power rivalries. This survey also raised several specific questions in regard to neighborly relations in the context of contemporary geopolitics.

Like many Afghans, those interviewed for this study were concerned about regional dynamics and thought that a large part of their three-decade-long problems were rooted outside their borders. They also believed that many of the solutions to the threats posed by the insurgency and spread of radicalism needed a constructive neighborly response and engagement, coupled with international prodding and engagement.

To this end, most respondents consider Afghanistan's regional policy inconsistent and primarily reactive. The Afghan public, however, has continuously empathized with President Hamid Karzai for his longstanding efforts at convincing the United States and other NATO countries that the ideology and structures that sustain radicalism and terrorism are not based in Afghanistan, advocating a need for a wider regional approach.

From the perspective of the survey respondents, regional relations were also vital for trade and transit purposes given Afghanistan's landlocked position, which makes it almost entirely dependent on land routes or access to seaports in Pakistan and, to a lesser extent, Iran. The price of imported commodities, consumer goods, and raw materials in Afghan markets is, to a large extent, defined by the flow of traffic, security of roads, and access to border markets and seaports in neighboring countries.

Afghans have traditionally viewed Pakistan as their most problematic neighbor, followed by Iran. Such perceptions exist, in part, because of the large influx of refugees in those countries since the 1980s; their roles during, as well as after, the post-Soviet occupation; their attempts at using proxy militancy to influence events in war-torn Afghanistan; and Kabul's inability to pursue a strategy that would define a new and mutually agreeable paradigm in relations in recent years, when world attention was at its peak.

Cross-border ethnic or religious ties are not the predominant factor of loyalty or shared interest. Survey findings are that, regardless of ethnic lineage, Afghans had the same aspirations, fears, and hopes as citizens. Throughout the survey, respondents emphasized that although the state may be weak and in reconstruction mode, society is strong and has a sense of shared identity and history. Nonetheless, interviewees were clear about the overwhelming impact neighboring countries have on Afghan security and economic conditions, especially with regard to the insurgency and access to sea lanes and land routes for commercial and business purposes (see table 7).

Survey respondents considered the sanctuaries for Afghan Taliban fighters and the Haqqani network in Pakistan, and Iranian covert support to other insurgent groups, as part of a wider regional strategic calculation aiming to influence the NATO withdrawal and future

***Respondents emphasized that although the state may be weak and in reconstruction mode, society is strong and has a sense of shared identity and history.***

**Table 7. Extent to Which Neighbors Affect Security Conditions**

Category (n=76)*	Frequency	Percentage
To a large extent	62	82
To some extent	8	11
Very little	4	5
Not at all	2	3

\* The number of responses do not add to 77 because one respondent did not answer the question.

**Table 8. Regional Help to End Conflict**

Category (n=74)*	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	9	12
Not sure	30	35
No	35	47

\* The number of responses do not add to 77 because three respondents did not answer the question.

political setup in Kabul—in other words, endgame hedging and meddling by key neighborhood stakeholders.

With the exception of government officials, respondents were critical of Afghan foreign policy toward regional players and considered it ineffective and ambiguous. Some were also critical of the United States and its allies for being either unable or unwilling to contain militant activity on Afghan soil or deal with cross-border attacks. This response was influenced not only by the issue of Taliban safe havens in Pakistan but also by the strong reaction in Afghanistan to recent Pakistan army shelling that claimed lives in the country's northeastern border regions. It was not perceived to have solicited any practical NATO/ISAF reaction.

The survey addressed two controversial issues with historical backdrop—which the government usually avoids as discussion topics—namely, border demarcation and water rights. The question of demarcating the Durand Line, drawn in 1893 during colonial times, was deemed the most pressing bilateral issue with Pakistan. Most Afghans questioned favored a referendum, and a majority of Pashtun interviewees favored a traditional consultative Loya Jirga. This demonstrates a high degree of willingness to consult and determine the fate of the controversial colonial boundaries.

