



Afghan reconciliation and the Bonn conference

Standard Note: SN/IA/6147

Last updated: 29 November 2011

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This note describes briefly the security situation in Afghanistan, the progress or otherwise of attempts to reconcile and reintegrate insurgents with the government and looks at the conference to be held in Bonn, marking the 10th anniversary of the conference which set up the present government.

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1 Situation in Afghanistan

On 21 November 2011, the Foreign Secretary William Hague made his quarterly report on Afghanistan to the House of Commons. He gave a generally upbeat account of security progress, saying that the number of attacks was down and the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) had continued to grow in number and effectiveness:

The summer fighting season is ending and it has been a hard year for the insurgency. The numbers of both attempted and executed attacks were lower than during the corresponding period last year, continuing the trend observed over the summer. Despite considerable efforts, insurgents failed to re-establish themselves in areas in the south from which they had previously been displaced. High profile attacks in Kandahar early in October and in Kabul at the end of the month affected Afghan and international perceptions of security. However, Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) disrupted many attempts and responded effectively and professionally to those that got through. Overall, the performance and operational capability of the ANSF continued to develop: they are on track to achieve their October 2012 growth objective of 352,000 and work continued to ensure that the quality of the forces steadily improves.

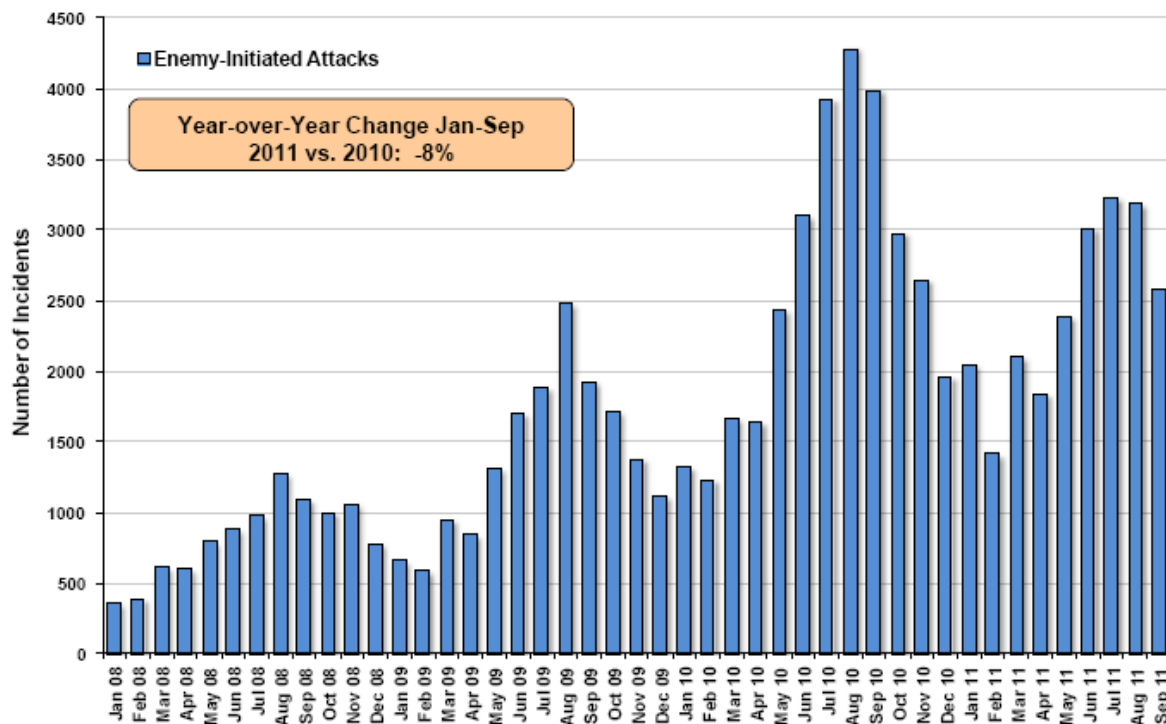
The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime's (UNODC) 2011 Afghan Opium Survey reported a year on year increase in cultivation of 7 per cent nationally (from 123,000 hectares to 131,000 hectares). However, the increase should be interpreted in the context of a difficult economic backdrop of opium prices (which have doubled in the past year to the highest level since 2004) and that the figures are 32 per cent lower than in 2007 (which saw 193,000 hectares cultivated).

