

OPERATION MOSHTARAK: PREPARING FOR THE BATTLE OF MARJAH

This Backgrounder is the first installment in a series of reports analyzing the battle for Marjah in Helmand province.

Operation *Moshtarak* (Dari for “Together”) is the first major offensive for U.S., coalition and Afghan forces to employ the new reinforcements ordered by President Obama in December of 2009. The mission is to retake the town of Marjah in Helmand province, a Taliban stronghold and center of the opium network. *Moshtarak* is expected to include as many as 15,000 U.S., coalition, and Afghan troops and will likely commence within the coming days.

The town of Marjah is located in the southern half of Nad Ali district, a relatively flat expanse of farmland, crisscrossed by narrow canals and dotted with small mud-brick compounds. Marjah lies just twenty-five miles southwest of Helmand’s provincial capital Lashkar Gah, the main strategic objective of the coalition’s counterinsurgency effort in Helmand.¹ Press reports suggest that Marjah is home to some 50,000 to 80,000 inhabitants, but they are likely referring to the entire district of Nad Ali. The population of Marjah itself and the surrounding villages is certainly less than 50,000.²

Marjah became a major command and control (C2) hub for the insurgency (Taliban and narcotics elements) after U.S. Marines drove insurgents out of their previous sanctuary just miles to the south in Garmser in April 2008. Marjah was and is favorable terrain for the Taliban. It is easy to defend, hard to attack and the population is either supportive of the insurgency’s protection of the poppy trade or powerless to oppose them. Afghan

and coalition forces never maintained a sufficient force presence in Nad Ali district and offered little resistance to a full-scale infiltration of local and foreign Taliban fighters, senior Taliban commanders, narcotics elements, heroin refineries, and IED production facilities.³ Perhaps most importantly, local opium farmers teamed-up with the Taliban in Marjah, forming an alliance that served to protect their opium fields against Afghan-led eradication forces.⁴ This relationship and the wholesale support of significant portions of the local population allowed the Taliban and narcotics traffickers to operate with impunity in key terrain in close proximity to key population centers.

Marjah is considered to be one of the main narcotics centers in Helmand. Residents state that the Taliban “promote...tax... [and] pressure people to grow poppy” while working with narcotics elements who “organize the distribution and export.”⁵ According to a Parliamentary representative from Marjah, the Taliban administer the local drug business and have “registered 187 processing factories” than convert opium paste into heroin.⁶ Each factory reportedly pays a tax to the Taliban at a rate of approximately \$1,200 per month which equates to over \$200,000 per month in revenue for Marjah alone.⁷ The Taliban also maintain elaborate shadow government structures in Marjah including a tax collecting committee, judges, and a mayor.⁸

The insurgency operates out of two main bazaars in Marjah. The Loy Charahi Bazaar is the main



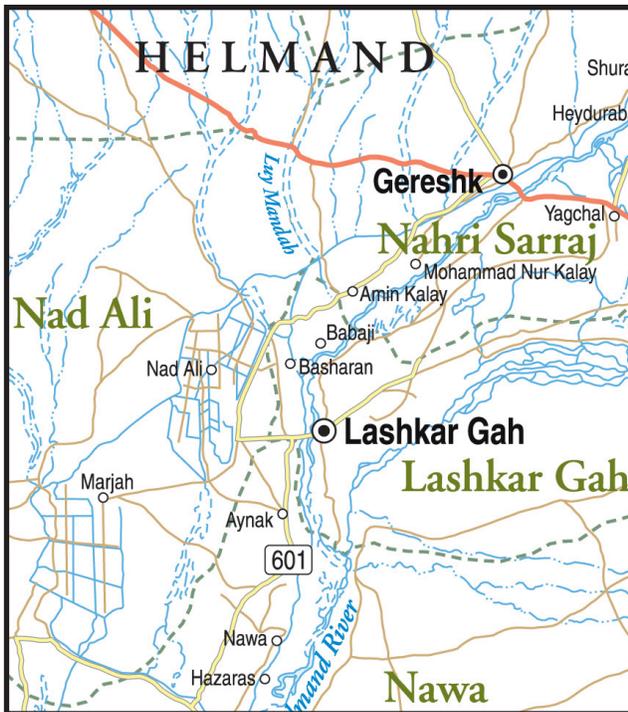
MAP 1: CENTRAL HELMAND PROVINCE

center of insurgent activity while a secondary bazaar operates nearby to the south. In May 2009, Afghan and British forces launched a large-scale, three-day operation which netted the single-largest drug cache in Afghanistan to date and resulted in the death of forty-seven militants.⁹ The assault was launched due to intelligence that suggested insurgents were planning for a large-scale assault on Helmand's capital of Lashkar Gah from Marjah.¹⁰ The force also uncovered sophisticated communications equipment that confirms that the area served as a main Taliban command-and-control hub and the center of operations for the Taliban's spring offensive.¹¹ Senior Taliban commanders in the area ordered reinforcements and fighters from neighboring Pakistan in order to recapture the bazaar. Despite this order, a large-scale counteroffensive never materialized.¹² Rather, insurgents withdrew to their secondary bazaar to the south. Intelligence reports described enemy elements trucking away narcotics and weapons from the sec-

ondary bazaar for fear of another joint offensive.¹³ However, the absence of sufficient coalition forces to hold terrain allowed for a slow but steady enemy recapturing of the bazaar.

Major joint offensives were launched during the summer of 2009 to recapture key terrain adjacent to the major population centers of Lashkar Gah and Gereshk, a key town located to the north on Afghanistan's Ring Road. Thousands of U.S. Marines, British and Afghan forces successfully drove the majority of insurgent elements away from key terrain north and south of Helmand's capital but they did not have enough resources to tackle the Taliban bastion of Marjah. Many insurgents fled west to Nad Ali and Marjah where they consolidated their positions, probing the perimeter of Afghan and coalition forces to the northeast and southeast, only occasionally striking within owned battlespace.¹⁴

U.S. and coalition forces in Helmand have been



MAP 2: MARJAH, NAD ALI, AND LASHKAR GAH

preparing to go into Marjah since the summer of 2009. The top Marine in Afghanistan, Brig. Gen. Larry Nicholson has been eager to take on the insurgency in Marjah for months—which he has termed a “cancer in Helmand.”¹⁶

The first public acknowledgment of an impending operation was announced by the allies in early February 2010, stating that the mission, Operation *Moshtarak* was “due to commence.”¹⁷ The tactic of announcing an offensive was most recently employed by the Pakistani military prior to their 2009 offensive in South Waziristan and prior to that, the announcement that surge forces in Iraq in 2007 would target Baghdad.¹⁸ The tactic has both psychological and practical benefits—to intimidate non-ideological fighters into fleeing or turning themselves in and providing notice to the population in the hopes that they will evacuate the area. Not only could this decrease the total pool of forces at the Taliban’s disposal but would significantly minimize the risk of civilian casualties. As of the time of writing, however, only several thousand residents had left the area, possibly due to reports that Taliban militants were preventing civilians from leaving to dissuade the coalition from using

overwhelming firepower by increasing the risk of civilian casualties.¹⁹ It has also been reported that approximately ninety percent of the population remain in the town, trapped by IED belts that ring navigable terrain.²⁰ NATO has since been advising residents to stay inside and “keep your heads down.”²¹

