

On the Canadian mission

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First, the Conservatives sprang a snap debate and vote in the Commons on the question of extending the mission by two years until February, 2009. The ploy almost backfired when the Bloc Québécois, the NDP and most Liberals voted against the motion. In the end, today's Globe reports that **Harper's motion to extend mission squeaked through with Liberal help**.

Tragically, only hours before the debate began, Canada lost its 17th soldier to the mission. Captain Nichola Goddard, 26, became **the first Canadian woman yet to die in combat**.

What are your thoughts on the mission and the debate on extending it? What is your opinion on the loss of life in Afghanistan so far?

Earlier, Omar Samad, Afghanistan's ambassador to Canada, and **Peggy Mason**, currently the mission critic of the Pearson Peacekeeping Centre and a former Canadian ambassador on disarmament, were on-line taking your questions and comments on both sides of the issue.

Scroll down to read the questions and answers.

Ms. Mason recently wrote in an exclusive essay for globeandmail.com that "the post-conflict security situation in Afghanistan has been badly mishandled with combat operations aimed at rooting out terrorists undermining - rather than building - the security of ordinary Afghans and foreign forces alike." Read the **rest of her argument** here.

This is Ambassador Samad's second visit to globeandmail.com. Back in March, he took questions from globeandmail.com readers on the situation in his country, which has been devastated for the past 25 years by a Russian invasion and occupation, guerrilla warfare, warlords, the Taliban government, the U.S.-led war after the 9/11 attacks, and the continued insurgency. **Read the transcript here**. Born in Kabul in 1961, Ambassador Samad attended primary and secondary schools in Paris, London, and at the Lycee Esteqlal in Kabul.

He left Afghanistan in 1979 following the Communist coup d'etat and settled in the United States.

Mr. Samad studied Computer Science from 1980-82. Thereafter, he earned a B.A. degree in Communications and International Relations at the American University in Washington, D.C. in 1991. He pursued a Master's Degree in International Transactions at George Mason University. At present, he is completing a Global Master's of Arts fellowship program in International Relations at Tufts University's Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy.

Mr. Samad worked in the field of Information Technology from 1981 to 2001, while pursuing a second career in media, initially with ABC News and later as a freelance television producer. In 1996, he launched Azadi Afghan Radio and ran the Afghanistan Information Center based in Virginia. As an international media commentator and analyst on Afghanistan, he covered the Bonn Conference on Afghanistan for CNN prior to his return to his homeland in late 2001.

Ambassador Samad represented Afghanistan at the 11th United Nations Conference on Climate Change in Montreal in 2005. He has been an official member of Afghan delegations to numerous international conferences, including the Afghanistan Reconstruction conferences in Tokyo (2002) and Berlin (2004), UN General Assembly sessions (2002, 2003), Non-aligned Movement and Organization of Islamic Countries summit meetings, and other specialized conferences on Afghanistan between 2002 and 2004. He represented the Afghan Foreign Ministry on the Tripartite Commission on security between the United States, Pakistan and Afghanistan.

Mr. Samad and is fluent in French and English in addition to Afghanistan's official languages. He is married to Khorshied Samad.

Ms. Mason graduated from the law program at the University of Ottawa after obtaining her Honours B.A. She spent four years as a lawyer before moving into more of a public policy role. She has worked for the Canadian Advisory Council on the Status of Women, the Foreign Affairs department - all roles that led to her appointment as Canadian Ambassador for Disarmament in 1989, a position she held for five years.

As Ambassador for Disarmament, Ms. Mason represented Canada at the UN Secretary-General's advisory board on disarmament matters for four years, along with many other roles related to disarmament, until 1997. She left Foreign Affairs in 1994, and is now one of the longest standing external faculty members of the Pearson Peacekeeping Centre in Cornwallis, N.S. Ms. Mason is now focused on complex peace operations and lectures around the world, where she is recognized as an expert in programs for disarmament.

She was named senior fellow at The Norman Paterson School of International Relations at Carleton University in 2002.

