

Defense Secretary Visits Afghanistan Ahead of July Security Shift

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[AFGHAN](#) VISIT: Defense Secretary Robert Gates (L) is escorted by Chief of Staff of the Afghan Defense Ministry Lt. Gen. Shir Mohammad Karimi as he arrives for meetings with Afghan President Hamid Karzai Mar. 7 at the presidential palace in Kabul. Gates is making his 13th visit to Afghanistan to meet with troops on the ground and with Afghan leaders. (Mandel Ngan/Getty Images)

their nation's security," Gates said. "In my view, we will be well-positioned to begin drawing down some U.S. and coalition forces this July, even if we redeploy others to different areas of the country."

With the war in Afghanistan drawing on, pressure to wrap up operations is falling on Gates and other U.S. leaders. Americans wanting U.S. troops to return home from Afghanistan within a year grew from 43 percent in the fall, to 52 percent, according to a report from Foreign Policy analyst Malou Innocent.

International opinion around the war is not much different. During the November 2010 NATO Lisbon Summit, operations in Afghanistan were a main concern. Many countries were expected to pull out in 2011, yet the major players agreed to stay into 2014.

Defense Secretary Robert Gates arrived in Afghanistan on March 7, beginning an [assessment](#) of the war's progress. His visit comes four months ahead of the July goal to begin shifting [security](#) responsibility to Afghan forces, which is set for completion in 2014.

Gates began his visit by meeting with Afghanistan President Hamid Karzai at the presidential palace. They outlined their meeting during a joint news conference.

Gates said that security zones are expanding and commerce is growing in the more distant provinces. "A semblance of normalcy is now beginning to return to local populations, now free of [the Taliban] threat," he said.

"We are now closer than ever to President Karzai's goal of building Afghan national security forces that can take the lead in

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is that leaving
Afghanistan too
early, with its

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government not fully recognized by the Afghan people, could lead to [civil war](#). Most countries part of the coalition are aware, "The bottom line is that the U.S. is reliant on NATO and needs NATO's help," Caroline Wadhams, director for South Asia Security Studies at the Center for American Progress, said in an earlier [interview](#) with The Epoch Times.

Following his meeting with Karzai, Gates began his tour of regional commands in the South and East to assess the progress of operations.

During a meeting with troops at Bagram Airfield, Gates said that the United States may keep what the AFPS describes as a "greatly reduced force," in Afghanistan after 2014, if the Afghan government is interested.

"We are fully prepared to have a continuing presence here, assisting the [Afghans](#) after 2014," Gates said, AFPS reported. "I think there is a desire on both sides to have some arrangement."