

A *Times* poll published on 22 July showed that two-thirds of those polled believed that British troops should be withdrawn either now (34%) or (33%) 'within the next year or so' (ie within 12 months). <tinyurl.com/jnv269>

So that's **56% wanting withdrawal within months, and 67% wanting withdrawal within a year.**

A staged withdrawal also fits in with US public opinion. In a *New York Times*/CBS News poll, 55% of voters said US troops should be withdrawn within two years (31% said within one year). (24 Sept., <tinyurl.com/jnv281>)

REPLACEMENT FORCES

The BBC/ABC/ARD poll showed that 63% of Afghans **supported the presence of US troops** in Afghanistan (but 77% wanted an **end to airstrikes**). Only 8% supported the presence of Taliban fighters in Afghanistan. <tinyurl.com/jnv272>

It seems that Afghans want **an international presence** in the country to prevent rule by the Taliban, who they fear and detest. That international presence ought to be supplied by independent forces uninvolved in the US-led invasion and occupation, and controlled by the UN General Assembly (rather than the US-dominated Security Council).

CONCLUSION

It is impossible to take the Taliban's position at face value – particularly on social controls – but there seems to be no alternative to a genuine negotiated solution to the Afghan conflict, in line with Afghan public opinion, Afghan parliamentary opinion, and British public opinion.

Britain and the US should halt their 'surge' into Afghanistan, ceasefire, withdraw to their bases, draw down troops and allow a national reconciliation process to take place. **The future of the Afghan people must be determined according to the wishes of the Afghan people.**

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WHAT DO AFGHANS WANT?

Staged US/UK Withdrawal; A Negotiated Solution

JNV Anti-War Briefing 120 (7 October 2009)

THE GUIDING PRINCIPLE

In his major speech on Afghanistan on 4 Sept., British Prime Minister Gordon Brown emphasized Britain's self interest in the Afghan war: 'We are in Afghanistan as a result of a hard-headed assessment of the terrorist threat facing Britain.' <tinyurl.com/jnv271> The Prime Minister does not often speak of **the wishes of the Afghan people**. But these wishes, so far as they can be known, ought to be **at the centre of British policy**.

What we know is that the majority of people in Afghanistan (77%) want **an end to the airstrikes** that have killed hundreds, perhaps thousands, of Afghan civilians. We also know that the majority of Afghans (64%) want a **negotiated end to the conflict**, and are willing to accept **the creation of a coalition government including the Taliban leadership**.

We also know that a majority of Afghans **oppose the idea of escalating the war** and increasing the number of foreign troops in the country. 73% of Afghans think that US-led forces in the country should either be decreased in number (44%) or 'kept at the current level' (29%). Only 18% of Afghans favour an increase.

FEAR OF THE TALIBAN

These are the results of a nationwide poll commissioned by the BBC, ABC News (USA) and ARD (Germany), in which 1,534 Afghans were interviewed in all of the country's 34 provinces between 30 December 2008 and 12 January 2009. <tinyurl.com/jnv272>

The poll found **enormous hostility to the Taliban**. 82% of people said they would prefer the present government; only 4% favoured a Taliban government. 90% of people said they opposed Taliban fighters. The Taliban were seen as **the biggest danger to the country** by 58% of people; the United States



was in fourth place with 8% (just ahead of 'local commanders' – a euphemism for US-backed warlords, we suspect).

'Who do you blame the most for the violence that is occurring in the country?' The Taliban came top with 27%; al-Qa'eda/foreign jihadis were next with 22%. In third place were 'US/American forces/Bush/US government/America/NATO/ISAF forces' with 21%.

69% of people thought it was a good thing that the US-led forces had come to Afghanistan to bring down the Taliban. (Down from 88% in 2006.)

64% of Afghans thought (in January 2009) that 'The Taliban are the same as before', and had not grown more moderate.

NEGOTIATE NOW

Despite all this, a solid **64% of Afghans** thought 'the government in Kabul should **negotiate a settlement with Afghan Taliban** in which they are allowed to hold political offices if they agree to stop fighting'. However, Afghans favoured preconditions to such talks: 71% said the government should 'negotiate only if the Taliban stop fighting'.

64% of British people also think 'America and Britain be willing to talk to the Taliban in Afghanistan in order to achieve a peace deal'. (*Sunday Times*, 15 Mar. <tinyurl.com/jnv285>)

Talks are only meaningful if the other side is willing to play their part. It seems, in the case of Afghanistan, that there is serious interest in a national reconciliation process on the part of the Taliban and the Karzai administration – but that these negotiations are being blocked by the United States and Britain, who are determined to achieve a military victory.

THE TALIBAN POSITION

The Taliban's current demands were set out in a *New York Times* article on 20 May: 'The first demand was an **immediate pullback of American and other foreign forces to their bases**, followed by a **cease-fire** and a **total withdrawal from the country over the next 18 months**. Then the current government would be replaced by a **transitional government** made up of a range of Afghan leaders, including those of the Taliban and other insurgents. Americans and other foreign soldiers would be **replaced with a peacekeeping force** drawn from predominantly Muslim nations, with a guarantee from the insurgent groups that they would not attack such a force.

Nationwide elections would follow after the Western forces left.' <tinyurl.com/jnv280>

A negotiator said the Taliban leaders also added two more conditions: an end to the drone attacks in Pakistan's tribal areas, and the release of some Taliban prisoners.

TALIBAN SOFTENING?

On 2 Apr., the *Independent* reported that preliminary talks between Afghan President Hamid Karzai and the Taliban seemed to have 'yielded a significant shift away from the Taliban's past obsession with repressive rules and punishments governing personal behaviour.'

It was said that the Taliban were now prepared to commit themselves to 'refraining from banning girls' education, beating up taxi drivers for listening to Bollywood music, or measuring the length of mens' beards.'

Burqas would be 'strongly recommended' for women in public, but not be compulsory. <tinyurl.com/jnv283>

The Taliban's wider political demands appear to have also softened considerably since 2007, when they demanded 'control of 10 southern provinces, a timetable for withdrawal of foreign troops, and the release of all Taliban prisoners within six months'. (*Guardian*, 15 Oct. 2007 <tinyurl.com/jnv284>)

WITHDRAWAL

The Taliban 18-month withdrawal schedule fits in with Afghan opinion. In the BBC poll, 21% of Afghans said US-led forces should leave immediately; 16% said between 6 months and a year from now; and 14% within two years. So **51% of Afghans want withdrawal within two years**.

In May 2007, the upper house of the Afghan parliament voted for a military ceasefire and negotiations with the Taliban, and for a date to be set for the withdrawal of foreign troops. (AP, 10 May 2007 <tinyurl.com/jnv273>)

A staged withdrawal also fits in with British opinion. In a *Guardian*/BBC Newsnight poll, published on 13 July, 42% of voters wanted British troops withdrawn immediately; and a further 14% wanted withdrawal "by the end of the year" (ie within five months). (36% of people said they should "stay until they are no longer needed".) <tinyurl.com/jnv268>