British troops have been conducting shaping operations in greater Nad Ali, just north of Marjah, for several weeks. Shaping operations are the first phase of counterinsurgency operations in which forces conduct reconnaissance and prepare the battlefield for large-scale operations including the establishment of forward staging locations and cordons to control the flow of friendly and enemy forces to and from the area of operations. Beginning on February 4, 2010, Afghan and British troops launched a helicopter and ground advance south through Nad Ali towards Marjah.²²

On February 6, 2010, small arms and mortar fire was heard around the outskirts of Marjah. The British press reported that U.S. Navy SEALs and British Special Forces began infiltrating the town, airlifting in on “kinetic” missions during the night.²³ The missions have been described as kill or capture raids targeting top Taliban commanders in the town.²⁴ It was later reported that as many as fifty specifically targeted insurgents were killed during the raids.²⁵ The following day, coalition forces fired illumination rounds after sundown to spot Taliban positions and dropped leaflets which “were aimed primarily at the militants, listing several of their commanders by name and warning fighters to leave the area or be killed.”²⁶ As many as 1,000 Taliban fighters, both local and foreign, IED facilitators, narcotics elements and senior commanders are believed to be holed-up in the town.²⁷ Mawlawi Abdul Ghafar, a Taliban commander in Marjah interviewed via satellite phone claimed that he and his 120 fighters would never lay down their arms.²⁸

Ahead of the offensive, Brig. Gen. Nicholson and Afghan Brig. Gen. Mahayoodin Ghoori held a shura, or leadership council, with Marjah’s most important district elders where they encouraged them to convince residents to stay inside once the

fighting begins.²⁹ Nicholson reaffirmed that any battle damage to homes, farms or businesses will be repaired and compensation will be paid.³⁰ This is the largest joint offensive involving Afghan forces to date. Unlike previous operations, Operation *Moshtarak* will pair one battalion of Afghan troops with one battalion of U.S. Marines.³¹ In part, Afghan forces will take the lead in clearing and searching compounds, interacting with locals and discerning friendly villagers from potential enemy fighters.

On February 9, 2010, the pace of the shaping operations increased. Approximately 400 troops from the U.S. Army's 5th Stryker Brigade along with 250 Afghan Army soldiers and their thirty Canadian trainers moved to take up positions northeast of Marjah. Although Stryker vehicles are known for their firepower and mobility, Stryker battalions also have many troops capable of moving dismounted as infantrymen. It is likely that these units are conducting dismounted surveillance and cordon operations and will be used to intercept Taliban fighters trying to flee the town. Embedded journalists reported distant small arms fire, signaling that the enemy's defenses extended far beyond their deeply entrenched positions further to the south.³²

The main assault force is comprised of U.S. Marines. One battalion of Marines, along with squads of Afghan soldiers, DEA agents, and private contractors are based seven miles north of Marjah at Outpost Belleau Wood.³³ 3rd Battalion, 6th Marine Regiment commanded by Lt. Col Brian Christmas constructed the outpost over the course of the past week. Currently, several units from 3/6 Marines are pushing south to Marjah while Marine engineers are preparing to lay down metallic bridges to allow access to territory cut-off by Marjah's canals and waterways.³⁴ The bridges are necessary because insurgents typically implant IEDs on dirt bridges and natural crossing points that link terrain on opposite sides of waterways. By constructing their own crossing points, ground forces seek to maximize their freedom of movement, launch strategic clearing operations and maintain open lines of supply for reinforcements.

As the 3/6 Marines pushed south, 1st Battalion, 3rd Marine Regiment along with Afghan forces conducted a successful helicopter-borne assault, seizing an area known as "Five Points."³⁵ "Five Points" is an intersection of major roads on the western side of the Helmand River near Rt. 601 and the Bolan Bridge that connects northern Marjah to Lashkar Gah.³⁶ Taliban militants attacked the joint force almost immediately with heavy machine gun, rocket, and small arms fire before reinforcing their positions.³⁷ Charlie Company of 1/3 Marines were joined by Bravo Company that cleared the route from Nawa, just south of Lashkar Gah and across the river from Marjah.³⁸

The establishment of a cordon around the area of operations signals that the launch of the operation is imminent. Statements from the U.S. Marine Corps suggest that the operation is only days away [officially, no specific launch date has been released].³⁹ It is unclear whether the Taliban will stay and fight in large numbers or melt away as the combat intensifies. If history is any guide, Taliban fighters typically withdraw, leaving a host of hastily constructed IEDs behind that have become more powerful over the years. Large-scale withdrawal is usually followed by pockets of fierce resistance from limited groupings of fighters while small IED emplacement teams and teams of fighters harass perimeter forces with small arms fire and RPGs.⁴⁰

The enemy response to this Operation *Moshtarak* might be different. The insurgency has had months to prepare for the impending assault, they control terrain that is highly favorable to defensive measures, they have tunnels and bunkers constructed and have brought in heavy weapons, supplies and ammunition.⁴¹ It is certain that the insurgents have predetermined ambush points, set booby traps and strewn landmines all over the town.⁴² The insurgents have also shown their ability to adapt. Their tactical proficiency has improved and they have had the benefit of learning from similar operations over the past several years as have many of the Marines taking part in *Moshtarak*. It is critical that joint forces do not underestimate the insurgency's ability to adapt and overcome as has been the case in the past.

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OPERATION MOSHTARAK: TAKING AND HOLDING MARJAH

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Operation Moshtarak is the largest joint operation of the war thus far. The operation is taking place in southern Helmand province, one of the focal points of General McChrystal's strategy where Afghan and International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) will look to seize the momentum from the Taliban. This backgrounder is the second in a series of reports analyzing Operation Moshtarak, the battle for Marjah.

Prior to launching the main assault, Afghan and ISAF forces met with approximately 350 elders from Marjah's main tribes in Helmand's capital of Lashkar Gah.¹ One Marjah elder, Haji Sar Mualem Sahib reported that some of the Afghan Taliban wanted to surrender but that there had not been any formal talks.² The elders argued for a delay in the launch of the operation in order to persuade Taliban fighters to lay down their arms.³ The one-day delay was granted as NATO commanders in Kabul approved the elders' request and waited for confirmation from President Karzai that the impending operation had his blessing.⁴ Tribal leaders agreed to form two councils to advise the Afghan government after Marjah was secured—one would deal with the appointment of local officials and the selection of development projects while the other would assist reintegrating low-level Taliban fighters.⁵ Although the elders voiced enthusiasm for the operation, they cautioned that their continued support depended on how the operation was executed and the magnitude of civilian casualties.⁶ While these concerns were being aired, the initial

preparatory phases of the assault on Marjah were underway.