With UK support, the Government of Afghanistan continued to make important progress on revenue collection and budgeting. The Government confirmed their best ever first quarter performance for revenue collection to date, bringing it in line with neighbouring countries including Bangladesh and Pakistan. Meanwhile, provincial governments have been working with the Ministry of Finance to ensure that for the first time, local priorities are reflected in plans for next year's national and provincial budgets. This will improve the Government's ability to deliver vital basic services to the Afghan people.¹

Some other assessments have not been so positive. There has been a string of attacks recently and the incident 29 October, mentioned by the Foreign Secretary, was particularly shocking to the internationals based in Kabul. A vehicle packed with explosives was driven into an armoured bus in Kabul, killing 17, including four Afghans, nine Americans and two British civilian contractors, making this the most serious attack on international forces in the capital yet.

The International Assistance Force (ISAF) provides the following graphic on the number of insurgent attacks by week, January 2008 to September 2011. It shows that the summer fighting season's usual peak in attacks was less pronounced than 2010's but that there were that 2011 is heading to be easily the second most dangerous year so far:

¹ HC Deb 21 November 2011, c7-8WS



Source: ISAF

The number of Improvised Explosive Device attacks showed no similar decline; neither did the number of civilian casualties fall in 2011.

2 Reconciliation process

In October, US Secretary of state Hillary Clinton expressed US backing for Afghan reconciliation.² The renewed push for negotiations, labelled “fight, talk, build” by Mrs Clinton, involves the US attempting to persuade the Pakistani intelligence services, the ISI, to deliver the real participation of insurgent groups such as the Taliban and the Haqqani Network. She said that the US supports “an inclusive Afghan peace process that ends the conflict, protects the gains the Afghan people have achieved in the last 10 years, and helps bring greater stability and prosperity to the wider region.”³

Those aims may be incompatible. If the Taliban does enter negotiations seriously, one of their aims could be precisely to undo some of the “gains of the last 10 years”; significantly those made in women’s rights. There has never been a clear indication that the core Quetta Sura leadership around Mullah Omar is seriously engaged in any reconciliation negotiations, but efforts to persuade them to get involved are increasing.⁴

2.1 Assassination of Rabbani

On 20 September 2011, Professor Burhanuddin Rabbani, former President of Afghanistan and Chairman of the High Peace Council, was assassinated in a suicide bomb attack. At first

² For more on internal politics in Afghanistan, see the Library standard note *Political developments in Afghanistan*, May 2011

³ “Clinton Backs Afghan Peace Efforts as “Best Hope” for Region”, US Embassy UK press release, 20 October 2011

⁴

the Taliban claimed responsibility for the attack then, the next day, denied any involvement. Since then, Taliban spokesmen have refused either to accept or deny responsibility. Coming only days after a 20-hour siege on the US embassy siege in Kabul, the assassination cast doubt on the security of Kabul and the ability of Afghan forces to guarantee it. The assassination, and the confusion over who did it, has also called into question the unity of the insurgency. One commentator argues that the Haqqani network, based in Eastern Afghanistan, may have been behind the Rabbani assassination, aiming to undermine reconciliation negotiations with the mainstream Taliban based in Kandahar and prepare for a separate Haqqani presence in any unity government.⁵

The Taliban, meanwhile, has indicated that any agreement that it may reach is dependent on other insurgent groups signing up and accepting the leadership of the Quetta Shura.

Whoever was responsible for the assassination and whatever the motivation, it dealt a severe blow to the prospects for negotiations. The *Financial Times* Afghanistan and Pakistan correspondent is convinced that the reconciliation process is going nowhere:

...to be clear, there is no chance at all of a peace deal between the government of Hamid Karzai, the president, and the Taliban in the near future. The killing of Rabbani, who was in charge of putting out feelers to insurgents, destroyed once and for all the idea that reconciliation was feasible in the coming months.⁶

2.2 Women's participation in the reconciliation process

Afghan High Peace Council

Only nine of the members of the Afghan High Peace Council are women. It is also reported that those women are largely marginalised on the council and are not taken seriously by their male colleagues. An Afghan woman MP said that the women on the council will be ineffectual: "These people do not represent the women of Afghanistan. They're negotiating for our rights - for my rights, for the rights of my daughters - from a position of weakness."⁷ Najia Zewari, one of the nine female council members, is defensive of the women who are on the council, saying that women's views will be represented:

