

## THE EFFECTS OF THE WAR IN AFGHANISTAN ON PUBLIC OPINION AND THE ARMED FORCES

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According to regular polls, France has a positive image of the military and trusts its armed forces. Service members, however, sense a feeling of indifference from the civilian world as to their fate. This study is an attempt to find the reasons behind this paradox. We shall analyse the processes governing the construction of public opinion and the reasons for its evolution, using the war in Afghanistan as a basis for the study.

*Key words: public opinion, narrative, counter-narrative, casualties, support, war, armed forces*

After looking back on the different phases of the war in Afghanistan, we can affirm that while the main countries of the alliance saw similar evolution in public opinion, each country has its own unique specificities. The main aim of the study is to explain the reasons that led to an unavoidable decline in support from the French people, even though France presented certain characteristics that distinguished it from the other European countries in the coalition. These characteristics should have created more persistent support.

After several decades of studies carried out on the factors that contribute to the erosion of public support to a military intervention, the conclusion is that there is no one cause that can explain a fall in popularity when it appears. The disappointment in public opinion is a phenomenon caused by factors that interact with one another.

Two aspects are under examination in this study: the accounts that justify intervention and military losses, each of which are considered, in English language scientific literature, as factors to be taken into account in the analysis of the change in public opinion towards a conflict in which their country's military are engaged.

The narratives transmitted by the media are the tools used to disseminate the reasons justifying the intervention. They are fundamentally directed towards public opinion.

In contributing to justify the war, they should be able to anticipate the public's loss of interest, especially when losses become too high or when success is no longer certain. The analysis of the narratives in France justifying the war in Afghanistan shows that the latter were lacking. They did not provide sufficient accounts of the evolution of the conflict and were unable to explain to the public why the intervention was becoming increasingly belligerent. Secondly, these narratives did not show the progress made despite the human losses, which is fundamental to maintain favourable public opinion. Furthermore, the term "war" was very slowly incorporated into the narratives, which made them incoherent with the reality in the field as perceived by the public through the media. The counter-narratives of those opposing the intervention therefore found more fertile ground in France, where the people were increasingly less convinced that the situation in Afghanistan concerned French interests

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and values directly. This dynamic contributed to the progressive rejection of this war.

The role played by military casualties was somewhat placed in perspective in recent studies on the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. The losses alone are not enough to explain the drop in support from the public, but they are even less tolerated when objectives are not reached and success appears to be unattainable. Although military losses are usually considered from the angle of the decision to withdraw troops, as they are a contributing factor to an unpopular intervention, the French situation reveals another phenomenon which has been neglected until now in studies on the impact of losses. It is not the losses themselves but the insufficient articles published in the media which, together with public disinterest, had negative effects. France is confronted with a contradictory situation in which, even if the image of the armed forces has never been as positive, service members consider that their fellow citizens are indifferent to their fate and this is particularly worrying when soldiers die in combat.

The war in Afghanistan revealed a potential weak point between society and its armed forces. It helped plant the feeling of a lack of recognition among the service members. While we can easily envisage that peacetime estranges citizens from the concern of having to defend the nation's values and interests, it is generally accepted that war brings civilians closer to its military.

Fallen soldiers, on top of the pain this causes within the families and regiments that suffer the losses, can have a damaging effect on trust, a fundamental sentiment between the military and the society it defends. This lack of trust enhances the sense of isolation caused by the civil-military divide.

The war in Afghanistan serves as an example to explain the change in public opinion alongside the evolution in an overseas operation. It is also a good example of the importance of the narrative of political leaders and the media to maintain the support of the public and a positive morale in the armed forces.