Before launching the main assault, Afghan and ISAF troops surrounded Marjah.⁷ By Thursday, February 11, 2010 U.S. and Afghan forces had completed their blocking positions around the town. The only main road in or out of Marjah had been secured by U.S. and Afghan forces after clearing a multitude of mines and bombs. In an attempt to draw pockets of the blocking force into a premature engagement, Taliban mortar and small-arms teams repeatedly harassed elements of the force, such as Lima Company of 3rd Battalion, 6th Marines who were positioned on the northern edge of the town.⁸ The commander of 3/6 Marines, Lt. Col. Brian Christmas described the Taliban's positioning as their outermost defenses.⁹ In all, over 3,000 Marines, 4,400 Afghan troops, nearly a thousand British and hundreds of U.S. Army soldiers comprised the assault force while thousands more provided logistical, transportation and other means of support.¹⁰

By Friday, February 12th, the road between Marjah and Lashkar Gah was clogged with cars and trucks fleeing the pending offensive. Over 2,700 people reportedly fled to the provincial capital just miles northeast of Marjah—some hastily escaping to avoid the impending invasion and others fearing recrimination from Taliban commanders.¹¹ Ahead of the offensive, there were already signs that many fighters had left Marjah, though hundreds of fight-



MAP 1 - HELMAND PROVINCE, SOUTHERN AFGHANISTAN

ers, including Arabs, Chechens, and Pakistanis remained in the town.¹² Taliban spokesman Qari Yousuf Ahmadi stated that Taliban fighters intended to use “hit-and-run” tactics and roadside bombs—much of the same tactics they used against U.S., coalition, and Afghan forces in other parts of Helmand over the past eight months.¹³

To the north of Marjah, British-led Task Force Helmand was responsible for securing an area near

Nad Ali district center, conducting several days of shaping operations ahead of the Marjah offensive.¹⁴ Although Marjah lies within Nad Ali district, it is geographically distinct from the populated district center of Nad Ali. Nearly 1,000 British troops were involved in securing the Chah-e Anjir triangle area just miles northeast of Nad Ali district center, while thousands remained in reserve. The area, and the insurgent-infested town of Showal was considered to be one of the more volatile tran-

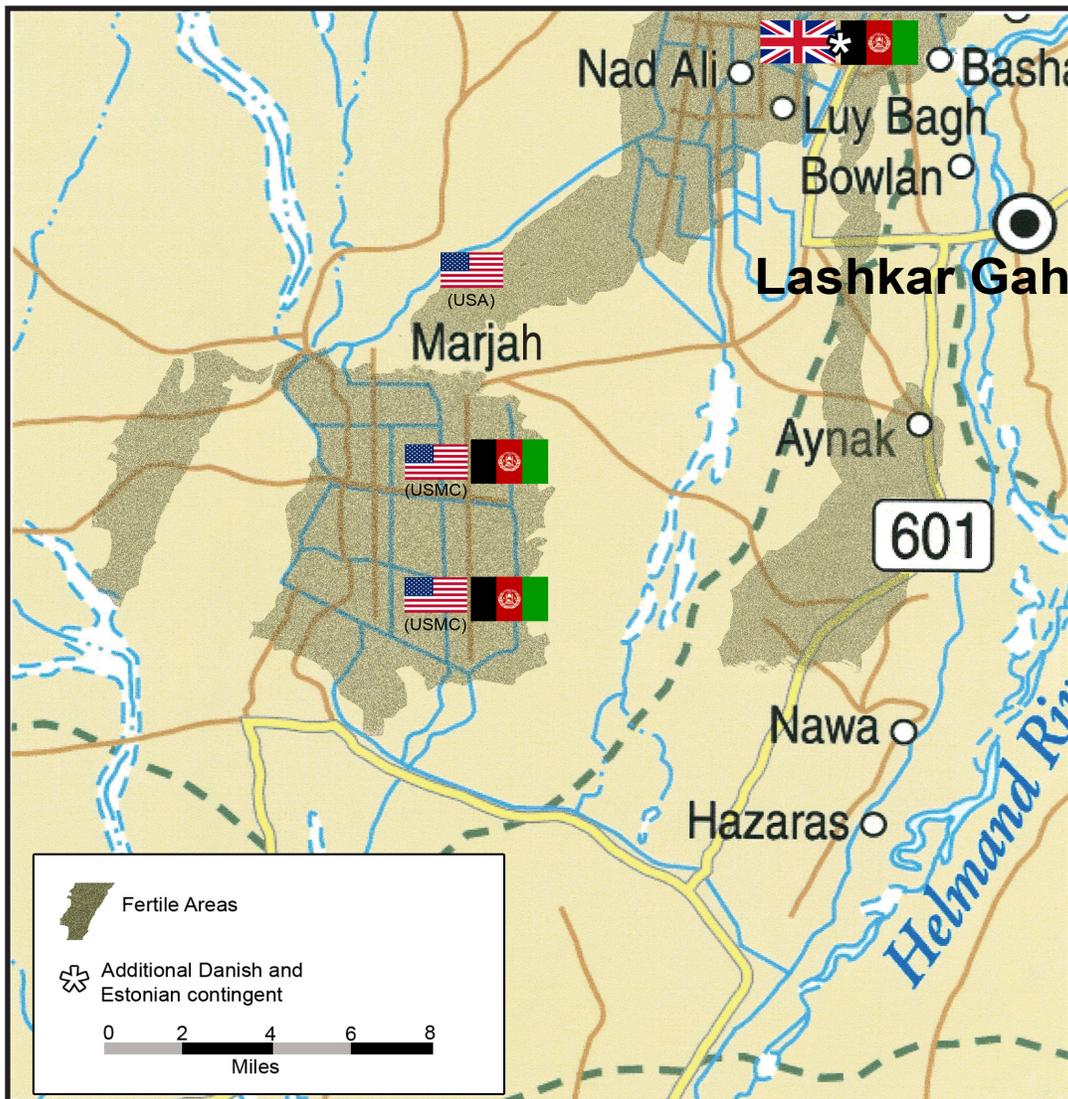
sit routes for insurgents moving south-to-north and north-to-south through Helmand.¹⁵

On Saturday the 13th of February, British troops air-assaulted in to Nad Ali in three waves to secure several compounds and a bazaar, attempting to control both sides of the main canal running into Nad Ali. British and Afghan National Army (ANA) troops conducted patrols, set up checkpoints and conducted shuras with locals to inform them of their intent to “provide them with the security they need.”¹⁶

By Thursday the 18th they held approximately two-thirds of the town, including Chah-e Anjir

and portions of Bolan to the east of Nad Ali.¹⁷ The force’s other main objective was to emplace a series of bridges over the Nahr-e Burgha and Shamalan canals to enhance freedom of movement in and out of Nad Ali district center.¹⁸

The assault on Marjah, the main objective of Operation Moshtarak commenced just hours before dawn on Saturday morning (local time). More than sixty helicopters inserted thousands of U.S. and Afghan combat troops into the town and surrounding farmland.¹⁹ The air-assault included elements of Marine Aircraft Group 40 and Task Force Pegasus from the U.S. Army’s 82nd Airborne Division, and was designed to project force behind



MAP 2 - FORCE DISTRIBUTION IN MARJAH & NAD ALI

the Taliban's initial defensive lines and IED fields, effectively achieving the element of surprise despite having broadcasted the pending offensive for months.²⁰ Charlie Company from 1/6 Marines was tasked with clearing a path from their command post near Marjah's southeastern border to the outer canal wringing the town while Alpha and Bravo Companies, with approximately 300 U.S. and Afghan troops per company, were airlifted into the town proper.²¹ The entire assault force worked to consolidate their positions and gain a foothold so that the remainder of the assault force could move in over land and link-up with the initial assault forces over the next several days. Marines from Alpha Company, 2nd Combat Engineer Battalion built a series of makeshift bridges to open lines of communication into the town.²²