In regard to water sharing challenges, survey respondents were split between a mediating UN role and bilateral negotiations. Although Afghanistan has a comprehensive treaty with Iran on the Helmand River water rights dating to 1973, new questions have arisen on implementation as well as rights to water from four main river basins: Kabul, Amu Darya, Harirud-Murghab, and Helmand. On the northern borders, a previously signed water sharing agreement with the Soviet Union has not been extended or renewed with its successor Central Asian states.

Overall, most respondents did not believe that Afghanistan poses any threat to its neighbors or harbors hostile intentions toward them. They believe that their country has been a victim of meddling and unwelcomed interferences from regional actors, especially Pakistan and Iran, which has bred a strong sense of mistrust toward the governments of both nations (see table 8).

Respondents are almost unanimous not only for better relations but also for joint efforts to quell militancy and radicalism viewed as a long-term threat to regional stability and peace. They also would like to engage relevant neighboring countries as part of confidence-building measures. Most interviewees expected the authorities to show resolve and be mindful of the benefits of regional cooperation to prevent deterioration of bilateral relations.

***They believe that their country has been a victim of meddling and unwelcomed interferences from regional actors, especially Pakistan and Iran.***



**Table 9. Taliban Military Strength and External Factors**

Responses (n=77)	Frequency	Percentage
High degree	60	78
Medium degree	10	13
Not linked	2	3
No opinion	5	6
<b>Ethnic analysis</b>		<b>Of those surveyed in category</b>
High degree (n=60)		
Pashtun	21	78
Tajik	20	77
Hazara	9	100
Uzbek	2	67
Others	8	67

## Taliban, Reconciliation, and Terrorism

Findings indicate that respondents viewed themselves as victims of terrorism and, to some extent, as victims of the fight against al-Qaeda led by western forces since 2001. This is especially true in the Pashtun regions affected by cross-border activities and aerial bombardments in the east and south that have claimed many civilian lives since 2001.

The majority of respondents expressed a desire for peace that would ensure stability, security, and progress and would over time reinforce national sovereignty and protect the gains of the last few years.

It is also generally acknowledged that, with the exception of areas fiercely contested by Taliban insurgents, most of Afghanistan has experienced a degree of relative normalcy and improved economic and social conditions during the last ten years.

Respondents for the most part agree that the situation began to take a turn for the worse around 2005–06 as the insurgency successfully regrouped and rearmed in their cross-border sanctuaries and reappeared on the scene taking advantage of Afghan governance weaknesses and a weak international footprint, due in part to U.S. attention being diverted to Iraq (see table 9).

Nonetheless, most of those interviewed want a solution to the conflict off the battlefield and support a political process leading to an all-inclusive and comprehensive reconciliation with the Taliban. That is, the majority want to end the war by discussing incentives but not at any cost or from a position of weakness.

The majority believed their country does not have the will or desire to be a threat to neighboring states but were divided over whether powerful circles in the neighborhood would respect Afghan sovereignty or territorial integrity and actually encourage a credible and inclusive outcome from a political peace process.

Uncertain of the future and fearful of a return to the chaos of the 1990s, including Taliban-style oppression, more than half of the respondents did not believe that the current decision makers within the Taliban would agree to the constitution as it stands or to participate in the political process, including elections.

This group believed that Taliban leaders committed to a narrower interpretation of sharia and the reestablishment of the Islamic Emirate are leaving almost no room for compromise in future peace talks. The perception was that they would reject democratic rights and gender rights as enshrined in the constitution and would insist on the full withdrawal of NATO and U.S. forces after 2014.

***The majority want to end the war by discussing incentives but not at any cost or from a position of weakness.***

**Table 10. Negotiating Democratic Values for Peace**

Category (n=76)*	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	38	50
No	31	41
No opinion	7	9

\* The number of responses do not add to 77 because one respondent did not answer the question.

***Nearly one third of the respondents opposed scaling back some of the constitutionally enshrined rights of citizens to some extent to “achieve peace.”***

Half of those interviewed (see table 10) agreed to compromise on fundamental democratic values, if necessary, as part of a political bargain, while roughly one third of those surveyed were willing to amend the constitution as part of confidence-building measures.