She is currently a faculty member at The Pearson Peacekeeping Centre.

Editor's Note: globeandmail.com editors will read and allow or reject each question/comment. Comments/questions may be edited for length or clarity. HTML is not allowed. We will not publish questions/comments that include personal attacks on participants in these discussions, that make false or unsubstantiated allegations, that purport to quote people or reports where the purported quote or fact cannot be easily

verified, or questions/comments that include vulgar language or libellous statements. Preference will be given to readers who submit questions/comments using their full name and home town, rather than a pseudonym.

Allison Dunfield, globeandmail.com, writes:Hi to you both and thank you for taking part in today's discussion with globeandmail.com.

For the opening question, I'm wondering if you could both clearly state your position on the Afghan mission? Can you provide your thoughts on Wednesday evening's successful motion in the House of Commons to extend the mission until February of 2009?

Peggy Mason writes:Dear Allison, Here are my opening comments.

I am deeply disappointed that the Harper government chose to rush into a vote on a new two-year military mission in Afghanistan without first having held committee hearings (either a Joint foreign affairs and defence committee or at least the defence committee alone). That would have allowed time for both government and outside experts to carefully examine the results of the current mission - to see where it has succeeded and where it has not - as the first step to developing the best possible strategy and mission for any new commitment that Canada might consider taking on. Instead, Parliament was asked to vote in support of an absolutely unknown mission. It is unknown because we were told it is to be under the auspices of the UN-mandated NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) but, since that mission has yet to deploy to Southern Afghanistan, we just have no idea how it will operate. The precise nature of the new ISAF mission is currently the subject of a raging and unresolved debate in NATO.

All the current evidence - from governmental and non-governmental sources alike - tells us that the anti-terrorist mission, Operation Enduring Freedom, is failing to bring greater security in Southern Afghanistan. The Americans have been carrying out these operations with more than ten times the number of soldiers that Canada has for four and one half years and the result is a dismal failure. The insurgency, by the Pentagon's own reckoning, is at its worst level since the onset of Operation Enduring Freedom. This is because most of the insurgents are not foreign fighters but Afghans from the dominant Pashtun ethnic group in the south who have been left out of the Bonn peace agreement, initially at American insistence because of the mistaken belief that they were all allied with al-Qaeda. In addition the insurgents and their opium warlord allies are being aided and abetted in various ways by Taliban extremists in Pakistan while other factions receive support from other neighbours including Iran and India.

There is no military solution to this problem which cries out for a comprehensive peace process bringing in all but the true hardliners and involving all the neighbouring countries, so they become part of the solution instead of the problem. President Karzai is ready to do this but needs a lot of help which, inexplicably, he is not getting from Canada or other NATO members.

My aim is NOT to abandon Afghanistan but to try and redirect the focus to the conditions necessary for success, based on all the hard learned lessons of post-conflict peace building over the past ten years. This is first and foremost a matter of diplomacy but this part of the so-called "three D" approach of the Harper government is utterly missing in action.

In summation, the Harper government has played politics on this issue from day one, trying to stifle debate and requests for basic information on the basis that to question whether the

mission given to the military by their political leaders is appropriate and effective is to somehow show a lack of support for the troops. This is a bit like suggesting that trying to improve the education curriculum is showing a lack of support for students.

To put this more bluntly, in circumstances where the strategy is manifestly NOT working, to seek to evaluate why it is failing as the first step to developing a more effective strategy would appear to offer far greater support for Canadian Forces than giving blind support to mission impossible.

Thus, in the absence of ANY evidence that this government is seriously interested in examining the mission and the mandate to get it right, I could not, and cannot, in good conscience support Canadian Forces staying in Afghanistan beyond the current commitment to February 2007.