By the end of the first day, U.S. and Afghan forces effectively advanced into the town center of Marjah, seizing key intersections, government buildings and one of the town's two main bazaars.²³ The assault force established eleven posts across the town while British forces to the north in Nad Ali consolidated their control of the district center and outlying areas, constructing two additional posts.²⁴ The force leading the assault was 1/6 Marines out of Camp Lejeune, North Carolina. The nearly 1,500-strong 1/6 Marines seized the Koru Chareh bazaar in north-central Marjah, constructing a makeshift outpost from which to operate.²⁵ Throughout the remainder of the day, companies from 1/6 Marines cleared ground from Koru Chareh southeast to the Loy Chareh bazaar. The infrastructure of Loy Chareh was largely destroyed in a coalition raid in May 2009 but it remained a hub of insurgent activity during the lead-up to Moshtarak.²⁶

Direct enemy resistance was lighter than coalition planners expected. It is most likely that either the Taliban elected not to contest the force's initial assault or they were sufficiently confused by the airborne assault that their command and control was overwhelmed and broke down. The Taliban appeared to fall back deeper into the town where insurgents could rely on typical asymmetric tactics like IEDs, mines, ambushes and sniper fire.²⁷ Insurgents staged one failed attempt to flood a main

waterway to block the Marines advance.²⁸ Many of the canal banks and crossing points into the town were so heavily mined that Marines laid down pre-constructed metal bridges to allow unfettered access into the roughly eighty-square-mile expanse of the Taliban-held town.²⁹

On Sunday February 14th, the Marines and Afghan forces' advance was significantly slowed by IEDs. Marines from Alpha and Charlie companies began clearing operations, expanding outwards from the Loy Chareh bazaar in the town's administrative and commercial center.³⁰ To avoid booby trapped compounds and layers of IEDs around buildings and canal crossings, the force advanced through open fields and waded through irrigation canals.³¹ Throughout their continued advance, the entire force within Marjah uncovered nearly four million dollars worth of raw opium and roughly 500 pounds of ammonium nitrate and other bomb-making materials.³² Meanwhile, companies from 3/6 Marines moved from east to west, including into the village of Sistani, which had pockets of intense resistance.

By Monday the 15th of February, the initial assault phase was winding down. Marines from 1/6 and 3/6, and their Afghan counterparts began piecemeal clearing operations to secure the areas around the key objectives. Typically, clearing involves removing all enemy forces and eliminating organized resistance in their assigned areas by "destroying, capturing, or forcing the withdrawal of insurgent combatants."³³ Clearing is the first main phase of a clear-hold-build counterinsurgency approach, beginning after friendly forces establish positions inside enemy terrain. In an operation of the size and scope of the Operation Moshtarak, clearing can last anywhere from weeks to months. It involves constant mounted and dismounted patrols engaging with the local population to gain valuable and exploitable intelligence about insurgent positions, IEDs and booby-trap locations, and weapons caches among other things. For an area like Marjah, clearing typically involves searching and securing the entire area of operations to ensure that the enemy has either been killed, captured, or has fled.

American and Afghan commanders estimated that approximately one-quarter of the 400 Taliban fighters in Marjah at the start of the operation had been killed while a number of fighters “appeared to have fled.”³⁴ Enemy resistance continued to weaken early Monday, and troops faced only occasional sniper and small-arms fire.³⁵ Intelligence reports suggested that fighters may have fled north to the town of Sangin and south across the Pakistan border.³⁶ By Monday afternoon, 3/6 Marines reported a half-dozen major gun battles throughout the town while one armored column was targeted by three separate sniper teams which allowed attackers to maintain relative safety while engaging and slowing advancing forces.³⁷ Defenders were also known to simply discard their weapons in ditches during firefights and withdrawing deeper into enemy held territory to take up defenses once again.³⁸

Although enemy resistance was lighter than expected, most U.S. forces regarded the combat as some of the most intense they had experienced in Afghanistan, and the resistance often delayed ISAF and Afghan National Security Force (ANSF) from achieving tactical objectives. According to members of one Marine company who had seen combat in Helmand before, the enemy in Marjah was “much, much better” than anything they had previously encountered.³⁹ Defenders had executed a mix of “ambushes and sustained engagements along with intermittent sniper fire.”⁴⁰ Pockets of enemy fighters prevented Kilo Company of 3/6 Marines from seizing its objectives until resistance was sufficiently beaten back late Monday. It took Kilo Company three days to achieve its objective: a bridge and bazaar just over a mile from where they were inserted.⁴¹

As Kilo Company achieved its objective, different areas continued to pose stiff resistance for other companies. Bravo Company was tasked with securing a populated area a short walk north of the Koru Chareh bazaar called the Pork Chop (Lamb Chop) for its distinct shape.⁴² Since the assault began on Saturday morning, the area had remained rife with insurgents who had been taking up fighting positions in the area each morning.⁴³ From the Pork Chop insurgents could and did fire on a Marine outpost with sniper fire and rocket-propelled gre-

nades. By Tuesday, February 16th, Bravo Company was able to secure enough of the area to prevent insurgents from firing on the nearby outpost.⁴⁴ According to one Marine corporal, the enemy in the area was much more capable than the enemy they faced in southern Helmand last year, concluding that “they had to be foreign fighters.”⁴⁵ While Bravo Company worked to secure the rest of their objective, Alpha Company from 1/6 was engaged in intense, day-long exchanges of fire with insurgents south of Marjah’s municipal center and the Loy Chareh bazaar.⁴⁶ Meanwhile, Lima Company from 3/6 Marines had cleared from north to south, linking up with Kilo Company. Marines reported less coordinated attacks, often taking the form of sporadic hit and run attacks in a disorganized manor.⁴⁷ Marines encountered snipers hiding in haystacks, while Cobra attack helicopters fired on enemy bunker positions.⁴⁸

Marines expressed frustration with rules of engagement (ROE) that prevented them from aggressively pursuing these individuals. The Marines experience articulates the challenges of waging a careful counterinsurgency campaign. Striking a careful balance between pursuing the enemy and protecting innocent civilians means Afghan and coalition forces assuming considerably more risk. According to 1/6 Marines Commander Lt. Col. Calvin Worth, “a professional fighting force need to assume the preponderance of risk... that’s the way it should be in a counterinsurgency.”⁴⁹ Insurgents were also using the Marines’ restrictive ROEs and their focus on protecting the population against them. There is ample evidence to suggest that insurgents are sheltering in and amongst civilians in compounds and crowded areas in order to draw fire and cause civilian casualties.⁵⁰ In some cases, an Afghan Brig. Gen. reported that insurgents may have ordered women and children to “stand on a roof or in a window of buildings where Taliban fighters are shooting.”⁵¹

By Wednesday, February 17th, Marines and Afghan troops reported “sustained but less frequent insurgent activity,” mostly limited to small-scale attacks.⁵² 3/6 Marines commander Lt. Col. Brian Christmas reported that the security situation just north of the town center allowed for Afghan police

to be brought in—permitting Marines to move on to other areas.⁵³ The plan is to turn over areas to Afghan police after they have been successfully cleared of insurgents by ANA and U.S. Marines. The first to arrive were three convoys of Afghan National Civil Order Police (ANCOP), approximately 200 in all.⁵⁴ ANCOP are recruited from all over the country, and are better trained and more disciplined than most local police.⁵⁵ They were dispatched to man checkpoints around central Marjah as soon as they arrived. Afghan officials announced plans to establish a police force in Marjah, consisting of approximately 1,000 locals to serve as constables.⁵⁶ The hope is that a local force will actively work to secure their own community and prevent senior Taliban figures from establishing insurgent fighting and administrative networks in their area.

