

Executive Summary

The Strategic Counsel is pleased to present this detailed analysis of findings from a series of focus groups with Canadians regarding their views on the mission in Afghanistan, their level of understanding of the goals of the mission and response to various statements, both supportive and opposed, and facts about the mission.

Canada's engagement in Afghanistan, under the auspices of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), was sanctioned by the United Nations in response to the attack on the World Trade Center in New York City by al-Qaeda terrorists on September 11, 2001. The nature of Canada's involvement in Afghanistan has evolved since 2002 when Canadians were first stationed there, in response to the economic and security needs of the Afghan people. Canadians are most aware of Canada's troop deployment to Afghanistan which garners a high media profile. In addition to working toward stabilizing the situation in Afghanistan and improving security for Afghan citizens, Canadians are also heavily engaged in a rebuilding effort, providing economic and humanitarian assistance as well as support in re-establishing basic civic and governance structures and systems. These diplomatic and development initiatives are generally less well known and understood by the Canadian public but are equally important components of the international reconstruction and rebuilding effort.

Over the past 12 months public support for the mission in Afghanistan has fluctuated, reflecting Canadians' growing concerns over the continuing risky nature of the engagement as well as lingering questions, and certainly some misperceptions, about the rationale for Canada's initial involvement. Support for the mission is also linked to the extent to which Canadians believe a positive and sustainable outcome in Afghanistan is likely.

Opinion polls conducted by *The Strategic Counsel* and released publicly have shown support for the decision to send troops to Afghanistan ranging from a high of 55 per cent in March 2006 to a low of 37 per cent in August. Support rebounded to 44 per cent in October 2006, then dropped back to 35 per cent in early December. While there is some debate regarding the extent to which mounting casualties have affected Canadians' views on merits of the Afghan mission, the decline in support appears to track a wavering belief that the deaths of some Canadian soldiers is an acceptable and the expected cost associated with bringing stability and peace to Afghanistan. Over the same time period, March to October 2006, the percentage of Canadians who believe that this price is too high has jumped from 39 per cent to 55 per cent.