

Executive Summary

Participants fail to see any connection between Afghanistan and Canadian security. They do not understand how fighting in Afghanistan in any way protects Canadians. While they generally buy into the view that Canada's involvement demonstrates leadership, fulfills our obligation to NATO and an active commitment to the protection of human rights, they do not see Afghanistan as a defence of Canadian national interests. Thus, the engagement is viewed as having very little, if any, direct relevance to most, apart from the obvious altruistic benefit associated with rebuilding a country that had been repressed and regressed under Taliban rule.

In all groups the question of whether Canada's involvement in Afghanistan reduces or enhances the risk of becoming a terrorist target was debated quite vigorously. Participants hold views on both sides of this issue. Some feel that Canada is increasingly a target as a result of its role in Afghanistan. Others believe that Canada would put itself at even greater risk if troops were withdrawn. The bottomline, however, is that few believe this issue to be a key factor in determining whether Canada stays or withdraws. While it is not driving public opinion with respect to support or opposition to the engagement, it is seen as a minor to moderately important risk consideration.

At the same time, few participants endorsed a swift and full withdrawal of Canadian troops at this time or even within the next 12 months.

While those who were most strongly opposed to Canada's involvement in Afghanistan advocated an immediate pull-out, the majority view was that doing so would have disastrous consequences both for Afghanistan and for Canada's reputation within the international community and among its NATO allies. For those who were uncertain or wavering with respect to Canada's involvement, a 12 to 18 month withdrawal timeframe was deemed reasonable. Others advocated maintaining a commitment through to 2009.

B. Key Communications Challenges

The communications challenges facing the Government of Canada on this issue are considerable, multilayered and complex. Opinions on the issue have been developed and have solidified based on a combination of myths, misperceptions and minimal understanding of the situation. Thus the Government's principal challenges are:

Increasing public knowledge and understanding of the plight of the Afghan people, their history and the opportunities through the provision of basic facts about the region;

Busting key myths and misperceptions about the engagement, including current perceptions that: