

JANUARY 2011

JEFFREY DRESSLER

AFGHANISTAN REPORT 8

COUNTERINSURGENCY IN HELMAND

PROGRESS AND REMAINING CHALLENGES



INSTITUTE FOR THE
STUDY of WAR

MILITARY ANALYSIS AND EDUCATION
FOR CIVILIAN LEADERS

Cover Photograph: Pinjadoo, Helmand province, Islamic Republic of Afghanistan — Lance Cpl. Sebastian J. Chenault, a vehicle commander with Jump Platoon, Headquarters Company, 3rd Battalion, 3rd Marine Regiment, holds security while supporting Lima Company Marines who began taking ineffective small-arms fire after an improvised explosive device detonated in Pinjadoo, Afghanistan, Sept. 6, 2010. No Marines or Afghans were injured by the explosion. Jump Platoon investigated the area around the blast for secondary IEDs and to gather information.

Photo Credit: Official United States Marine Corps photo by Sgt. Mark Fayloga

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jeffrey Dressler is a Research Analyst at the Institute for the Study of War (ISW), where he studies security dynamics in southeastern and southern Afghanistan. He has previously published the ISW reports, *Securing Helmand: Understanding and Responding to the Enemy* (October 2009) and *The Haqqani Network: From Pakistan to Afghanistan* (October 2010). Dressler's work has drawn praise from members of the Marine Corps and the intelligence community for its understanding of the enemy network in southern Afghanistan and analysis of the military campaign in Helmand province over the past several years. Dressler was invited to Afghanistan in July 2010 to join a team conducting research for General David Petraeus following his assumption of command.

Dressler has briefed wide audiences on topics related to the war in Afghanistan. He was invited to Camp Lejeune, North Carolina to brief a Marine Battalion prior to their deployment to Afghanistan, and has held similar pre-deployment briefings for civilians headed to Afghanistan.

Dressler has also conducted briefings for Congressional audiences and members of the press, including correspondents from The New York Times, Fox News, CNN, and MSNBC. Additionally, Mr. Dressler's commentary, articles and opinion editorials have been featured by numerous outlets, including Real Clear World and Small Wars Journal. Mr. Dressler received his Bachelor's Degree from the Political Science Honors Program at The University of Connecticut, graduating summa cum laude and Phi Beta Kappa.

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ABOUT THE INSTITUTE

The Institute for the Study of War (ISW) is a non-partisan, non-profit, public policy research organization. ISW advances an informed understanding of military affairs through reliable research, trusted analysis, and innovative education. We are committed to improving the nation's ability to execute military operations and respond to emerging threats in order to achieve U.S. strategic objectives.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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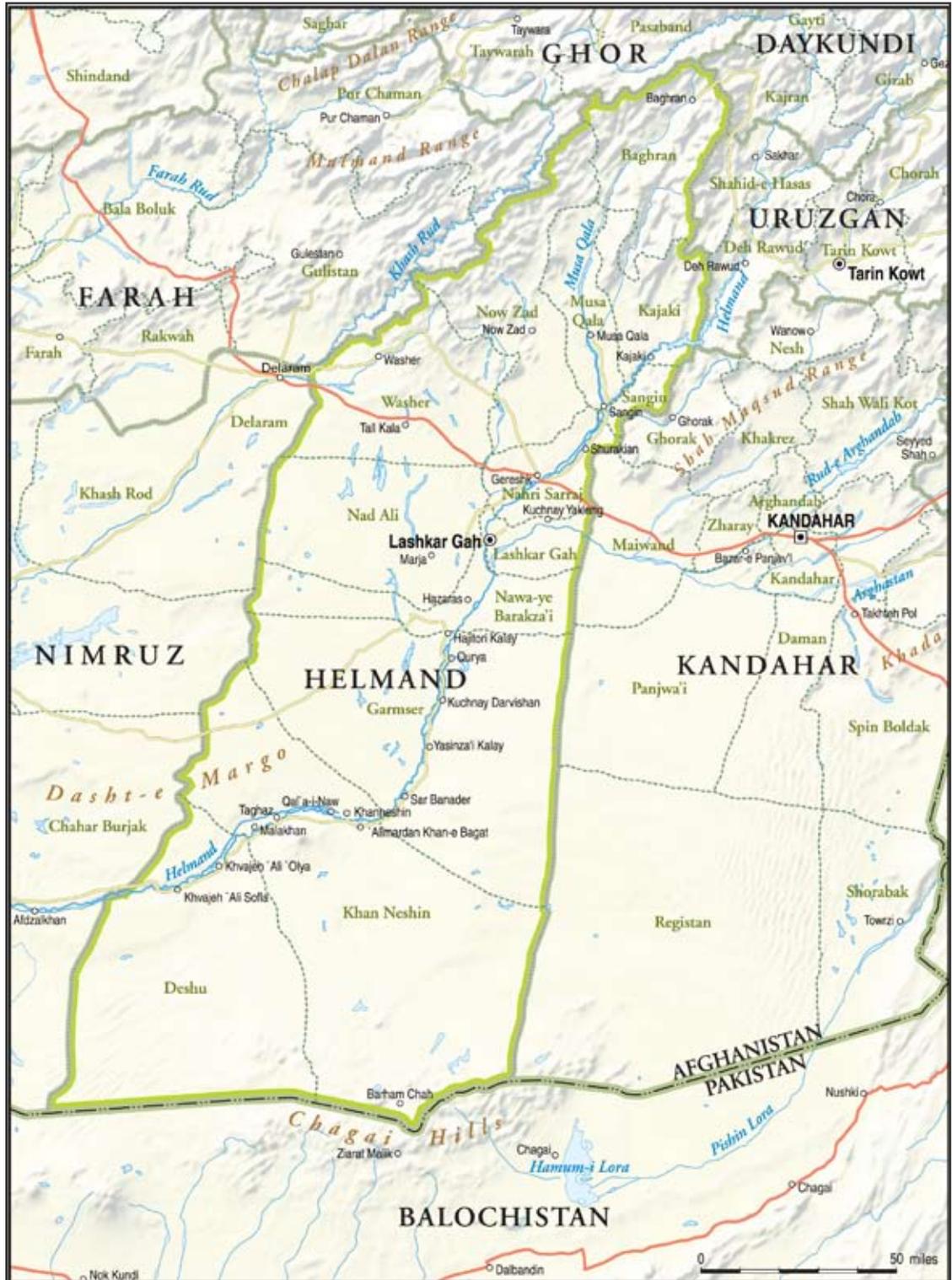
KEY FINDINGS