Over the course of the next several days, ANA and U.S. Marines advanced towards enemy controlled terrain in southwest Marjah.⁵⁷ Though Marines managed to control a few key pieces of terrain around Marjah's two main bazaars and a handful of other areas, there was still much of the town where insurgents were able to move about freely, seen in images captured by drones flying overhead.⁵⁸ As the force pushed further into enemy held territory, they encountered skilled marksmen in well-fortified positions approximately a half-mile away from the town center.⁵⁹ The kinetic pattern of enemy contact in Marjah was relatively steady: "light contact in the morning, intensifying sniper fire through midday before subsiding at night-fall."⁶⁰ There were even reports that insurgents were running low on ammunition and had called for back-up, according to intercepted Taliban communications.⁶¹

Early Saturday, February 20th, Marine reconnaissance teams were inserted behind enemy lines to break pockets of resistance.⁶² One compound that was vigorously defended appeared to be a Taliban headquarters. A search revealed photos of fighters posing with weapons, Taliban ID cards, and a graduation diploma from a training camp in Baluchistan, Pakistan.⁶³

Still, the majority of enemy activity was confined to pockets of terrain in the center of town and to the extreme North and West.⁶⁴ On Sunday the 21st

of February, Marines and ANA focused on a two-square-mile area in the western quarter of the town where they believed more than forty insurgents were entrenched.⁶⁵ In the north of town, enemy activity still consists of "several firefights a day."⁶⁶ As Marines advance, they have set up several patrol bases from which to project force forward, clearing as they go. By late week, more than a hundred Marines and their Afghan counterparts pushed north into what was thought to be the enemy's final pocket of resistance.⁶⁷ Progress was slow, but it appeared as though the approximately one hundred fighters that were thought to have regrouped in the twenty-eight-square-mile area of "Kareze" may have fled.⁶⁸ Residents reported not having seen militants in the area for the past several days. By Saturday, February 27th, Marines and Afghan troops linked-up with a U.S. Army Stryker battalion north of Marjah.⁶⁹ Lima Company of 3/6 Marines linked up with the Stryker battalion after days of meticulous advance and comprehensive clearing of northern compounds.⁷⁰

The clearing phase will continue for weeks while Marine, ANA, and Afghan police units also work to hold cleared terrain. Brig. Gen. Lawrence Nicholson, commander of the Marine Second Expeditionary Brigade, surmised that coalition forces will "control all key roads and bazaar areas by the end of the month."⁷¹ That said, there will not be complete freedom of movement for civilians until all transportation routes and public areas have been cleared of mines, IEDs, and booby-traps. An Afghan Army official reported over 400 devices defused by the combined force to date, and there are many more still buried about town.⁷²

Towards the end of the second week of Moshtarak, Helmand Governor Gulab Mangal raised the Afghan flag over the center of town in Marjah. The ceremony was attended by nearly 700 residents and the newly appointed town administrator, Abdul Zahir Aryan and a team of advisors.⁷³ Aryan is a close friend of Gulab Mangal and has been living in Germany for the past fifteen years—he does not appear to carry as much sway with Marjah elders in a way that former Helmand police chief and head of the Marjah shura Haji Abdurrahman Jan does.⁷⁴ Though Aryan was born in Helmand, he does

not maintain an active power base in the region, often a pre-requisite for effective leadership. The relationship between Aryan and Jan will have to be watched closely over the next several months.

Given the short amount of time, the size of Marjah, and the total force involved in Moshtarak, it is unlikely that a comprehensive, fully successful clearance operation has been completed. Instead, it appears as though the assault force focused on securing several key objectives, such as bazaars, roads and densely populated areas. This would allow for local governance elements to be brought in, assuming a reasonable amount of risk, before the entire area could be comprehensively cleared.

1/6 and 3/6 Marines along with their Afghan counterparts are currently constructing combat outposts and patrol bases to the North, South and West that will be used to conduct patrols and hold terrain.⁷⁵ Sporadic roadside bomb attacks targeting resupply convoys on the outskirts of town continue to occur—an asymmetric tactic that the Taliban will continue to employ where possible.

Approximately 2,000 Marines and 1,000 ANA will remain in Marjah for several months, likely until the end of this coming summer to ensure lasting security while Afghan police slowly takeover security duties, initially in bazaars and checkpoints and eventually throughout the entire town.⁷⁶ More than 900 Afghan Counternarcotics Police and ANCOP are already conducting patrols.⁷⁷

To the north in Nad Ali, Afghan and coalition forces were also reporting progress by the end of the second week. District Governor Habibullah held a large shura of 450 people, which was supported by the district community council and Afghan security forces.⁷⁸ A market had opened for the first time in eighteen months—supported by a new patrol base in a strategic junction nearby.⁷⁹ The force will continue to patrol, clear main transportation routes, search compounds and establish patrol bases.⁸⁰ Approximately 400 well-trained Afghan police, known as Gendarmerie were brought in to man checkpoints and conduct patrols with British troops.⁸¹

The biggest challenge in Nad Ali will be to con-

vince the civilian population that the coalition and Afghan presence will be enduring, ensuring continuous and lasting results over the months to come. Promises have been broken in Nad Ali before. This may be the last chance that Afghan and coalition forces have at winning over the local population. Yet, security is only one challenge—effective local governance, development and reconstruction backed by the provincial government in Lashkar Gah, President Karzai and the relevant Afghan ministries will ultimately be the determinant of success or failure.

Although the early phases of Operation Moshtarak have gone according to plan, there are several concerns worth keeping in mind as Operation Moshtarak proceeds:

HOLDING CLEARED TERRAIN

One challenge for Marines and ANA will be holding terrain that has been cleared of insurgents, preventing re-infiltration from surrounding areas. The fact is there may not be enough Marines and ANA to hold all of the territory they have cleared while also conducting vigorous patrols throughout the rest of town. This means Afghan police, both ANCOP and the Public Protection Force will have to be used as a force multiplier. If insurgents are able to re-infiltrate or successfully evade the clearing force while remaining in Marjah, it will result in a persistent atmosphere of fear. If this happens, it will be difficult to achieve the level of security that residents will require in order to start serious cooperation and engagement with local government and security forces. The population's buy-in is essential for lasting and meaningful success.

CIVILIAN CASUALTIES

Depending on the source, there have been between sixteen and twenty eight civilian deaths during the course of Operation Moshtarak as of the time of writing.⁸² Prior to the launch of the operation, Marjah elders warned the assault force that their continued support for the operation depended on the magnitude of civilian casualties. Although

tragic, it appears as though that threshold has not been met. U.S. and Afghan forces have to continue to use extreme caution as insurgents have demonstrated their willingness to place civilians in harms way. Additionally, as civilians begin to resume their daily activities, there is a persistent fear that they will fall victim to residual pressure-plate triggered explosive devices. Marines and Afghan forces may be blamed by the population for incidents such as these.