One finding that many Afghans and international actors will find disturbing was that nearly one third of the respondents opposed scaling back some of the constitutionally enshrined rights of citizens to some extent to “achieve peace.” Some of the factors that influence this willingness to negotiate rights for peace include regional variations, urban versus rural settings, age, and gender.

Overall, more conservative elements within today’s elites do not consider losing some level of gender and civil rights and liberties in exchange for stability and peace a setback. This sentiment runs contrary to most political parties, civil society actors, and the youth and women’s movements. It also contradicts the position adopted by the international community, which has pledged to safeguard the basic rights of Afghan women.

Finally, Afghans surveyed consider the U.S. role in political outreach to be necessary and therefore welcomed, partly because of the pervasive role played by Americans over the last decade.

## **Political Order, Democracy, and Elections**

A question that looms heavy on the minds of the Afghans interviewed was whether the anticipated presidential elections scheduled in mid-2014 can bring a legitimate and peaceful transition of power.

Some expressed fear that armed opposition groups might attempt to buy time and pursue delay tactics while weakening state capabilities and the will to fight in order to emerge as the most powerful force in the country once the international community’s engagement is significantly reduced. Such a scenario might spell the death of democracy in Afghanistan. Others, more cautiously optimistic, pointed to the possibility of all-out warfare that might be detrimental to all sides pushing toward a negotiated settlement that could pave the way for a legitimate transfer of power. Most, however, agreed that without new political leadership being legitimately elected, it is difficult to foresee how an inclusive and credible political settlement process could emerge after 2014.

Historically disenfranchised communities still hold the democratic process—albeit imperfect—as their preferred option for an inclusive political order. Any serious tampering with such vital citizens’ and self-determination rights is expected to provoke tension and instability (see table 11).

Contrary to popular belief, more than half of the survey participants, a majority of whom voted in the last four elections since 2004, did not believe that the current regime was imposed from the outside, but instead that it is more democratic than many other political systems in the region. These respondents considered democratic values as essential to political and social stability and continued to ask for stronger democratic values to be enshrined in the country’s political system in the future.

***More than half of the survey participants . . . did not believe that the current regime was imposed from the outside.***

**Table 11. Is Governance Based on Democratic Values?**

Category (n=77)	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	73	95
No	1	1
No opinion	3	4

**Table 12. Favor a Transparent Electoral Process**

Category (n=76)*	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	70	92
No	4	5
No opinion	2	3

\* The number of responses do not add to 77 because one respondent did not answer the question.

**Table 13. Current Presidential System**

Category (n=76)*	Frequency	Percentage
Overly centralized	34	45
Adequately centralized	23	30
Not centralized enough	14	18
No opinion	5	7

\* The number of responses do not add to 77 because one respondent did not answer the question.

Regardless of ethnicity, age, and gender, almost all participants favored the concept of free and fair elections in 2014. By the same margin, they also wanted to see civil society and other stakeholders be active members of a transparent process for selecting members of the Independent Election Commission and Electoral Complaints Commission (see table 12).

Very few participants believed that elections were free and fair during the 2009 presidential and 2010 parliamentary balloting. Electoral fraud topped the list of complaints, followed by high-level corruption and weakness in the judicial system.

Most survey respondents believed more time is needed for full-fledged political parties and a stronger parliament to emerge.

Questions concerning more decentralization and adoption of a parliamentary system yielded an almost equal divide. Just over half were opposed; the rest viewed the current system as overly centralized (see table 13).

Corruption, weak governance, armed militias, regional meddling, warlordism, emergence of economic and political mafias, injustice, and extremism were all listed as problems the next elected Afghan government will have to face.

Respondents did not have a specific model to offer as an alternative to democracy but would like to see a democratic system emerge over time that offers greater accountability and a more effective system of checks and balances.

## Conclusion

Aware of the tremendous gains made over the past decade, Afghanistan's political elites remain cautiously optimistic but realize that their accomplishments are fragile, that the future looks uncertain as they face a complex transition period, and that foreign investment and engagement are diminishing. This confluence of factors puts a major burden on both current rulers and future leaders to offer the country a coherent strategy, viable

e-ISBN: 978-1-60127-162-4

An online edition of this and related reports can be found on our Web site ([www.usip.org](http://www.usip.org)), together with additional information on the subject.

choices, and practical solutions that could help ease the country through multilayered challenges.