Omar Samad writes: Opening comment: Thank you for providing this opportunity again for an Afghan voice to be heard. I attended the first 2 hours of the debate yesterday and I have to say that Prime Minister Harper's speech was very strong, clear from a policy point-of-view and a reflection of Canada's important role on the international scene in general, and in Afghanistan in particular. The Canadian government shows strong understanding of this issue. Afghans and our government welcome the decision. It is important to stay the course in this important peace-building and nation-building mission. The Afghans asked for it and it would be dangerous to leave the mission and the job half-done. We also appreciate the additional aid commitment, which will be very important to help us with economic development and other priorities. I also want to thank those leaders in the Liberal Party who have shown vision and leadership by voting for the extension. We appreciate the overall support of all parties in Canada for the current mission and the continued engagement in Afghanistan.

Dan Weaver from Canada writes:How long do you feel it will take to stabilize Afganistan under the current situation? I am concerned that the amount of infrastructure (physical, constitutional, political and security) required to meet this goal is out of reach without a wider international contribution.

Mr. Samad writes:Thank you Dan. Very difficult to put a timeframe to this mission because there are several unknown and fluid variables. I wish we could. One factor is the pace of rebuilding a professional and well equipped Afghan army, police and other security institutions. It may take another 3-4 years at least. Another, is how we do in our fight against the terrorists and extremists on the ground. The better we do in those areas, the sooner the chances of ending the missions. Another is to continue to help rebuild the country's economy and put its people to work, so they don't have to rely on poppy for example. This is what the Afghans want to day. You are right that we need to focus on the economic priorities such as infrastructure and we have spelled that out in a document signed in London earlier this year (the Afghanistan Compact) which points to the pririties.

Ms. Mason writes:Dan, the thrust of my opening comment is that we will not be able to stabilize Afghanistan if we do not take a new approach. But even assuming we do manage to rally the international community around a comprehensive peace process, that will only be the beginning of the peace consolidation process. Clearly, a much larger NATO-led peace stabilization force would then be required and a comprehensive plan developed for transitioning Afghanistan from an opium economy to other viable, sustainable activities.Parliamentary hearings would allow Canada to examine this in greater detail in order to identify with more precision what we can provide, over what time frame and what

else is needed and to whom we might go to get this help. The Bonn Agreement and the subsequent London Compact set out the general framework for assistance but it does appear that individual countries are not really pulling together but are all still going their own separate ways. This is true of the military mission and the humanitarian and reconstruction components. It is also particularly true of the reconciliation aspect, of which I spoke in my opening comments.

Joan Gagne from Qualicum Beach, Canada writes: I have a son serving in Khandahar, and a son in Kabul. They both think that this is an honourable mission. Of course, I would prefer them to be at home in Canada, but they are in the armed forces, and this is their job. Canada must see this mission through to the end. It is nice to be peacekeepers, but sometimes we have to actively help other countries. We can't forever be 'nice guys.'

Mr. Samad writes: Thanks Joan and please convey my gratitude to both your sons. They know best since they are on the ground and can appreciate the realities around them. I wish them a safe journey and I agree that we must stay the course until the situation in the southern tier of Afghanistan is more secure and reconstruction can take place as it is in 80 per cent of the rest of the country.

Ms. Mason writes: Dear Joan, In my respectful submission, the issue is one of effectiveness. Is the current military mission - which is determined by the politicians not the soldiers - an effective one in Southern Afghanistan? Almost of the impressive gains that were laid out in the Parliamentary debate last night - about schools and reconstruction - took place under the auspices of the NATO-led peacekeeping operation. But the conditions are not ready in the South for the NATO-led mission to do the same in the South. The issue is how do we stabilize the situation there so that the development and reconstruction work can get going. So this is the issue - how do we make progress in the South? As I said in my opening comment, if the current strategy in the south is not working - not because the soldiers are not doing their best, but because they have been handed an impossible mission - then it is up to the politicians to adjust the mission to give it the best possible chance of succeeding. This is why I will continue to call for parliamentary hearings.

Chieko Makino from village Japan writes: In what way is the degree of participation to Afghan mission decided? Who does the actual adjustment?

Mr. Samad writes: Hello Chieko. I am not sure if I understand fully the question. The mission is mandated by the United Nations. The countries are invited by the democratically elected government of Afghanistan. NATO is taking over parts of the mission soon and ISAF is a grouping of countries that are involved in providing security or running Provincial reconstruction Teams. There are 36 nations with troops and aid programs in Afghanistan today. Canada is not alone.