ALTERNATIVE LIVELIHOODS

The majority of residents in Marjah are farmers—their main crop has been poppy, the bulbous plant that produces raw opium. It pays better than most any other crop and has been the livelihood of Marjah's population for years. Now that the Taliban and narcotics elements have largely been driven out and local governance structures have been brought in, there will be a major push for crop substitution—mainly wheat. This will be a tough sell. Forced eradication has not worked and certainly will not work if winning the hearts and minds of the population is the overarching objective. Wheat is a reasonable alternative, but it alone may not be sufficient. Local governance structures, development and reconstruction experts and Afghan ministries must figure out a way to wane farmers off of poppy while providing them with a legitimate and reasonable substitute that will allow for them to maintain their meager standard of living.

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MARJAH'S LESSONS FOR KANDAHAR

Operation Moshtarak was the largest joint offensive in Afghanistan to date. The objective of Moshtarak was to retake the Taliban stronghold of Marjah, a town in the Nad Ali district in southern Afghanistan's Helmand province. Thousands of U.S. Marines, partnered with Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) landed in the town on February 13, 2010 with the short-term objectives of killing, capturing, and driving out Taliban militants; and securing the town's district center, two main bazaars, and key crossing routes.¹

Longer-term objectives included securing the town's population and building credible local governance as part of a counterinsurgency (COIN) strategy. In the months since the air assault phase, coalition and Afghan forces in Marjah have encountered a number of challenges in effectively clearing the area of insurgents, integrating the Afghan police into counterinsurgency efforts, and coordinating and delivering competent and timely district governance in Marjah. Understanding the nature of these challenges and possible mitigation strategies is critical, not only for future efforts in Marjah, but also to inform the operational planning and execution of the coalition's *Hamkari Baraye* Kandahar or Cooperation for Kandahar campaign and to improve the overall effectiveness of the coalition's ongoing partnership with the Afghan government.

CLEARING TERRAIN IN MARJAH

Given the size of the terrain and the extent of the Taliban's control prior to the launch of Moshtarak, recent experiences in Iraq and elsewhere suggests that a comprehensive clearing mission in a counterinsurgency should be expected to last for months, especially given the permanent presence of only two Marine battalions.

The American military's *Counterinsurgency Field Manual*

defines "clearing" in counterinsurgency as removing enemy forces and eliminating organized resistance in an assigned area by "destroying, capturing, or forcing the withdrawal of insurgent combatants."² Marjah is approximately one hundred square miles of agricultural land dotted with small compounds and bazaars, and crisscrossed by a series of canals that irrigate the farmland. The area was littered with thousands of improvised explosive devices (IEDs) prior to the arrival of coalition forces. Comprehensively clearing terrain like Marjah is extremely difficult and requires significant time and resources.

The main assault force operating inside Marjah included 1/6 and 3/6 Marine battalions, several hundred Afghan National Army (ANA) soldiers, and a contingent of Special Forces as well as a U.S. Army battalion, which established a cordon to the northeast. Only a portion of this total force, however, conducted operations within the town itself.

After air assaulting into the outskirts of Marjah in the early hours of February 13, 2010, the assault force advanced towards the center of the town to seize and secure several key objectives, including two main bazaars (Loy Chareh and Koru Chareh) and the town center.³ Once these areas were secured, the force would then extend anti-Taliban clearing



MAP 11 | HELMAND PROVINCE, SOUTHERN AFGHANISTAN

operations to outlying areas.⁴ By February 20, 2010, the town center and bazaars were reportedly secure, according to Brigadier General Larry Nicholson, commander of the U.S. Marine Corps Second Expeditionary Brigade.⁵

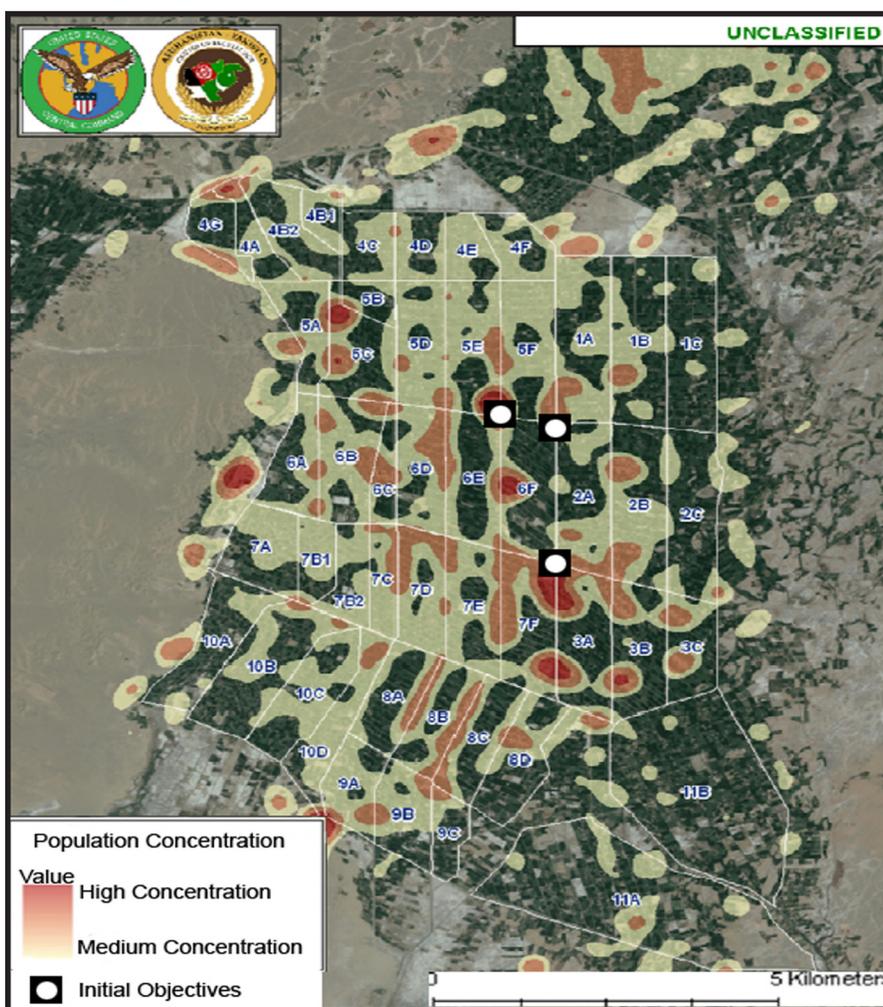
Nicholson, however, cautioned that U.S. and Afghan forces still had to clear “huge swaths” of the target area but would first concentrate on protecting streets and markets, anticipating building a bubble of security.⁶ Brigadier General Nicholson expected the town to be cleared in thirty days, setting a target completion date of mid-March.⁷

Yet just days later, Pentagon Press Secretary Geoff Morrell stated that operations in Marjah were transitioning from the clearing to the holding phase.⁸ Marines and Afghan forces reported that

they had cleared the last major pockets of Taliban resistance in the town on February 27, 2010, just fourteen days after the initial invasion and only one week into the projected thirty day clearing timeframe set by NATO commanders in mid-February.⁹ Deputy Secretary of Defense William J. Lynn III reaffirmed Morrell’s earlier statements in early March and noted that the clearing phase was nearly complete.¹⁰ Days later, Brigadier General Nicholson had stated that the hold, stabilize, and build phases were the next main challenges.¹¹

There was a lull in enemy-initiated engagements in late February after initial Taliban resistance; however, reports of renewed enemy activity were beginning to surface by mid to late March.¹² Outside the three bazaars and administrative center of Marjah, Afghan government officials had little to