- Coalition and Afghan forces have made remarkable progress clearing and holding critical districts in central and southern Helmand province.
 - The Taliban's supply lines running from south to north along the Helmand River Valley have been significantly disrupted.
 - The Taliban's safe havens and support zones in central and southern Helmand have largely been removed, rendering enemy forces incapable of challenging coalition and Afghan troop's monopoly over the use of force.
 - Population-centric counterinsurgency operations in Garmser, Nawa, Marjah and Nad Ali have forced the Taliban out of the main populated areas and have prevented re-infiltration.
 - Taliban-initiated violence and assassinations in southern and central Helmand have fallen considerably from their peak in 2009, no longer posing a serious threat to district security.
 - The former Taliban stronghold of Marjah is transitioning from the clear to the hold phase. Daily security incidents have dropped from several dozen to single digits.
 - Marines in the district of Nawa have begun the process of transitioning security duties to Afghan National Security Forces.
- Past performance of Afghan National Security Forces in Helmand has been poor although there have been significant signs of improvement throughout the past year.
 - The 215th Corps of the Afghan National Army (ANA) with responsibility for Helmand and Nimruz was officially activated in April 2010. The ANA's performance during Operation Moshtarak in February 2010 was marred by reports of looting, drug use, and insubordination.
 - Throughout the spring and summer of 2010, close mentoring and partnering with coalition forces has improved the core capability and professionalization of the ANA. Some ANA units are now capable of executing independent operations and patrols.
 - Despite important gains in the ANA, many Afghan Uniformed Police that perform law enforcement duties in districts and villages lack basic skill sets and are often accused of predatory behavior by the local populous.
 - Coalition forces in Helmand have instituted an indigenous police recruitment and training effort with the support of tribal elders which produces more capable police who are representative of Helmand's unique tribal makeup.
- The coalition's counternarcotics strategy, which focuses on interdiction, has been an effective approach; offering farmers credible alternatives to poppy remains a challenge.
 - The narcotics trade is perhaps the most critical funding mechanism for the insurgency in Helmand. Marines estimate that insurgents received approximately fifty percent less money from the Helmand drug trade in 2010 than in 2009.
 - Insurgents and narcotics elements have grown increasingly intertwined over the last several years. Insurgents are now involved in all aspects of the drug trade, from collection to refining to smuggling. Despite this, Major General Richard Mills, the commander of Regional Command Southwest, stated that, "we have intelligence that indicated [the Taliban] has a financial crisis on his hands. He has a cash flow problem. He doesn't have the money he needs."

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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- Governor Mangal's Food Zone program, designed to help farmers make the shift from illicit to licit crops, has achieved some positive effects. The decision to scale-back the program in 2011 is unwise and may jeopardize gains that have been made over the past several years.
- Governance in Helmand is successful due to a capable provincial governor and effective, representative district governance. Despite this, negative interference from national-level leadership persists.
 - Helmand's provincial governor, Gulab Mangal, is an extremely active and effective leader who maintains good relations with his coalition partners in Helmand. Although President Karzai has not been supportive of Governor Mangal's efforts in Helmand, the U.S. and international presence has provided him with the majority of the resources and backing to be able to successfully execute his duties as governor.
 - Influential powerbrokers at the local and national level continue to hinder progress in governance. Sher Mohammad Akhundzada and his network maintain close ties to President Karzai and continue to enjoy his support at the expense of Governor Mangal.
 - Although there have been tremendous strides made in provincial and district governance over the past several years, though some critical challenges remain, including identifying and attracting capable civil servants. The former district governor of Marjah, Haji Zahir, made approximately \$80.00 per week compared to some Afghan interpreters who were making approximately \$2300.00.
 - Disputes over land ownership, squatters on government land, and the inability of the Afghan government to deal with these issues in an effective way is a serious deficiency. The Taliban's ability to resolve land disputes has undermined support for governmental mechanisms.
- Reconstruction and development projects are popular throughout Helmand and have helped attract local support for district governance and continued security.
 - Immediate, quick-impact projects such as cash for work programs have been an effective way to reduce local unemployment while ensuring that military-aged males are not available for insurgent recruitment. Approximately 4,000 locals are employed by these programs each day.
 - The stable security environment in most districts has enabled progress in the establishment of schools and healthcare facilities, perhaps two of the most popular services according to Helmand's residents.
 - As security improves, Afghan and international efforts in Helmand must increase the population's freedom of movement and access to essential markets inside and outside of Helmand, such as neighboring Kandahar province.
 - International expenditures of massive amounts of cash in relatively poor communities have the potential to fuel a culture of dependency and corruption, if not carefully structured and monitored.
 - According to recent polling by *The Washington Post*, ABC and the BBC, approximately two-thirds of Helmand residents believe that Afghanistan is on the right track. Furthermore, seventy-one percent currently describe their living conditions as "good," an increase of twenty-seven percent since late last year. Of those surveyed, fifty-nine percent give positive marks to the availability of jobs, up nearly fifty percent from last year. In Helmand, public assessments of the availability of clean water and medical care are sharply higher than last year.



MAP 1 | HELMAND PROVINCE

COUNTERINSURGENCY IN HELMAND

PROGRESS AND REMAINING CHALLENGES

By Jeffrey Dressler

INTRODUCTION

Helmand is Afghanistan's largest province. Its terrain varies greatly—a blend of inhospitable desert in the south, lush agricultural zones in the central Helmand River Valley, and impermissible mountain ranges in the north. Helmand also represents the central node of the Taliban's narcotics empire, generating substantial funds to finance a brutal insurgency aimed at forcing the withdrawal of coalition forces and preventing the establishment of Afghan-led provincial and district governance. Helmand's enemy system is an important part of the larger southern Afghanistan insurgency, connected to key enemy nodes in Kandahar and Uruzgan provinces.

The presence of US forces in Helmand from 2004 to 2005 was extremely limited, often with an approximate maneuver force of only 300 soldiers.¹ Still, incidents of insurgent violence were limited until 2005, after which time they began to increase as part of a wider Taliban offensive directed by its senior leadership in Quetta, Pakistan. This offensive had the support of Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence Directorate (ISI).² Over time, southern and central Helmand became one of the most dangerous and firmly entrenched enemy systems in all of Afghanistan. The largely Pashtun population suffered predatory governance at the hands of Karzai loyalists and their affiliated militias and commanders. Insurgents controlled much of the province, save for a selection of district centers.