Ms. Mason writes: Dear Chieko Makino - I am not sure if I fully understand your question. If you are talking about participation in ISAF, the NATO-led mission which Canada is supposed to join once it deploys to Kandahar some time in the summer, then the process is first the UN Security Council authorizes the mission, then the NATO military bureaucracy sets about seeing which of the 26 NATO member countries (and the 26 Partnership for Peace countries) agree to participate and in what way. Then the North Atlantic Council of NATO Foreign Ministers decides on the exact details of the NATO mission, consistent with the general guidelines set out in the UN Security Council resolution, especially regarding the use of force (when and how.) Finally, the individual countries who have been asked to

participate by NATO and who have agreed to do so may put additional "national" restrictions on the way their forces carry out the mission.

Ron MacGillivray from Flatbush, Alberta writes: My own reading of our Afghan mission is that we are there to prop up a government that has little trust or support among the Afghan people and the Taliban have a lot more popular support than we are being led to believe. The Afghan government is widely viewed as being controlled by foreigners and that many of those associated with it are criminal gangs heavily involved in the heroin trade. In fact, there are allegations that a lot of the foreign aid which has poured into Afghanistan has been diverted to finance the now booming opium trade. Given this context, it is not hard to see why a significant number of the Afghan people support the Taliban because they offer the best hope for restoring law and order. Would you care to comment?

Ms. Mason writes: Dear Ron, You will have seen from my opening comments that I believe basis of the problem is a flawed peace process which, at the behest of the U.S., in effect rewarded certain factions in what was a civil war and left out other factions. Thus, President Karzai has limited support in the country at large. And yes, I do agree with you that the Taliban has local support and so long as it does, the insurgency will continue. Options and alternatives have to be given to those left out of the original peace process. Even Secretary Rumsfeld, last summer, stated in a press conference that it was probably time to start negotiating with at least some of the Taliban. Supporting this approach is a recent State Department assessment that al-Qaeda is not really a serious factor in Afghanistan now. As for the opium trade, this problem is so complex that I believe it requires a radically new approach by the international community.

Mr. Samad writes: I am not sure what you may be reading Ron. I have to say that you can find very few people in Afghanistan who think so. The Taliban have almost no support among the locals, with the exception of a few pockets of sympathy for financial, drugs or ideological reasons. Most of their support networks exist outside Afghanistan, with such groups as al-Qaeda. Afghan men, women and children are now free, whereas under the Taliban their most basic rights were denied. Could you or would you be able to live under the Taliban rule, where women are denied education, freedom of movement, music, photography and movies are prohibited, certain sports like soccer and kite-flying are punishable... and so on... No democracy, freedom, rights or true Islamic rule. That is what they brought to society aside from terror and a concentration camp environment. So the answer is simply, NO the Afghans do not support them.

The Afghan government is democratically elected. Over eight million Afghan men and women went to the polls. We have an elected parliament now. We have a free press. Yes, we have problems with corruption, drugs, poverty, human rights and rule of law like most other countries may have. But we are working to solve them one by one. It will take time, effort, failure, waste and so on. But things are improving dramatically. Every poll shows that more than 80 per cent of Afghans are happy about the changes and hopeful about their future.

Alice Emma Hawthorne from Ottawa Canada writes: I have questions. In the West, members of the public do not have access to articles that report on the non-western side of any conflict, which is very frustrating for us. We never get to read any interview with any opposing group, although I cannot see why not. Only recently I was startled to come across an article describing how suicide bombers go through a ritual in which they claim that their voices can never be heard and that their act is in response to that (and no doubt many other influences). It seems to me that such a comment reveals a tremendous opportunity if

not an outright invitation to listen to those voices and begin negotiations in return for an end of such bombings. I would like to know what you think? Are we missing opportunities to negotiate peace? Is Canada using too much of an American-style military intervention as a crude hammer in a very complex social-political-economic situation? Can we copy those who disarmed and demobilized terrorism in their midst - in Ireland, in Beirut, etc.? What's the demographic breakdown on the Taliban? What fuels them? It seems to me that Afghanistan is desperate for funds. Would targeted funding/business development be more effective than military operations?