MAP 2 | POPULATION CONCENTRATION IN MARJAH



SOURCE: ANTHONY H. CORDESMAN AND JASON LEMIEUX, "THE AFGHAN WAR: A CAMPAIGN OVERVIEW," CSIS, PG. 43. JUNE 23, 2010.

no freedom of movement due to the threat of IEDs and small-scale ambushes.¹³

In northern Marjah, the security situation was becoming increasingly unstable as the Taliban waged an intimidation campaign against the population. This included the assassinations of an uncooperative senior elder and a local working on a bridge reconstruction project, the kidnapping of family members connected with individuals believed to be cooperating with government officials, and the circulation of night letters warning the population not to cooperate with foreign forces.¹⁴ There were reports that the Taliban's governor for Marjah returned to the area to hold a meeting with local elders in April 2010. He offered stern warnings that they should not cooperate or take money from U.S. Marines or Afghan government officials.¹⁵

Unarmed Taliban fighters on motorcycles reinforced these threats by visiting individual compounds. They reiterated the governor's warnings in person and urged families not to send their children to school.¹⁶ The Taliban increased both their presence and activity throughout April, with some fighters present to harvest poppy.¹⁷

Throughout May, additional fighters attempted to re-infiltrate Marjah, aided by the complex and hard-to-secure terrain.¹⁸ The Taliban continued their subversive intimidation campaign during this time. The end of the poppy harvest in mid to late May undoubtedly freed up manpower for increased Taliban activity, and many groups operated in small maneuver teams of two and three men that were harder to detect.¹⁹ By the end of May, Marines reported an increase in firefights while conducting regular patrols.²⁰

According to media reporting, the presence of insurgents in Marjah steadily increased from mid-March to mid-May, as did the insurgents' effectiveness in convincing the population that they, not the U.S. Marines or Afghan government will be on the winning side.²¹ The ability of overstretched U.S. Marines and overmatched Afghan National Civil Order Police (ANCOP) to degrade the capacity of a shadowy and subversive enemy was limited. From mid-May to mid-June, there were more U.S. Marine fatalities than in the first month of the operation.²²

Yet, recent counterinsurgency operations in southern and northern Helmand suggest that kinetic activity is not the best way to gauge the enemy's presence.²³ It is not simply the enemy's fighting forces that must be eliminated; it is also their "politico-administrative apparatus" and intelligence network that must also be removed.²⁴ The population's willingness to cooperate and communicate with U.S. and Afghan forces and share information about insurgent locations and activities is a more effective measurement tool.²⁵

Typically, during the clearing phase of a COIN operation, human intelligence about enemy fighters in the area is gradually obtained from locals after friendly forces have demonstrated the ability to protect and secure the population, thus earning their trust. As long as the population is open to insurgent threats and intimidation, they will be reluctant to share critical information that often translates into necessary, actionable intelligence.

Despite progress securing their main military objectives, Marjah's residents remain hesitant to engage with U.S. and Afghan forces for fear of retribution. Afghans in the town also view efforts to rejuvenate the town's bazaars, build clinics, and restore schools as insufficient to fully sway them to the Coalition's side.²⁶ These actions, or 'demonstration efforts,' are designed to show the population that the local Afghan government can provide for their wellbeing. Yet, the British experience in Helmand since 2006 demonstrates that reconstruction and development in the absence of security for the population have little enduring value.²⁷ In Marjah, as long as the population is exposed to the threats and retaliatory actions by insurgents, they will not

entertain the possibility of actively opposing them. According to locals, "villagers do not dare give them away to the Americans because they are local men and can exact revenge."²⁸

Marjah's Lessons for Kandahar

Comprehensively clearing terrain such as Marjah is a slow, methodical process. Removing the Taliban's extensive Marjah network requires months of clearing and close interaction with the town's population, much of which is located miles away from the district center and bazaars. Frequent and sustained interaction with the population has the proven ability to prevent insurgent reinfiltration. This is a prerequisite in order to begin the transition to the hold phase.²⁹ This transition takes weeks, not days.³⁰ There is a significant period of overlap between these stages in terms of the tasks and time it takes to successfully execute the transition. Continuously securing the population is one of the central tenets of a successful transition.

On the basis of experience, an example of successful execution and realistic timelines for clearing and holding can be seen in the southern Helmand River valley. During the summer of 2009, U.S. Marines and a small contingent of ANA launched an operation to secure three contiguous districts where the enemy maintained a significant presence.³¹ Two of these districts, Garmser and Nawa are most similar to Marjah. The Coalition forces in this region faced a significantly easier objective vis-à-vis Marjah: the force encountered a less intense enemy counteroffensive, a more receptive population, and significantly less complex terrain. Nevertheless, it still took months to comprehensively clear the area. Major progress in the hold and build phases did not materialize until late winter and early spring 2010, more than six months after the initial assault, according to 2/2 and 1/3 Marines.³²

A successful clearing effort is ultimately measured by the elimination of insurgents, their infrastructure and networks and the cooperation of the population with the clearing force.³³ Ultimately, security is the necessary precondition for the population's trust and support. Security includes actual protection from insurgent threats and intimidation and more importantly, the belief that the population will not

be punished for openly siding with friendly forces. These are prerequisites for the provisioning of basic services and the introduction of local governance.

Although it remains to be seen if coalition and Afghan forces will engage in large-scale clearing operations in the districts surrounding Kandahar City, International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) must have realistic expectations regarding the time and resources required to clear difficult, enemy infested terrain and fully ensure the establishment of proper and necessary security conditions for improving local government.

USING POLICE IN COIN OPERATIONS

ANCOP are considered to be the most professional and highly trained elements of the Afghan National Police. ANCOP was designed to serve as a temporary replacement police force for local Afghan Uniformed Police (AUP) who leave the battlefield for an intensive eight-week training course, known as the Focused District Development program (FDD) and to maintain law and public order during the “hold” phase of COIN operations.³⁴ Though ANCOP is a paramilitary police force, it cannot be in the lead during the “clear” phase of COIN.³⁵ In fact, no police force can sufficiently function in a COIN environment until the hold phase. Police are trained to enforce order, not establish security.³⁶ The decision to employ ANCOP in this role during the “clear” phase of Operation Moshtarak exceeded the capability of this force.

Just days after the invasion, more than 300 ANCOP arrived in Marjah. Immediately there were problems. Some refused to work at night, send out patrols, and stand post more than three hours at a time.³⁷ Others refused to stand guard or clean their living areas. Some units abandoned their checkpoints during the midday heat and took lunch breaks that lasted for hours.³⁸ Many were caught smoking hashish. In the early days after the invasion, an entire ANCOP battalion of 179 policemen was temporarily taken off-line after approximately one-quarter of the force tested positive for drug use.³⁹ It was clear from the outset that the capacity of this force would be severely limited.

The most troubling development was reports of corruption. Marjah's previous police force was so corrupt and abusive that residents warned the Marines prior to the invasion that “if you bring in the cops, we will fight you till death.”⁴⁰ Although the majority of ANCOP is more professional and disciplined than the AUP, their conduct in certain instances during Moshtarak was comparable to previous abuses by the AUP. Reports from Marjah stated that ANCOP members set up checkpoints to shake down residents while others charged locals for head-of-the-line privileges.⁴¹ Reports of reckless behavior, ignorant of the strict rules of engagement that were designed to minimize civilian casualties were also reported.