As part of the widening international military effort in southern Afghanistan, the United Kingdom agreed to assume responsibility for Helmand in 2006, sending 3,300 troops and civilian personnel to engage in "peace support and counternarcotics operations" rather than population-centric counterinsurgency operations.³ UK forces were thinly spread across the province in isolated "platoon houses" that required a significant effort simply to prevent them from being overrun by insurgents.

Aggressively pursuing the enemy and conducting mutually-supporting operations across the province was simply not a central tenet of the UK's strategy in Helmand.⁴

Requisite troop numbers capable of executing comprehensive counterinsurgency operations did not arrive in the province until the summer of 2009, a full three years later. These additional US forces joined with UK and other coalition forces to begin comprehensive counterinsurgency (COIN) operations to clear substantial portions of southern and central Helmand province. Central Helmand, where approximately three-quarters of the province's population lives, was the center of gravity for a population-centric strategy aimed at winning the support of the people at the expense of the insurgency.

It has been nearly eighteen months since comprehensive counterinsurgency operations began in southern and central Helmand in July 2009. The progress that has been achieved throughout these areas is notable. The insurgency has suffered important losses in Helmand. US, coalition, and Afghan forces have established security in many parts of southern and central Helmand, which has enabled significant portions of the population to assist in supporting Afghan governance. Yet, a number of challenges remain—a reminder that the fight is not yet over.

The progress in southern and central Helmand demonstrates that counterinsurgency can work in Afghanistan if adapted properly for the conditions in each province. This report offers a detailed assessment of counterinsurgency efforts in Helmand province since the summer of 2009. The report analyzes the coalition's progress along five primary lines of effort: security; Afghan National Security Forces development; counternarcotics; governance; and reconstruction and development.

SECURITY: COUNTERINSURGENCY IN HELMAND

The insurgency in Helmand has been significantly degraded over the past eighteen months, beginning with Operation Panther's Claw and Operation Strike of the Sword in southern and central Helmand province during the summer of 2009. US, coalition, and Afghan forces have removed nearly all insurgent safe havens in the province and are increasingly killing, capturing, and denying insurgents access to key terrain and population centers in and around the Helmand River Valley.⁵

From 2004 to 2006, the insurgency in Helmand grew significantly due to abusive local governance, poor military planning, and an absence of sufficient combat forces. With only 3,300 coalition personnel in all of Helmand, British Major General Gordon Messenger, a brigade commander in Afghanistan from 2008 to 2009 said, "the scale of the challenge was not matched by the resources allocated to it."⁶ Insurgents funneled supplies, weapons, and fighters into Helmand from Pakistan's Balochistan province.⁷ In Balochistan, the Taliban-led insurgency maintained sanctuary to recruit, shelter, and equip fighters headed for Afghanistan.⁸ These men and materiel were funneled through the Barham Chah bazaar on the southern border, north through the Reg desert, and ultimately to the Helmand River Valley. While men and materiel were facilitated into Afghanistan, raw and refined narcotics were smuggled out of the country through the same network of co-located Taliban facilitators and narcotics traffickers.⁹

The southern Helmand River Valley served as planning, staging, and logistical hubs for the insurgency.¹⁰ From its stronghold in the south, the insurgency reinforced their operations to solidify their control over central Helmand, which comprises northern Garmser, Nawa, Lashkar Gah, Marjah, Nad Ali, and Nahri Sarraj, some of the most populated districts in Helmand province.¹¹ In the north, insurgents maintained a strong presence, but primarily concentrated on the narcotics trade and improvised explosive device (IED) manufacturing, while supporting their campaign to expand west and resourcing their operations against Canadian forces in Kandahar province.¹²

Operation Strike of the Sword: Clearing the Southern Helmand River Valley

In the early summer of 2009, President Barack Obama ordered approximately 21,000 troops to deploy to Afghanistan. Some 10,000 Marines from the 2nd Marine Expeditionary Brigade were the first to arrive, and they were sent to Helmand province.¹³ They were tasked with "forging new ground... going to places nobody has been before."¹⁴ The combined US and Afghan mission was to "provide security for population centers along the Helmand River Valley and connect local citizens with their legitimate government while establishing stable and secure conditions for national elections scheduled for August as well as enhanced security for the future."¹⁵

The vision for southern Afghanistan was, more generally, to create a zone of security, economic activity, and increased freedom of movement for the majority of the region's most-populated areas.¹⁶ Securing the majority of the Helmand's population in central Helmand and connecting it with neighboring Kandahar would conceivably enable a zone of stability throughout southern Afghanistan, formerly the stronghold of Taliban operations in Afghanistan.

Helmand was the first province in Afghanistan to receive sufficient force to engage in comprehensive, population-centric

counterinsurgency operations. These operations began in earnest in early July 2009 following the launch of Operation Strike of the Sword which involved approximately 4,000 US Marines along with a smaller contingent of approximately 600 Afghan National Army (ANA) and Afghan National Police (ANP).¹⁷ Prior to July 2009, a contingent of US Marines in RC-South were primarily focused on training ANSF in Helmand and its western neighbor, Farah province.¹⁸

UK forces assumed responsibility for Helmand province in May 2006.¹⁹ From 2006 until the late-spring of 2009, British forces with a contingent of Estonian, Danish, and ANA personnel struggled to maintain hold of what little ground they controlled in the province. Despite their concerted efforts, a shortage of combat forces, thinly spread, were ill-equipped to combat the insurgency that controlled the majority of the province. The Taliban, directed and resourced from the Pakistani city of Quetta, Balochistan, controlled nearly every district and district center of the province aside from the provincial capital of Lashkar Gah and the district centers of Musa Qala, Sangin, Gereshk, Nad Ali and Garmser.²⁰ Beyond these immediate district centers, the Taliban dominated the landscape, prohibiting patrolling and engaging with the local population. By late-October 2008, Taliban fighters had essentially encircled Lashkar Gah, launching several daring raids to destabilize the provincial capital.²¹ The enemy's offensive continued throughout the spring of 2009.

The Taliban insurgency virtually controlled the Helmand River Valley, including key populated districts and towns from Nawa in the south to Kajaki and Musa Qala in the north.²² The Taliban enjoyed sanctuary across Helmand's southern border with Pakistan, and safe haven throughout southern, central, and northern Helmand.