A need remains for continued structured engagement and coordination from the donor community after a decade of heavy investment in blood and treasure in one of the costliest and lengthiest civil-military missions since World War II. The views expressed by an influential cross section of Afghan society should not be taken lightly, as they provide valuable insights not only to help practitioners but also Afghan and international analysts and policymakers.

Higher level recommendations captured in this survey are aimed at evaluating strategic pointers, adjusting policy parameters and implementation modalities for the transitional period and beyond. They include the following:

- Expedient policy formulations that could lead to the collapse of the constitutional order or Talibanization of the country should be avoided.
- All sides should desist from subjugating strategic objectives to policy disagreements over ad hoc issues.
- Strategic planning needs to have a long-term horizon focused on priorities aimed at national security forces' build-up, democratic development, and economic support.
- All efforts need to concentrate on ensuring political legitimacy and inclusivity both in relation to the credibility of elections and in the reconciliation process.
- Successful management of threats emanating from terrorism and radicalism requires local, regional, and global partnerships based on a comprehensive understanding of the causes and effective measures to address them.

## Notes

1. For the full text of the 2001 Bonn Agreement, "Agreement on Provisional Arrangements in Afghanistan Pending the Re-establishment of Permanent Government Institutions," see [www.un.org/News/dh/latest/afghan/afghan-agree.htm](http://www.un.org/News/dh/latest/afghan/afghan-agree.htm).
2. According to CNN's Casualty Report, since 2001, 3,243 U.S. and Coalition forces have been killed in Afghanistan (January 10, 2013). See [www.cnn.com/SPECIALS/war.casualties](http://www.cnn.com/SPECIALS/war.casualties). In addition, according to the Congressional Research Service, more than \$557.1 billion have been spent on Afghanistan through war operations, diplomatic operations, and medical care for war veterans. This number encompasses spending from FY2001 to FY2011 and includes the FY2011 CRA and FY2012 requested budget. See [www.fas.org/sgp/crs/natsec/RL33110.pdf](http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/natsec/RL33110.pdf).
3. For the full text of the communiqué from the 2010 Lisbon NATO Summit, see [www.nato.int/nato\\_static/assets/pdf/pdf\\_2010\\_11/2010\\_11\\_11DE1DB9B73C4F9BBFB52B2C94722EAC\\_PR\\_CP\\_2010\\_0155\\_ENG-Summit\\_LISBON.pdf](http://www.nato.int/nato_static/assets/pdf/pdf_2010_11/2010_11_11DE1DB9B73C4F9BBFB52B2C94722EAC_PR_CP_2010_0155_ENG-Summit_LISBON.pdf).
4. For the full text of the signed agreement, "Enduring Strategic Partnership Agreement between the United States of America and The Islamic Republic of Afghanistan," see [www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/2012.06.01u.s.-afghanistanspasignedtext.pdf](http://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/2012.06.01u.s.-afghanistanspasignedtext.pdf).
5. For the full text of the final communiqué from the 2011 Bonn Conference, see [http://eeas.europa.eu/afghanistan/docs/2011\\_11\\_conclusions\\_bonn\\_en.pdf](http://eeas.europa.eu/afghanistan/docs/2011_11_conclusions_bonn_en.pdf).
6. For the full text of the final communiqué from the 2012 Chicago NATO Summit, see [www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official\\_texts\\_87595.htm?](http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official_texts_87595.htm?)
7. For the full text of the final communiqué from the 2012 Tokyo Conference, see [www.mofa.go.jp/region/middle\\_e/afghanistan/tokyo\\_conference\\_2012/tokyo\\_declaration\\_en1.html](http://www.mofa.go.jp/region/middle_e/afghanistan/tokyo_conference_2012/tokyo_declaration_en1.html).



**United States  
Institute of Peace**

2301 Constitution Ave., NW  
Washington, DC 20037

[www.usip.org](http://www.usip.org)