The women on the council - we want to know that the Taliban will respect our rights, that progress will continue. We also want the women of Afghanistan to know that we can be their voice.⁸

The British government says that it is aware of the problem. In October 2011, Foreign Office minister Alistair Burt said:

This issue is very important to the United Kingdom, and to the many Members who have written to me about it over the past few weeks. Women are represented on the High Peace Council; nine of its 70 members are women. They have also been represented in Parliament and in last year's peace process. We continually stress to the Afghan Government that the commitment they have made to the equality of all their citizens and the inclusion of all in future processes must be met by action as well as words, and we will continue to take that forward as we look towards the Bonn summit.⁹

⁵ Michael Semple, [How the Haqqani Network is Expanding From Waziristan The Pakistani-Based Militant Group Needs a War In Afghanistan to Survive](#), Snapshot, *Foreign Affairs*, 23 September 2011

⁶ Matthew Green, "Hurling down Afghanistan's road to perdition", *Financial Times*, 26 September 2011

⁷ "Afghan women fear losses in Taliban talks", *Washington Post*, 26 July 2011

⁸ "Afghan women fear losses in Taliban talks", *Washington Post*, 26 July 2011

⁹ HC Deb 25 October 2011, c165

President Karzai denies that the peace negotiations will be in any way damaging to the interests of Afghan women:

Be confident my sisters, our achievements made on the basis of the Constitution, achievements towards the progress of the country and towards the better condition of our women will not be damaged or slowed down by any peace deals.¹⁰

Some commentators have suggested that any kind of negotiations with the Taliban will entail compromises on women's rights and is likely to result in significant setbacks in any agreed formula at the end of such negotiations. Whether the Taliban would then fully respect any agreement is also open to question.

On 3 October, Amnesty International released a report calling on the Afghan government and the International community to fulfil its responsibilities towards women.¹¹ The report made some recommendations to concerned governments and the United Nations:

- **The Afghan government and the international community** must ensure women's rights are not sacrificed and make a genuine commitment to meaningful participation of women in all phases and levels of any peace processes.
- **The Afghan government** must enhance efforts to increase representation of women in elected bodies and government institutions at all levels to 30 per cent; encourage religious leaders to speak out on women's rights in Islam; and intensify efforts to promote female access to education, health, justice, and other basic services.
- **The Afghan government** must improve awareness of women's rights and human rights law in the justice and security sector, and ensure effective implementation of these laws; and increase substantially women recruits in the security and justice sectors.
- **The international community** must support expanded civic education programs to raise awareness of women's rights at community level and support efforts to improve female leadership
- **The international community** must intensify support to promote access to education and other key services, and ensure this support will continue at current or increased levels even as international military forces prepare to withdraw.
- **The UN** must continue to monitor all government actions including the peace processes and provide increased support to the Afghan government on all negotiation, reconciliation, and reintegration processes.¹²

On 8 October, a number of high-profile women wrote to the *Times* asking world leaders not to sacrifice the gains that have been made over the last 10 years.¹³

3 Istanbul conference

Regional cooperation is widely recognised as being one of the most important factors determining whether Afghanistan progresses towards stability and order or whether the country's decades of suffering and conflict continue.

¹⁰ "Peace efforts will not derail women's gains, Karzai and UN officials stress on Women's Day", UNAMA press release, 8 March 2011

¹¹ *A Place at the Table: Safeguarding women's rights in Afghanistan (full report)*, Oxfam, 3 October 2011

¹² "A Place at the Table: Safeguarding Women's Rights in Afghanistan", Oxfam press release, 3 October 2011

¹³ "We will wear green scarves"; Letters to the Editor", *Times*, 8 October 2011

On 2 November, there was a conference for Afghan's neighbours, held in the Turkish city of Istanbul. Afghanistan, China, India, Iran, Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, the Russian Federation, Saudi Arabia, Tajikistan, Turkey, Turkmenistan, and the United Arab Emirates discussed enhancing regional cooperation to fight terrorism, promote regional trade and develop cultural and education links: the Istanbul Process on Regional Security and Cooperation for a Secure and Stable Afghanistan.¹⁴

The UK was an observer at the conference, and Middle East minister Alistair Burt welcomed the outcome:

Today's conference saw regional leaders go further than before in their commitment to work together for a stable and secure Afghanistan in a stable and secure region.