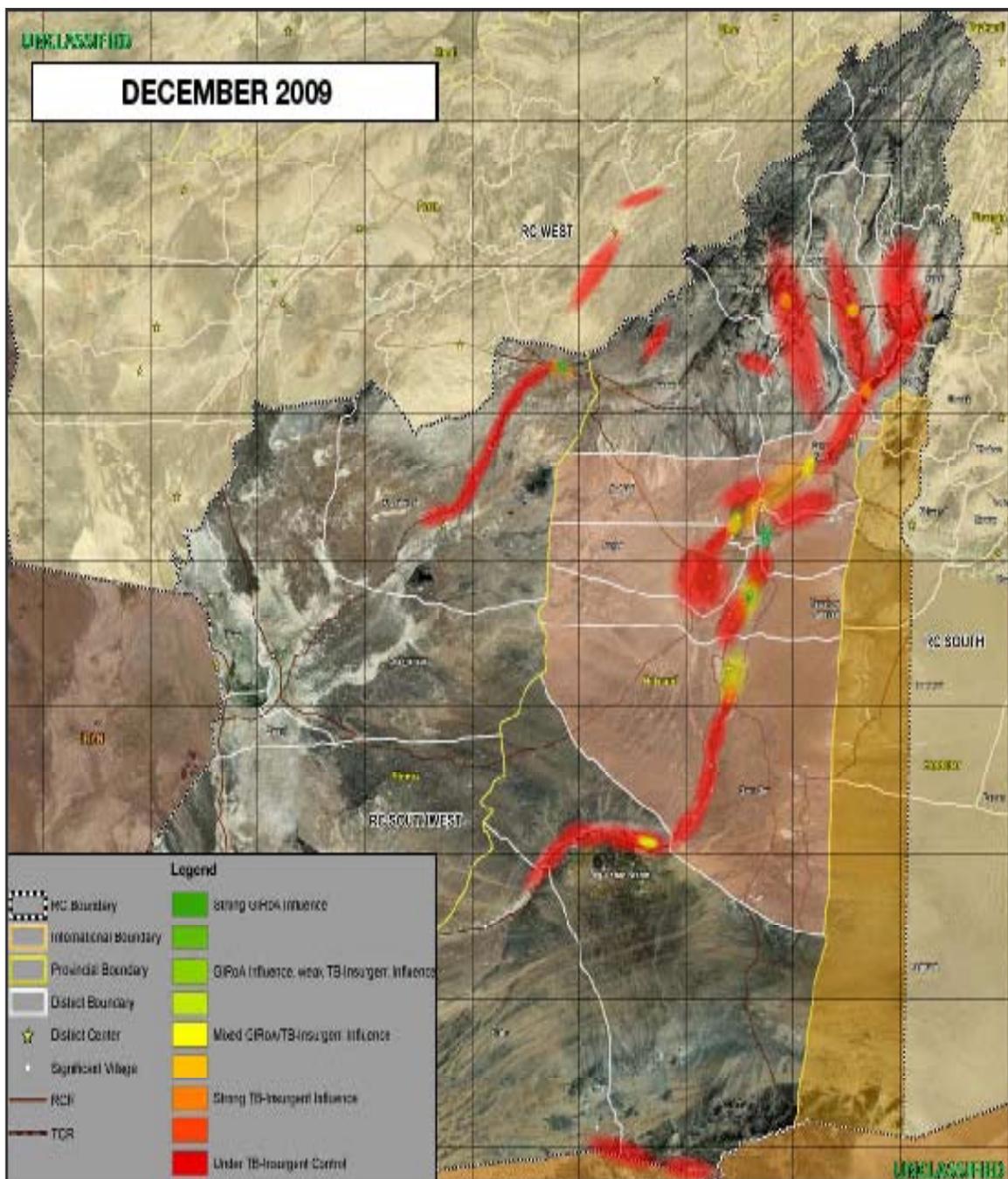
Within the province, Taliban fighters and narcotics traffickers maintained operational support zones throughout the Helmand River Valley. In the southern Helmand River Valley (also known as the 'fishhook') insurgents would transit through the Pakistani border and desert until

they reached Khan Neshin, which served as the first contact point for insurgents moving north.²³ At the northernmost point on the fishhook, insurgents and traffickers in the village of Mian Poshtey, Lakari and the Safar bazaar would shelter fighters, weapons, and IED materials before moving north to the central districts of Nawa, Nad Ali, Marjah, and Nahri Sarraj. From there, insurgents travelled to the northern Helmand districts of Sangin, Kajaki and Musa Qala to stage attacks on coalition and Afghan forces, construct and place IEDs, and refine raw opium into processed heroin for smuggling out of the country.²⁴ Support zones in districts in and around the Helmand River Valley were critical for sustaining their operations. Insurgents would launch attacks against coalition and Afghan forces in central and northern Helmand from a multitude of these operational support zones without fear of reprisal. Insufficient force, or intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance assets meant that coalition forces were limited in their ability to target the enemy network.²⁵