Ms. Mason writes: Dear Alice, These are exactly the kinds of questions that must be asked. You may have seen the new book out by a Canadian journalist, Kathy Gannon, "I is for Infidel" which discusses many of these points. The international community has learned so much over the last twenty years in how to build the peace in a post-conflict situation, through successful UN peace operations in Namibia, Cambodia, Mozambique, Eastern Slavonia, Sierra Leone, Liberia and Burundi, to name a few. Lots of lessons have also been learned from NATO-led peace operations in Bosnia and Kosovo and all these should be applied, not ignored, in Afghanistan. The key lesson that is identified over and over is the need to bring as many into the peace process as possible in order to isolate the true irreconcilables from the rest. Only then can the underlying issues be addressed and mechanisms found to resolve differences peacefully in future. If you are not part of the solution, then you are likely part of the problem. Right now the Canadian military mission in Afghanistan is using up about 90% of the Canadian funds being spent in Afghanistan. This might be okay if the military mission were succeeding in the South in stabilizing the situation so as to pave the way for development. But the military mission is failing so we need to get back to basics and start focusing on how to get as many of the opposing groups sitting at the table as we possibly can. President Karzai has appointed a former President to do just this but, so far, the international community has not really paid much attention. This must change! I hasten to add that the military mission is failing, not because Canadian Forces are not doing their best, but because they have been given the wrong mission. The local Taliban will fight to the death for their country if they are not given another choice.

Mr. Samad writes: The five-year-old mission in Afghanistan is NOT an American mission. Yes, the world decided after 9-11 to remember the forgotten and terrorist-controlled Afghanistan again, but as I mentioned earlier, there is no dissent in the international community on the mission in Afghanistan. All countries, from the UN Security Council to NATO, EU, Islamic nations and others, agree that Taliban/Al Qaida should have been driven out of Afghanistan and the country put on a path of political, economic and social revival after 3 decades of war, invasion and destruction. Not helping failed states is dangerous as Afghanistan proved it in the 1990s. More than 60 donor nations are engaged in Afghanistan. More than 35 nations are contributing troops for the country's security. Afghans are working hard to rebuild their own army and police, judiciary and legislature. The situation in Afghanistan is not complex at a certain level. It is simple and straightforward, that is why it has such strong international backing. What is important is that we do it right, allocate the resources wisely, empower and train the Afghans and help them help themselves, and have the perseverance to fulfill the mission and not leave it half done. I agree with you that funds for development and investment are crucial. This is what we are doing. There is a lot of foreign investment, specially from regional countries that is coming into Afghanistan. More than four million Afghans have returned to their homeland in the past four years. They are voting with their feet and that is a strong indicator of confidence in their future.

Oliver Palluault from France writes: What is your opinion on the idea to allow Afghanistan to cultivate poppies for the production of essential medicine such as morphine

and codeine? Wouldnt this boost economic development and at the same time have positive effects on stability and security in the area?

Mr Samad writes: Merci Olivier. Yes, there is such an idea on the table and the Afghans are studying it. Meanwhile we need to implement a comprehensive plan to combat narcotics at all levels, and help the farmers move to other crops. It is not easy and it will take time, patience and resources. It is also a consumer problem that needs to be addressed by consumer societies.

Ms. Mason writes: Dear Oliver, I am not an expert on the unbelievably complex question of how to address the opium trade. Alas, apparently others are having the same problem since we are told, after four years of an alleged British-led opium eradication strategy, the latest reports indicate that almost NO progress whatsoever has been made. I know that the World Health Organization licenses a small number of countries to cultivate poppies for essential medicines but do not know if there is a possibility of Afghanistan being licensed too, without displacing other countries who may disagree. I also wonder how much of the production it would account for. Having said all that, it seems to me what is needed is to bring together as many experts as possible including trade experts to really look at this issue and to think in new ways about what we can do. Of course, you will likely be aware that this issue is part of a broader international debate which is very divided with many countries arguing that the only way to effectively address the drug trade is to license and regulate it closely as a legal not illegal activity. But other countries very, very strongly disagree.