Significantly, regional leaders, supported by international partners, signed up to an "Istanbul Process", ensuring for the first time a framework for taking forward political and security co-operation, and going beyond economic cooperation. They also made commitments to support the Afghan government in its efforts to promote reconciliation and to tackle terrorism together across the region.

I was grateful to the Afghan and Turkish governments for hosting the conference and congratulate them on achieving this outcome. The test will now be in the implementation, though the fact that the region could reach agreement on these quite sensitive issues is important.¹⁵

Critics have said, however, that the positive noises coming out of the Istanbul conference are not likely to be followed up by genuine cooperation among Afghanistan's neighbours, who are too busy pursuing their own perceived interests in Afghanistan. India is said to want a secular Afghanistan not close to Pakistan; Pakistan wants a strongly Sunni government in Kabul allied to Islamabad. Uzbekistan and Tajikistan support Afghan Uzbeks and Tajiks. Iran is concerned about the Shia minority, mainly Hazaras, in Afghanistan. Other regional cooperation conferences have produced declarations of intent to cooperate that have not been fulfilled. This point of view was put succinctly in a recent article in *Foreign Affairs*:

Resuscitating region-wide approaches is a fool's errand that will not save Afghanistan. It is time for the international community to dump diplomatic niceties and work with those neighbors whose policies could be moulded to Afghanistan's benefit.¹⁶

Many commentators agree that, despite the divergence in the interests and goals of Afghanistan's neighbours, they all have an interest in maintaining some sort of order in the country, as civil war, extremist violence and uncontrolled drug trafficking would pose a threat to all of them.

4 Bonn conference

It is 10 years since the original Bonn conference of 2001 brought together various interested powers to decide the future of Afghanistan after the fall of the Taliban government.¹⁷ Another

¹⁴ [Declaration of the Istanbul Process on Regional Security and Cooperation for a Secure and Stable Afghanistan](#) [posted on the Council on Foreign Relations website]

¹⁵ "Foreign Office Minister welcomes increased regional cooperation on Afghanistan", FCO press release, 8 November 2011

¹⁶ George Gavrillis, "Why Regional Solutions Won't Help Afghanistan", *Foreign Affairs*, 18 October 2011

¹⁷ For more information about the 2001 conference see the following Library research papers: [The campaign against international terrorism: prospects after the fall of the Taliban](#) (RP 01/112) and [Afghanistan: the culmination of the Bonn process](#) (RP 05/72)

conference will be held in the same location on 5 December 2011, with the approach of the significant reduction in international forces which will take place over the next two years.

The British government set out the objectives for the conference in October:

The Bonn conference on Afghanistan will be hosted by Germany and chaired by the Government of Afghanistan. It will focus on three main themes: the political process; the international community's long-term relationship with Afghanistan; and the civilian aspects of transition. Our objectives are for the conference to revitalise the Kabul Process, make progress on the political track, and reiterate the international community's long-term commitment to Afghanistan. We are working with the Afghans and our international partners to help ensure that the conference will be a success and we look forward to participating.¹⁸

4.1 Women and the Bonn conference

The conference in Bonn, scheduled to take place on 5 December, has also been criticised for excluding women's representatives. There seems to have been little or no provision made for women's representatives at the conference and the Afghan government has not confirmed the presence of any women in its delegation. Human Rights Watch said:

The Afghan government and its international backers say that women's rights are one of their 'red lines' as they plan for the withdrawal of international forces. If this is the case, why are Afghan women struggling to get a seat at the table in Bonn?¹⁹

The group called for the German government, as host of the Bonn conference, and other western governments to put pressure on the Afghan government to increase the participation of women in the government delegation to at least 25%.