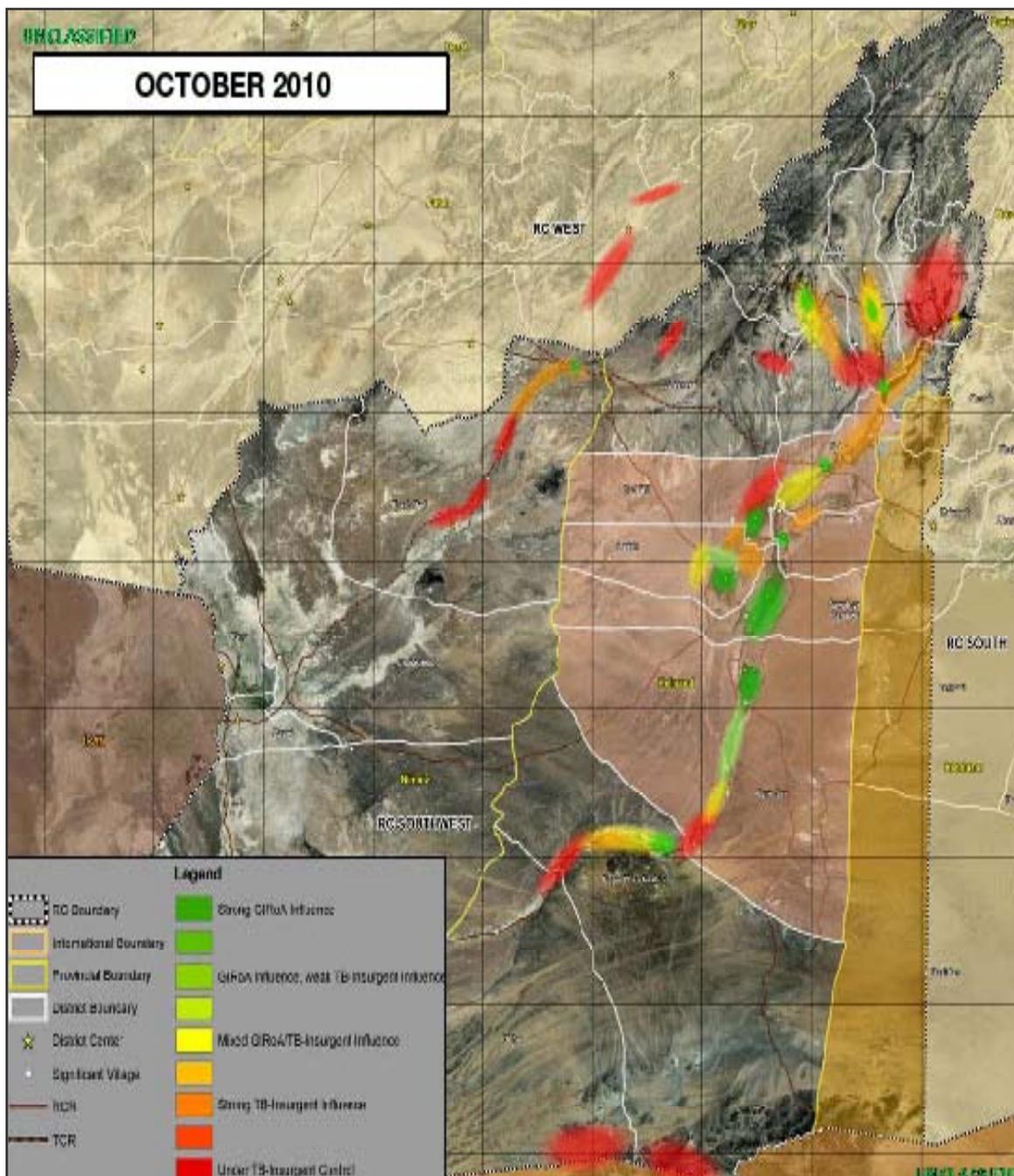
In the summer of 2009, coalition forces in Helmand launched Operation Strike of the Sword, led by the US Marines and Operation Panther's Claw led by UK forces.²⁶ These operations focused on the Nawa, Garmser and Nad Ali districts. The stated purpose of the operations, which were directed by then-International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) Commander General David McKiernan, was to expand security in advance of the August presidential election.²⁷ Yet, there were two important shortcomings with the operational concept. First, the decision to launch a major clearing operation only weeks before the election did not leave enough time to properly establish security before the vote. In this case, the result was predictable. Less than ten percent of the populous turned out to vote and complaints of ballot stuffing and fraudulent activity were widespread.²⁸ Second, the decision to clear the areas of Nawa and Garmser, rather than the central enemy stronghold of Marjah meant that the Taliban's main support zone was never challenged. Indeed, the uncontested presence of

the Taliban stronghold of Marjah undermined and slowed the clearing operations in Nawa and Garmser. Had the Marines been allowed to go into Marjah first and clear the enemy's support zones rather than its attack zones, counterinsurgency operations in Nawa and Garmser would certainly have progressed through the clear and hold stages even more rapidly.

The pursuit of the enemy, the disruption of close sanctuary and support zones and the severing of enemy lines of communication were the principle objectives during the initial months of Operation Strike of the Sword. The Marines and their Afghan counterparts sought to physically and financially isolate the insurgency, both



MAP 2 | RC(SW) GIROA vs TALIBAN INFLUENCE. COURTESY OF RC(SW) AIR GROUND TEAM



MAP 3 | RC(SW) GIROA vs TALIBAN INFLUENCE. COURTESY OF RC(SW) AIR GROUND TEAM

from the population and their safe havens and support zones.²⁹ This involved careful shaping and clearing operations and constant engagement with the local population to remove enemy forces and eliminate organized resistance in an assigned area by “destroying, capturing, or forcing the withdrawal of insurgent combatants.”³⁰

During the summer months, Marines were forced to cover significant ground, resulting in smaller outposts and patrols. In the southern district of Garmser, Marines constructed over fifty outposts, fourteen of which were manned entirely by Afghan forces.³¹ In all, Marines and their Afghan partners managed to clear and hold over twenty miles of terrain south of the district

center which had been cleared by Marines in the spring of 2008.³² The Marines constantly patrolled, observed the roads from outposts, and protected villages from Taliban intimidation during the night. This helped reverse the security situation in Garmser.³³ By January 2010, the population in the nearly fifteen miles of terrain from the Garmser district center to Mian Poshtey was beginning to show signs that they were open to working with their government.³⁴ Officials in Garmser credit the return of leading tribal elders and their willingness to work with the Afghan government and coalition forces as one of the main drivers of the shift. The commanding general of Regional Command Southwest, which includes the provinces of Helmand and Nimruz, said in July 2010, “[the enemy] are consistently being pushed back further and further away from the various district centers... and they’re consistently being separated from the population.”³⁵