S. T. from Canada writes: No disrespect to either respondent, but what jumps out to me when I read their accomplishments is this... Someone who is representing their country who appears to have spent very little time in it. Someone who is representing an issue (disarmament) who appears to never have held an armament. Best of luck with your 'square off'.

Mr. Samad writes: In my case, I spent three years in Afghanistan between Dec. 2001 and Sept. 2004 before coming to Canada and experienced the job of rebuilding from zero. I was born there and spent many years intermittently until I had to flee to escape the communist takeover. If you read my bio, I spent 20 years in exile working on Afghanistan and dedicating my time to help my country. I have talked, written and represented my country for the last 25 years at least.

Dear S.T. To be blunt, you have absolutely no idea how much time the Ambassador spends inside or outside his country and, equally, you have no idea what knowledge or experience I have of armaments. I think a safer course would be to focus on the arguments that we make on their merits. Quite aside from the fact that I actually happen to have quite a bit of direct experience with things military (going all the way back to childhood and growing up in a military family), if your assumption is that you have to know about armaments in order to be able to promote reconciliation, then would you also argue that you have to be a criminal in order to be able to adequately prevent crime?

Jim Parker from Victoria, Canada writes: I sincerely hope that this most recent, sad death of one of our soldiers, while make Canadians more resolute about the job we are doing in Afghanistan, rather than more weeping and wailing and cries to 'pull our soldiers out!' With respect to our politicians and this issue, they have no backbone anyway and are merely concerned about 'vote-getting'. Again sadly, this is what will drive the issue.

Mr. Samad writes: Thank you Jim. As an Afghan, I and other Afghans mourn your losses as we mourn our own. We extend our sympathies for the untimely death of Capt. Goddard. Afghans lost more than a million people as a result of invasions, terrorist takeovers and civil strife. We understand what it means to lose someone, or one's country. I hope Canadians will continue to support their troops and the effort to rebuild a nation. It is indeed a worthy cause.

Ms. Mason writes: Dear Mr. Parker: With the greatest respect, I believe that many politicians are motivated by a desire to do the right thing so far as the Canadian Forces are concerned. To be blunt, it is just not enough to be "resolute" Being "resolutely wrong" means you are still wrong. The Canadian Forces, in my view, have been given the wrong mandate. I am not alone in this view. What the right mandate should be is the subject of great debate among NATO countries at this very moment. It is even the subject of great debate WITHIN particular NATO countries such as, for example, the UK where the Prime Minister has one view and the Ministry of Defence has another. How best to effectively support the goal we all share of a strong and stable and prosperous Afghanistan is a very, difficult and complex issue. If it were just a matter of resolve, then four and one-half years of American resolve would have done the trick.

Miles Tompkins from Antigonish, Canada writes: Two Questions 1) Where is Malalai Joya at the present time? 2) Do you agree that we are fighting a losing battle unless we demand a reduction of the domination of fundamentalist elements within Afghanistan?

Mr. Samad writes: I am for democracy, rule of law, good governance, human rights and moderation in short.

Ms. Mason writes: Regarding Malalai Joya, I do not have any information other than what is recently reported about Malalai Joya's ongoing heroic efforts to improve women's rights and get rid of criminal warlords in positions of authority in the government and elsewhere in Afghanistan. So far as I am aware, she is presently in Kabul but perhaps the Ambassador has more direct information.

2) Do you agree that we are fighting a losing battle unless we demand a reduction of the domination of fundamentalist elements within Afghanistan?