The matter of representation at the Bonn conference has also been raised in Parliament. On 18 October, Alistair Burt said for the Foreign Office that the British government was working closely with the government of Afghanistan:

We continue to work closely with the Government of Afghanistan, local and international non-governmental organisations, civil society organisations and international partners to improve the status of women in Afghanistan, so that they can play a full role in a future, peaceful Afghan state.²⁰

Mr Burt later elaborated on the British government's position on both the Bonn conference and on Afghan women's rights in general:

I recently met Fawzia Koofi, an Afghan woman MP who was outspoken in her determination to ensure that she and others like her should be properly represented, both at the Bonn summit and in other aspects of life. She reminded all of us that Afghan women have traditionally taken part in a great deal of decision making at local and provincial level, and she was keen to ensure that the gains made over the past 10 years in women's lives should not be lost. We should stand absolutely beside those who believe that.²¹

¹⁸

¹⁹ "Afghanistan: Key Conference Sideline Women", Human Rights Watch press notice, 30 October 2011

²⁰ HC Deb 18 October 2011, c892W

²¹ HC Deb 25 October 2011, c165-6

This is a topic that has attracted a lot of attention in recent months from NGOs and others. Human Rights Watch has published a comprehensive report on the dangers to women's rights in the forthcoming transition. HRW said:

The Afghan government and its international supporters have ignored the need to protect women in programs to reintegrate insurgent fighters and have not guaranteed that women's rights will be included in potential talks with the Taliban.²²

4.2 Pakistan boycotts the conference

Pakistan is easily Afghanistan's most important neighbour as far as bringing stability to the country is concerned. During remarks to the press with President Karzai, Mrs Clinton also stressed the importance of Pakistan's cooperation for the stabilisation of Afghanistan. During remarks to the press with President Karzai in October, Hillary Clinton stressed the vital role that both the US and other countries think Pakistan needs to play:

We agree with President Karzai that Pakistan's cooperation is critical. Violent extremism has also taken the lives of thousands of Pakistanis as well as Afghans. And if you look beyond the history of distrust, it is clear that all countries in the region will have to work together for all the people in the region.

So I urge the leaders of Afghanistan and Pakistan to resume their dialogue. We must focus on concrete measures to support peace and reconciliation in Afghanistan, and to deny extremists safe havens in Pakistan.²³

On 29 November, however, Pakistan announced that it would not be attending the Bonn conference. The move is a protest at the death of 24 members of the Pakistani armed forces on the Afghan/Pakistan border. Pakistan claimed that the soldiers had been killed in an unprovoked and deliberate attack by NATO. NATO and the US government apologised, calling the deaths "tragic", but said that NATO and Afghan forces, who had been on a joint operation on the Afghan side of the border, had come under attack from the area and had called in air support. According to one report, the NATO and Afghan forces had been fired on from a Pakistani army base.²⁴

The absence of Pakistan is a serious blow to the credibility of the conference. Pakistan went further, however. Islamabad announced that the border at Torkham, near the Khyber Pass, would be closed to NATO; banned the US from further use of the Shamsi air base in Balochistan; and started reviewing military and intelligence cooperation with the US and NATO.

The reaction of the Pakistani authorities represents a further sharp deterioration of US/Pakistani relations after the killing of Osama bin Laden on Pakistani soil. The Pakistani government needs to take domestic political opinion into account and, at present, opinion in Pakistan is hostile to collaboration with the United States, in view of the deaths caused by US drone strikes, the killing of bin Laden. It may also be the case that Pakistan is taking advantage of the incident to distance itself from the US, whose influence in the conflict is waning as troop removals progress. Pakistan's good relations with the Taliban, whose role is

²² "Afghanistan: Talks Shouldn't Ignore Taliban Abuse of Women", Human Rights Watch press release, 12 July 2011. Full report available [here](#)

²³ "Clinton Backs Afghan Peace Efforts as "Best Hope" for Region", US Embassy UK press release, 20 October 2011

²⁴ "Obama sees Pakistani deaths as tragedy: spokesman", *Agence France Presse*, 29 November 2011

likely to grow, are perhaps seen as more important in Islamabad and are not improved by the perception of Pakistan as a close ally of the US.

5 Afghan Civil Society Forum

The Afghanistan Civil Society Forum was developed as a result of the first Afghan Civil Society Conference, held from 29 November to 2 December 2001 in Germany. The forum coordinates civic education, monitoring, capacity building and peace-building activities with scores of Afghan organisations.²⁵

A meeting of Afghan civil society organisations will take place in Bonn on 2-3 December. Lynne Featherstone, minister for equality at the Home Office, will represent the UK at the forum.