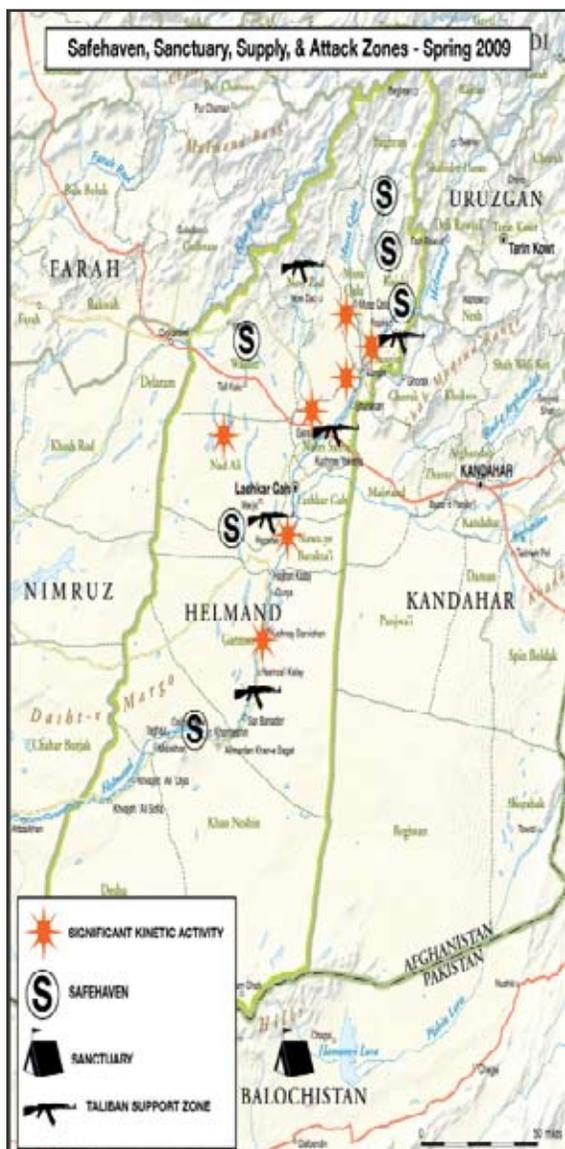
In districts such as Garmser and Nawa clearing operations lasted for several months. Two Marines battalions were airlifted behind the enemy’s forward lines in early July 2009. They were ordered to remain mobile for thirty days in order to engage the enemy, patrol and clear terrain, and to demonstrate to the population that the Marines were not, first and foremost, concerned about force-protection.³⁶ In response to this, the enemy constructed new forward lines just kilometers away from the Marines’ furthest position. In Nawa, Marines estimate that the progression from the clear to the hold stage began during August and September of 2009, in large part due to the aggressive nature of 1st Battalion, 5th Marines, led by Lieutenant Colonel Bill McCullough.³⁷

In Garmser, the complexity and size of the terrain presented more of a challenge.³⁸ The district stretches approximately 100 kilometers from top to bottom along the southern Helmand River Valley. The transition from the clear to the hold in Garmser district center followed months after similar efforts in Nawa.³⁹ Southern Garmser took longer the clear because key population centers in the north were prioritized efforts for Marine clearing and holding operations. Yet, by late 2009 and early 2010, much of Garmser district

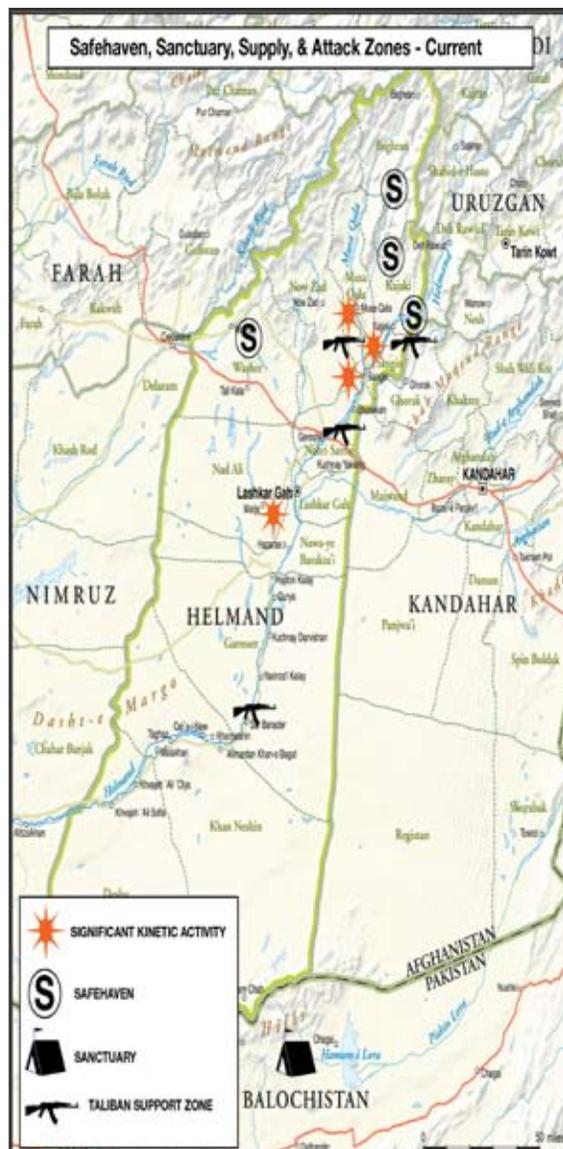
was stable, save for a selection of villages in the extreme south between Khan Neshin and the southernmost point of Garmser.⁴⁰

While these comprehensive, population-centric counterinsurgency operations were primarily focused on protecting and winning the support of the local population, there was also an important counter-terrorism component to target enemy operatives and installations in the deserts surrounding Nawa and Garmser and in the southern reaches of the Helmand River Valley. In areas such as Marjah, Marine Reconnaissance units were able to stem the flow of men and materials flowing into the district, thus preventing the Taliban’s ability to mount a sustained counteroffensive.⁴¹ Counterterrorism operations assist counterinsurgent forces’ ability to secure population zones by degrading the enemy’s ability to man, resource, and conduct counteroffensives. Targeted raids to dismantle enemy safe havens and support zones, killing and capturing enemy commanders, and severing enemy lines of communications assists counterinsurgent forces’ ability to separate insurgents from the population. This helps establish initial security to create the time and space that is needed to provide the population with an acceptable alternative. These operations outside of the population centers allowed Marines and Afghans operating from within the ability to establish a firm security bubble in which the population felt safe enough to begin participating in district governance.

Today, Nawa district is thriving as it progresses from the clear and hold stages of counterinsurgency operations into the build stage.⁴² Abdul Manaf, the district governor, is considered to be very effective in working with Marines and other influential figures in Nawa.⁴³ The presence of the Marines and the building of credible and respectable Afghan governance have compounded the security gains. In June 2009, a few dozen British soldiers were garrisoned in the Nawa district center, suffering nightly Taliban attacks while schools and markets remained closed.⁴⁴ Today, Marines who live at the former British base have not fired a single shot while patrolling during the last five months.⁴⁵ Classrooms throughout the district are now largely



MAP 4 | SAFEHAVENS, SANCTUARY, SUPPLY & ATTACK ZONES - SPRING 2009



MAP 5 | SAFEHAVENS, SANCTUARY, SUPPLY & ATTACK ZONES - CURRENT

full and the local bazaar is thriving.⁴⁶ Progress in Nawa has developed sequentially along three key lines of effort: security, governance and growing civilian confidence.⁴⁷ After months of partnered operations, the ANA in Nawa now have sole responsibility for a number of small patrol bases, and Marines hope to transition full control of security duties in the district entirely to Afghan control throughout 2011. Marines would then redeploy to the outskirts of the district to provide emergency support to Afghan forces and interdict any insurgent re-infiltration efforts from the western desert area that borders the district.⁴⁸

