

Think tank: 92% of Afghans never heard of 9/11

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Fewer than one in 10 Afghans are aware of the 9/11 attacks and their precipitation of the war in Afghanistan, says a study from an international think tank.

A report (PDF) from the International Council on Security and Development (ICOS) shows that 92 percent of those surveyed had never heard of the coordinated multiple attacks on US soil on September 11, 2001. It also shows that four in 10 Afghans believe the US is on their soil in order to “destroy Islam or occupy Afghanistan.”

To be sure, the survey can’t claim to be definitive: It only canvassed men, and relied primarily on respondents from Helmand and Kandahar, the two most war-torn provinces in the country. But the results nonetheless show that Western forces fighting insurgents in Afghanistan have largely failed to connect with the local population.

“We need to explain to the Afghan people why we are here, and both show and convince them that their future is better with us than with the Taliban,” ICOS lead field researcher Norine MacDonald said in a statement.

The survey also suggests that Afghans are skeptical of their own government’s ability to protect them, and have little regard for the fledgling democratic institutions the country is building. Fully 43 percent could not name one positive aspect of democracy, and nearly two-thirds — 61 percent — said they didn’t think Afghan forces would be able to keep up the fight against the Taliban if and when Western forces withdrew.

The ICOS study recommends a publicity campaign to explain to Afghans why foreign forces are fighting on their soil. The think tank also proposes a number of other initiatives meant to improve the image of foreign forces in the country, including having NATO forces deliver humanitarian aid where aid groups fear to travel, providing farmland to the poor, setting up women’s councils, and “safe village convoys” which would see foreign troops escort villagers in dangerous rural areas.

ICOS has a permanent presence in Afghanistan and has been studying the nearly decade-long war’s impact on Afghan society. The think tank has previously proposed that Afghanistan license the growing of opium. The group argues that eliminating the opiate trade from Afghanistan is virtually impossible due to its entrenched place in the culture. At the same time, Afghan farmers could earn money by selling opiates to painkiller manufacturers.

Opponents of the idea say that Afghanistan is not stable enough to develop a proper opium-manufacturing industry, and a licensing scheme would only encourage the sale of opium to heroin manufacturers.

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