6 After Bonn

Following on from Bonn, the planned 2012 Chicago and Tokyo conferences will set out the international community's commitments on security and non-security expenditure. The international community continues, therefore, to promise sustained engagement with Afghanistan, despite the withdrawal of troops, which will be largely complete by the end of 2014.²⁶

On 19 November, a *Loya Jirga* of some 4,000 Afghan representatives, supported the Karzai government's plan to conclude an agreement between the US and Afghan governments on a long-term US troop presence. The meeting, whose decisions have no legal weight, placed conditions on the US presence, including that all operations would be Afghan-led and that the US troops would be subject to Afghan law. The *Loya Jirga* also stipulated that the forces should be in Afghanistan no longer than 10 years and that they should not be used for attacks in neighbouring countries.

A strategic agreement between the US and Afghanistan is still being negotiated; detail of the conditions under which any troops would operate will be negotiated after an overarching agreement, in a status of forces agreement. These negotiations, then, have some way to run and the *Loya Jirga* may be little more than a negotiating ploy on the part of Karzai with which he would hope to secure better conditions from the US. The Taliban roundly rejected the announcement, saying: "these resolutions will be a catalyst for stirring regional sensitivities and will make unfortunate Afghanistan a centre of tumult for a long period."²⁷

Whatever the detail of the negotiations, an American military presence of some thousands of troops is likely. The main aim of these troops will be to continue training and advising the Afghan National Security Forces and probably to continue special forces operations, at least in Afghanistan. Given the present struggle to control large areas of the country, however, it seems likely that the much reduced US presence after 2014 will not be able to achieve more than very limited objectives.

²⁵ See the ACSF organisation's website [here](#)

²⁶ For more information about the withdrawal of NATO troops from Afghanistan, see the Library standard note [Afghanistan, the timetable for security transition](#), 1 December 2011

²⁷ "US hails Afghan view on presence", *Wall Street Journal*, 21 November 2011

6.1 Impending civil war?

Given the limited capacity of the continued US presence, some have suggested that it will be impossible for the Kabul government to maintain its authority over the whole of the country. A successful deal with the Taliban would perhaps mean the survival of the Kabul government in exchange for substantial autonomy for the mainstream Taliban to control the Pashtun region in the east and, particularly, the south of the country.

Many observers worry that this may be an inherently unstable situation. A *de facto* 'Pashtunistan' in Afghanistan might tend to draw in the barely-controlled north-western areas of Pakistan, which also have a Pashtun majority. The warlords of the former Northern Alliance, on whom the West relied so heavily to defeat the Taliban in 2001, would resent such an outcome and might contest territory with the Taliban, especially in the small Pashtun enclaves of the north of the country, otherwise dominated by ethnic Tajiks and Uzbeks.

Worse scenarios exist. A full-blown civil war might develop quite quickly, as ethnic tensions, always present in Afghanistan, are unleashed.

In a recent interview, the International Crisis Group's Programme Director for Asia gave a sobering assessment of the likely conditions in Afghanistan after the withdrawal of international forces:

I think there will be a period when the government sort of carries on more or less as normal, but then I think that will be eroded by increasing violence, increasing ethnic tensions, increasing resort to regional warlordism that we have seen in the past. I think there may well be a fracturing of the Afghan national army into different groups led by different warlords. I think you could see a slow and steady disintegration, a move towards even street fighting in Kabul and a serious decline in security in the capital and in the surrounding provinces.²⁸

The head of the Royal Air Force, interviewed on 23 November, said that it would not be possible to judge the success or otherwise of the Afghan campaign until five or ten years after 2015.²⁹ Air Chief Marshal Sir Stephen Dalton accepted that civil war was a possibility after the withdrawal of NATO troops. He also mentioned that RAF aircraft might be required to help the Afghan government after the withdrawal of NATO troops.

7 Related Library briefings:

Research Paper 10/45: [The 'AfPak policy' and the Pashtuns](#)

Standard Note 5851: [Afghanistan: The Timetable for Security Transition](#)

Standard Note 5678: [Afghanistan: Towards a Handover of Security Responsibility?](#)

Standard Note 3139: [The cost of military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan](#)

Standard Note 5960: [Political developments in Afghanistan](#)

²⁸ Robert Templer, "Afghanistan: After the Withdrawal", International Crisis Group, 9 November 2011

²⁹ "RAF head says Afghan civil war possible when Nato leaves", *BBC News Online*, 23 November 2011