Marines note that one of the next priorities in southern Helmand will be to push out from the southern Helmand River down to the border town of Barham Chah. Through November 2010, Barham Chah continued to serve as the forward deployed sanctuary and logistical hub for Helmand's insurgency in southern Helmand. Barham Chah's location on Helmand's border with Balochistan provides the Taliban with the ideal facilitation point into Helmand, aided by the support of elements of the Pakistani security establishment.⁴⁹ In a late October 2010 operation, ISAF and ANSF

forces assaulted a Taliban logistical hub in the Barham Chah bazaar. The assault force faced significant enemy resistance and discovered numerous IEDs strategically placed to protect the bazaar. Yet, Afghan and coalition forces were able to breach the Taliban’s defenses, and they discovered a staggering amount of narcotics and IED materials. In all, the assault force discovered nearly twenty-four metric tons of ammonium nitrate, capable of resourcing the production of more than 2,000 IEDs; sixty cases of .50 caliber machine-gun ammunition; 500 liters of acid used for the refining of narcotics and 2,000 kg of other precursor chemicals used in the refining process.⁵⁰ The discovery of a cache of this size evidences that Barham Chah remains a critical node of insurgent operations in Helmand.

Unsurprisingly, Marines describe insurgents in Helmand as “pragmatic...positioning themselves just beyond your furthest reach.”⁵¹ Although there is currently a highly-mobile Light Armored Reconnaissance battalion operating to restrict insurgent and narco-trafficker movement through the southern Helmand desert, Marines believe the insurgency is still able to exploit gaps in their positions that allows insurgents continued but limited ability to funnel arms and supplies through the Helmand River Valley.⁵² Since the Marines are not authorized to target insurgent safe havens across Helmand’s border in Pakistan’s Balochistan province, they must attempt to intercept men and materiel after entry into Helmand through Barham Chah. Further restricting the enemy’s ability to reinforce the

DISTRICT COIN IN HELMAND	
MILITARY OPERATION PHASE	SITUATION IN DISTRICT
SHAPE	<p>Enemy: Insurgents enjoy freedom of movement and operational flexibility.</p> <p>Friendly: No freedom of movement for Afghan, PRT, NGO officials. Majority of population unwilling to challenge insurgency.</p>
CLEAR	<p>Enemy: Insurgents engaged in parts of district. Nighttime freedom of movement.</p> <p>Friendly: No freedom of movement for Afghan, PRT, NGO officials in areas not secured by military. Population hesitant to engage with international military or civilian officials.</p>
CLEAR/HOLD	<p>Enemy: Insurgent freedom of movement severely disrupted, decreased engagements with friendly forces. Increased intimidation of population.</p> <p>Friendly: Limited freedom of movement in wider security zone. Road freedom of movement with military assistance. Engagement with local population.</p>
HOLD	<p>Enemy: Enemy activity restricted to perimeters of security zone. Do not threaten coalition or ANSF monopoly of force. Occasional kinetic activity possible.</p> <p>Friendly: Limited freedom of movement in district center and additional security pockets. Freedom of movement within secured zone and with military assistance outside of secured zone. Population willing and able to participate in Afghan governance, development, and reconstruction.</p>
HOLD/BUILD	<p>Enemy: Enemy activity limited to isolated, infrequent attacks that do not deter active participation of the population in Afghan governance, development, and reconstruction.</p> <p>Friendly: Freedom of movement throughout the district. Road freedom of movement to neighboring districts. Majority of population support Afghan governance rather than insurgency.</p>

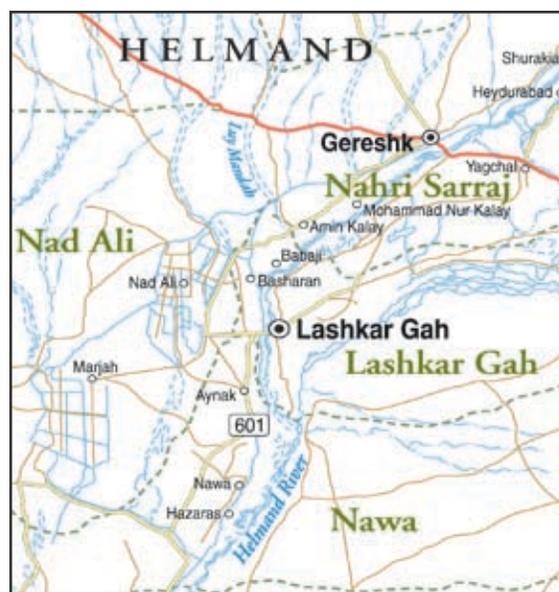
FIGURE 1 | DISTRICT COIN IN HELMAND

insurgency in southern and central Helmand will have a significant impact on the efficacy of their continually weakening operations against Marines, Afghan security forces, and Afghan government officials.

Operation Moshtarak: Dismantling the Enemy's Sanctuary in Central Helmand

In the months following the July 2009 Operation Strike of the Sword in the central and southern Helmand River, the insurgency increasingly consolidated in the town of Marjah in southern Nad Ali district just miles west of the provincial capital of Lashkar Gah. Marjah had been the Taliban's stronghold for years. Marines could not even fly over the town for fear of being targeted by Taliban anti-aircraft munitions.⁵³ The assault on Marjah, the main objective of Operation Moshtarak, commenced just hours before dawn on February 13, 2010. More than sixty helicopters inserted thousands of US and Afghan combat troops into the town and surrounding farmland.⁵⁴ Contemporaneous with the Marines air assault into Marjah, UK forces to the northern end of the district in Nad Ali district mounted a similarly large-scale operation to clear Taliban support and attack zones to the east of the municipal center.⁵⁵ In tandem, these mutually reinforcing operations were largely effective in denying insurgents ground to operate and preventing an immediate counteroffensive. For a more detailed description of the planning and conduct of the operation, see "Operation Moshtarak: Taking and Holding Marjah," a background published by the Institute for the Study of War earlier this year.

