

Executive Summary

A disconnect between the notions of protecting Canadians and helping the Afghan people – While this is a view held by many participants regardless of their age, it is particularly pronounced among younger focus group participants.

Notably, young people in the focus groups were supportive of humanitarian and reconstruction/rebuilding efforts in Afghanistan. However, they firmly believe that these efforts could be undertaken in the absence of a military presence. The notion that the region must be secured and stabilized in order for rebuilding efforts to be successful is not a premise that many young people accept. By contrast, they argue that the military is likely exacerbating an already tenuous situation and a destabilizing factor.

Those opposed and even those supportive of the mission express scepticism about the likelihood of a positive outcome. Their views have been shaped by media reports on the almost daily skirmishes between Canadian Forces and Afghan insurgents. They have little sense of a broader plan and question the commitment of the Afghan people and leadership, based on the region's troubled history.

Among those opposed (and even those who are supportive), the principle issues/concerns are:

Canadians are fighting an American war. Continued use of terms such as the “War on Terror” in describing Canada’s efforts in Afghanistan has had the effect of co-mingling the situation in Iraq with Afghanistan in the minds of many participants. It is difficult for many to de-link Afghanistan from Iraq. As such, given that the “weapons of mass destruction” argument originally employed as the principal rationale for the U.S. going into Iraq has subsequently been revealed as baseless, many believe that the rationale for going into Afghanistan is likely faulty or weak at best. Moreover, the deteriorating conditions in Iraq, which is seeing increasing sectarian violence and terrorist activity, are effectively leading many to believe that this must also be the case in Afghanistan.

There is no real reason for Canada to be fighting in Afghanistan. Among the younger participants in particular, many felt that Canada was forced or manipulated into participating in Afghanistan by the Americans following 9/11. There is also some suspicion that Canada is in Afghanistan simply to provide support to the United States and Britain and that these countries are operating purely out of self-interest in an attempt to dominate the region. Related to this is the fact that many are of the view the U.S. may be imminently pulling out of Afghanistan. This view has been reinforced by the result of the mid-term elections in the United States. Talk of bringing troops home, although it has been in reference to the American engagement in Iraq, is leading some to believe that Americans may also withdraw from Afghanistan, leaving Canadian troops increasingly vulnerable. There is little understanding that Canada is part of a larger international contingent.