I really do not think we can "demand" anything. If we believe in democracy, we have to find practical ways to assist the Afghan people in building their own democracy. Part of the problem with the original constitutional drafting process, it seems to me, was that it was controlled by outsiders, particularly Afghan ex-patriots close to the USA State Department, and it was rushed, so the result was not really a genuine reflection of the full aspirations of the Afghan people. I do know that, for some time now, Canadian expertise has been offered in developing a federal/provincial framework, through the Canadian Forum of Federations. The aim has not been to dictate approaches but to just give some ideas on what has and has not worked in the complicated Canadian constitutional context.

Robin Collins from Ottawa, Canada writes: Some people have suggested that arguing for deployment in Darfur, but against the way the Afghanistan deployment is placed under OEF auspices is contradictory. How would you respond to that? Are the two positions compatible? Robin Collins

Ms. Mason writes: Robin, an interesting question but surely no one is suggesting that the solution to the horrific problem in Darfur is to mandate a counter-insurgency mission there!

That would mean going to war with the Sudanese government and the likely result would be even greater suffering and loss of life for the civilian population. In Darfur, progress is at last being made in the peace process and this needs to be buttressed by a well-equipped force that has some real capacity to position itself between those preying on innocent civilians and their intended victims. This is virtually uncharted territory for military forces and requires doctrine and training, something Canadian non-governmental organizations have been calling on the Canadian department of National Defence to do. So I guess my answer is, the OEF mission is the wrong mission for BOTH Afghanistan and Darfur. I have tried to explain what I think the right mission is for Southern Afghanistan in my opening comment.

Allison Dunfield, globeandmail.com, writes: And now, a few questions to Mr. Samad from our readers:

John Rowell from Nelson, BC Canada writes: Hello, Sir: What would happen in Afghanistan if all foreign troops were to withdraw immediately from your country? Are the Taliban strong enough to retake power?

Mr. Samad writes: Thanks, John. The Taliban are not strong enough inside Afghanistan at this point, but they have a vast network of support outside Afghanistan, including al-Qaeda, that could destabilize the country again. The people will resist but if you are faced with a force of well armed and well funded insurgents who know the art of guerrilla warfare, you will be distracted from the job of rebuilding the country. I don't think anybody would allow that to happen. We will, however, reach a point in time when we will be able to take care of our own security affairs without foreign help.

Ron White from Calgary, Canada writes: Your Excellency: Many Canadians believe Canada is helping the good people of your country with our Military presence. Are we? Do you and our Government feel we are helping and do you want us to continue? ..Ron White, Calgary, Alberta

Mr. Samad writes: Yes, you are. The help is much appreciated by Afghans. It does make a difference. I tell Canadians that I want both Canada and Afghanistan to be successful with this 3D mission, which involves development and diplomacy also. I also believe that we can all do a better job of prioritizing and managing the job of rebuilding the country, in terms of economic growth, capacity-building, institution-building, job creation and infrastructure.

From Toronto, Canada writes: There are a few questions I would love to see answered by Ambassador Samad (but it won't be answered): 'Just how fair and free were the elections in each region of the country, what was the percentage of eligible voters that voted and did Karzai win the majority of those votes in each and every region of Afghanistan?' A proper, full, sincere answer would go a long way to counter the argument made by some that the Karzai regime is a puppet government of the United States.

Mr. Samad writes: Why should I not answer you (from Toronto) if I have the accurate answer. We had two elections in the past two years. The first-ever general elections for the presidency. Eighteen candidates (including a woman) and almost 80 per cent of eligible voters took part in all provinces. It was a stunning success with little insecurity. There were some irregularities but at the end all agreed that the end result was fair. It was monitored by hundreds of foreign monitors. Pres. Karzai garnered about 55 per cent of the vote.

The second [election] was last year when about 60 per cent of voters elected members of the parliament and provincial councils. It was more complex with more than 5,000 candidates. Today, we have elected legislatures, very vibrant, vocal, colourful and including a large number of women (28 per cent in the lower house). There are ex-communists, ex-Taliban, ex-Mujahedeen, democrats, Westernized and other types among them.