Despite these issues, the fundamental problem with the ANCOP in Marjah was assigning them to perform functions for which they were not trained, equipped or prepared to do. On February 17, 2010, just four days after the invasion, Marines reported that the security situation in northern Marjah was such that ANCOP forces could be brought in to allow 3/6 Marine forces to clear more areas.⁴² Brigadier General Larry Nicholson echoed those sentiments several days later, arguing that he needed ANCOP forces to free up his soldiers to fight the Taliban, “what I can't afford is for all the [Coalition] forces to be pinned down holding areas we've already taken,” he said.⁴³

The decision to send ANCOP to assist in the earliest stages of Operation Moshtarak was a mistake. ANCOP was neither equipped nor trained to maintain responsibility for a sizable piece of terrain like northern Marjah, especially only days into a clearing operation. This task would be far more appropriate for an Afghan National Army battalion, a light infantry force, with embedded U.S. Marine trainers. Many ANCOP assigned to northern Marjah were forced to undergo retraining as a result of their poor performance, after which reports suggested that their performance improved.⁴⁴

The overreliance on ANCOP was likely the result of a paucity of American and Afghan National Army forces participating in Operation Moshtarak. According to General Stanley McChrystal, “had we put more force in [Marjah], we could have locked [it] down better,” stating that “I think we have let

too much move along without overwhelming-enough security.”⁴⁵ Although ANCOP is a necessary and useful force multiplier, coalition forces must be cognizant of their actual capabilities and provide them with the necessary embedded trainers and supervision they require to perform.

Marjah's Lessons for Kandahar

Coalition and Afghan planners should not rely on the ANCOP or any police equivalent to successfully execute mission-critical tasks in the early stages of counterinsurgency, especially during the protracted clear phase.⁴⁶ Ill-equipped and insufficiently trained Afghan police forces are not an effective substitute for adequate numbers of ANA, U.S., and coalition troops.

As a result of ANCOP's poor performance in Moshtarak, senior U.S. military officials have recently ordered U.S. Special Forces to provide training to forty-percent of the ANCOP and establish long-term partnerships with half the battalions they train.⁴⁷ Six ANCOP kandaks (or battalions, consisting of slightly more than 300 policemen each) are scheduled to be deployed to Kandahar to support Operation Hamkari Baraye Kandahar that is currently underway. It is unlikely that this “seven to eight day program of instruction” for immediately deploying units and “longer and more comprehensive training” and partnering will be sufficient in addressing the shortfalls of this force.⁴⁸ ANCOP units deployed to Kandahar will require sufficient guidance and supervision in the field to ensure proper conduct and appropriate tasking.

LOCAL GOVERNANCE IN-PRACTICE VS. 'IN-THE-BOX'

Prior to the launch of Operation Moshtarak, military and civilian leaders formulated a ready-made “government-in-a-box” concept for Marjah. This “government-in-a-box” was said to include all necessarily components of district-level governance that could be quickly inserted just days into the clearing phase. The hope was that this ready-made administration could provide basic services to the population that would demonstrate the Afghan government's ability to govern more effectively

than the Taliban system. Yet, four months after the start of Operation Moshtarak, local governance in Marjah is still a work in progress.

An unprecedented level of interaction and cooperation took place at the national and provincial level during the planning phase. NATO's senior civilian representative in Afghanistan, Mark Sedwill, said that Moshtarak was planned from the “end-game backwards,” which is to say that planners understood the importance of “civilian delivery of governance and development,” and used that ideal end state to determine the required inputs.⁴⁹ President Karzai and the various Afghan line ministries participated in the process to ensure that the stabilization and governance phase would be instituted quickly and smoothly following the establishment of sufficient security conditions. Despite positive early engagement with Kabul and the relevant Afghan ministries, the government's capacity to deliver critical resources in an efficient and timely manner revealed the challenges of creating effective district governance.⁵⁰

The stabilization phase and the installation of the “government-in-a-box” was executed under the rubric of the District Delivery Plan (DDP), led by the Independent Directorate of Local Governance (IDLG), Helmand Governor Gulab Mangal, and the Helmand Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT).⁵¹ The DDP is an inter-ministerial initiative that was created in 2005, comprising the Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development; Ministry of Agriculture, Irrigation, and Livestock; Ministry of Health; Ministry of Education and the IDLG and it was designed to “establish or improve the presence of the Afghan government in recently secured districts.”⁵² The DDP's “planning” and “partnership” efforts were confidence inspiring, according to statements from General McChrystal on February 4, 2010.⁵³

Yet, in-practice, the “government-in-a-box” concept was underwhelming. Nearly ten days into the operation, Kabul had not set a date for dispatching dozens of bureaucrats from Afghan ministries, including health, education, justice, finance and agriculture.⁵⁴ In early May, several key ministers admitted that they had not done enough local-level outreach to ensure the delivery of manpower and

resources.⁵⁵ By late May, only eight of eighty-one certified teachers were on the job.⁵⁶ Only a handful of ministry representatives assigned to Marjah lived in the district while others resided within the relative sanctity of the provincial capital. In order to commute to work from the capital, these officials required a sizable security detachment.⁵⁷ It was and remains difficult for the Afghan government to earn the trust and confidence of the local population when many of the individuals sent to provide basic services are absent or at best ineffective.

Marjah's Lessons for Kandahar

The extent of President Karzai's, the IDLG's, and various Afghan ministries' involvement in the planning and coordination of the stabilization phase of Operation Moshtarak is a positive development and should be commended. Yet, the capability of these Kabul-based ministries to project resources to the district level was limited in practice. ISAF planners must accurately assess what Afghan ministries can deliver and when. Planning is only one small part of the process. Marjah revealed a disparity between what the various ministerial heads promised and what they could adequately deliver. If demands on performance exceed capacity, ISAF planners must account and even make their own plans to address the governance and economic objectives in a counterinsurgency campaign.

Yet, it is worth noting that in Kandahar the challenge of governance is fundamentally different than that of Marjah. Whereas Marjah suffered from a total absence of state governance, Kandahar has functioning Afghan governance institutions. The problem in Kandahar is that the population views government institutions as predatory and illegitimate, representing the interests of key powerbrokers rather than the populous.⁵⁸ Effective and legitimate governance in Kandahar and its environs will depend on local engagements with the population through locally recognized and respected avenues to earn the populations buy-in and support and to produce results.

CONCLUSION

The execution of Operation Moshtarak has presented coalition and Afghan forces with unique insight into the planning and execution of large-scale counterinsurgency operations in Afghanistan. Rushed clearing operations, the premature overreliance on ANCOP, and a limited capacity to establish effective local governance have hindered success. As coalition and Afghan forces look towards Kandahar this summer, the lessons from Operation Moshtarak should be used to inform proper planning and execution in order to avoid the repetition of costly mistakes.

Most importantly, campaign objectives and timelines must be grounded in reality. A premature progression through the clear phase creates false expectations and sets the stage for misplaced criticism. The inability to meet unrealistic expectations gives the impression of failure, emboldening the enemy and increasing doubt amongst the population. Rather, objectives and timelines based on experience and lessons learned provide a realistic and accurate opportunity for enduring success. Although unforeseen challenges and obstacles to overcome will likely surface during the 'Cooperation for Kandahar' campaign, accurate planning and proper execution enable the greatest possibility of success. Much like in Marjah, success will require time.

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