I hope this helps to dispel that notion you mentioned. The U.S. is a major player in Afghanistan. So is the EU, Japan, Canada, China, Russia, Turkey, our neighbors and Muslim states... they all have a stake in peace and stability, prosperity and growth in Afghanistan. That is what makes Afghanistan so compelling and such a worthy cause. We do not want to re-create a failed state. Let's work to create a shining example of post-conflict success.

Allison Dunfield, globeandmail.com, writes: And now, a few questions to Ms. Mason from our readers:

GAP GAP from Winnipeg Canada writes: After reading Ms Mason's comments, I can only conclude that she missed the Flower Power era by a generation. She should put on her sandals and wander the hills of Afghanistan plugging flowers into gun barrels and the problem will be solved. If you look through your recent articles you will find that in most cases, during contact with Taliban forces, it is the Afghan National Army and Police with NATO forces as support, that is making contact. They know their enemy best. Here in the West we fight cancer with the tenacity of a bulldog, Ms. Mason would leave the cancer to grow in Afghanistan while she talked...to whom? As has been pointed out, there is no conflicting government to negotiate with, just a bunch of criminals and terrorists who want absolute power and control.

Ms. Mason writes: Dear Gap, Gap, Perhaps you haven't noticed but the current strategy is not working in the South. Maybe you don't care whether the Canadian Forces are effective or not, just so long as they kill people, but I believe THEY would very much like to leave Kandahar province in better shape than when they first arrived. As for Flower Power, tell that to the British government. In the end, they concluded that the only way forward was a negotiated solution and to bring the political representatives of the terrorist organization, the Irish Republican Army, into a power sharing arrangement in Northern Ireland. So they not only negotiated with them, they gave them a role in governing. So perhaps you'd better rethink your Flower Power analogy and go do a bit of reading on conflict resolution.

Robert Campbell from Toronto Canada writes: Reading Ms. Mason's article, it strikes me that the international approach depends on the origins of Taliban support. If they are from the local population, as Ms. Mason's article supposes, then she is obviously right that foreign forces can't successfully make war and peace with the local population simultaneously. On the other hand, if they are predominantly foreigners and foreign-funded, then the current approach of war-fighting Taliban supporters should (eventually) increase the security of the locals and hence support peace-building with the locals. As usual, the truth is somewhere in the middle: I've read interviews with some locals supporting the Taliban's views and other articles noting the porous Pakistani border and the insurgents' recent adoption of foreign (e.g. Iraqi) tactics. Is this a red herring or a useful characterization to help determine an approach? I've read that illiteracy in rural Afghanistan is about 50 per cent for men and 95 per cent for women. This combined with the isolation of these communities usually implies that locals tend to believe what their local leaders tell them. So it seems international forces and Kabul must first win the hearts and minds of local leaders before the general populace, but those same local leaders may have vested interests in keeping their power and values versus the perceived threat of the encroachment

of Western values. How can these hearts and minds be won over given the resources available?

Ms. Mason writes: Dear Robert Campbell: Well you have nicely touched on some of the complexities of the situation. Of course it is not black and white but many, many shades of gray. Afghanistan's six neighbours must all be constructively engaged in any new peace process and to make that happen is a formidable task indeed! A recent, very exhaustive, study by the Council on Foreign Relations has concluded that the heavy handed tactics of the Pakistan military in the border areas has had absolutely disastrous consequences with areas previously under government control, or at least favourable to it, now falling to Taliban extremists, thus providing more areas for launching actions into Afghanistan, for training new recruits and so on. They conclude that an essential precondition for Afghanistan to be stabilized is genuine democracy in Pakistan (!) and they fear that the way the Bush administration has prosecuted the war on terror has undermined, not strengthened, Pakistan's democratic underpinnings, particularly civil society. And the Council on Foreign Relations is hardly a bastion of wild-eyed radicals!

Allison Dunfield, globeandmail.com, writes: That's all the time we have for today. Thank you so much to both our guests, Ms. Mason and Mr. Samad, for the time they took today and for thoroughly answering questions on this difficult and complex issue.

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