Marjah was not only a safe haven for the insurgency, it was an operational support zone for insurgent attacks in Nad Ali to the north, Lashkar Gah, and Nawa to the east. It was also the center of the narcotics trade in Helmand, generating millions of dollars in revenue for the Taliban and narcotics traffickers every year.⁵⁶ Within months of the formation of the Nawa Community Council in October 2009, Taliban fighters from Marjah assassinated three members, including the chairman.⁵⁷ It took months before the remaining members felt safe enough to once again



MAP 6 | NAD ALI, LASHKAR GAH, NAWA & MARJAH

represent their community.⁵⁸ Marjah's central location and proximity to key population centers in central Helmand was the primary reason why US Marines, UK and Afghan forces launched Operation Moshtarak in February 2010.⁵⁹

The two Marine battalions who spearheaded Operation Moshtarak were the first of the "surge" forces to arrive in Afghanistan since the President's announcement in December 2009. The Marines first seized the town's two main bazaars and consolidated their positions to begin slow, detailed clearing operations in the surrounding villages.⁶⁰ Through the spring and early summer of 2010, Taliban fighters were able to re-infiltrate the district, mostly at night, to conduct a targeted intimidation campaign designed to deter Afghans from cooperating with ISAF or government personnel.⁶¹ Despite the increase in coalition forces, the permanent presence of two Marine battalions in Marjah, and assistance from the ANSF, the difficult terrain, innumerable IEDs, and sporadic enemy resistance complicated the clearing operations. There were firefights almost daily and insurgents could operate in the area during the nighttime hours with relative ease.⁶² The enemy continued to intimidate residents through a campaign of night letters and targeted killings which were effective in preventing their cooperation with

US and Afghan forces or the limited presence of Afghan governmental officials.⁶³ Although this was an effective tactic for many months, over time, constant Marine patrols, the establishment of security throughout much of the area and improvements in district governance began to turn the tide in Marjah during the latter half of the summer and fall of 2010.

At the time of this writing, the Marines have maintained at least two battalions in Marjah for more than ten months. The Marines have faced a tough fight in the district, and note that many passive observers maintained overly optimistic timelines regarding the clear and hold phases of the operation.⁶⁴ It has taken longer to stabilize the security situation in Marjah than in the neighboring district of Nawa for several important reasons that help to highlight the complexity of COIN operations in Helmand. First, Marjah possesses unique tribal and geographical differences, as it was populated with settlers from a variety of tribes following the American-led construction of the intricate canal systems during the 1950s.⁶⁵ Conversely, Nawa's majority Barakzai tribe maintains generally congenial relations with the smaller tribes in the area, all of whom are represented on the forty-five member Community Council.⁶⁶ Second, the abusive police force under the leadership of Abdul Rahman Jan terrorized the population in Marjah which, in turn, welcomed the Taliban as their protectors.⁶⁷ Third, the insurgency dominated the area more so than elsewhere by assassinating influential elders who opposed their rule while simultaneously transforming the district into a poppy-producing hub that generated significant revenue for the Taliban and poppy farmers alike.⁶⁸

According to US officials in Helmand, security in Marjah is improving.⁶⁹ Senior Marines describe operations in Marjah as transitioning from the clear to the hold phase.⁷⁰ There is increased freedom of movement on roads both within Marjah and externally, to the capital of Lashkar Gah.⁷¹ Local bazaars are busy and children are attending school.⁷² Daily security incidents have dropped to single digits, typically characterized by the Marines as a "shoot and scoot."⁷³ Much of

these incidents occur on the outskirts of town, where insurgents have been relegated on account of the constant patrolling and Marine expansion outwards from the center.⁷⁴

Further evidence of success in Marjah is the willingness of the local community to support efforts to secure the district. Today, approximately 300 police are serving in Marjah, more than one hundred of whom were recruited locally.⁷⁵ These police are bolstered by increasingly popular "neighborhood watch programs," essentially unarmed individuals who provide information about the insurgency.⁷⁶ Some Marines believe that Marjah has the potential to resemble its neighboring district to the north, Nad Ali, or even Nawa, perhaps as early as the fall of 2011.⁷⁷ Much of this will depend on the effectiveness of counternarcotics programs, the strength of the district community council, and the buy-in of tribal elders and mullahs, all of which have contributed to the stability of Nad Ali and Nawa.

In addition to neighborhood watch programs, Marines have also encouraged the creation of a 500-man strong force from Doottanow, a village in central Marjah—150 of which are registered with the Afghan government.⁷⁸ The group's leader, Haji Baazgul, is a former Mujahideen fighter from the Deftany tribe in Doottanow village and is the current head of the Marjah district council.⁷⁹ Baazgul's group draws its members from one tribe but they insist they are not a tribal militia or *arbaaki*.⁸⁰ Thus far, the group has succeeded in keeping the Taliban out of Doottanow. This has enabled more than 300 children to attend school, the institution of aid and development projects, and the opportunity to exist free from Taliban threats or intimidation.⁸¹ Other villages are currently discussing the feasibility of launching similar groups, although Marines and Afghan forces must remain vigilant to ensure these groups are not embroiled in tribal disputes between neighboring villages and that individual commanders do not use these groups as a personal militia.

The Push North

On June 1, 2010, it was announced that Regional Command South, which maintained responsibility for Afghanistan's southern provinces, would be split into Regional Command South (RC-S) and Regional Command South West (RC-SW).⁸² RC-SW, which became fully operational during the summer months, assumed sole responsibility for Helmand and Nimruz, while RC-S maintained responsibility for Kandahar, Uruzgan, Daykundi, and Zabul provinces. According to UK Major General Gordon Messenger, the change was necessary due to the increased complexity of the command challenge in southern Afghanistan, as well as the massive increase in coalition forces.⁸³

Major General Richard Mills was selected as the commander of RC-SW with command authority over I Marine Expeditionary Force (I MEF), while Brigadier General Joseph Osterman was selected as Assistant Division Commander, 1st Marine Division. The British-led Task Force Helmand was transferred to the command authority of I MEF, consolidating and concentrating its efforts in central Helmand between Nad Ali district and Nahri Sarraj district.⁸⁴ The British Battle Group that previously maintained responsibility for the northern districts of Kajaki and Sangin transferred responsibility for the area to a Marines Corps Regimental Combat Team in September 2010, which allowed UK forces to further consolidate and concentrate their efforts in central Helmand.

The Marines' push into northern Helmand is an expansion of the original mission to concentrate efforts in southern and central Helmand. Since March 2010, Marines have slowly expanded from southern and central Helmand into permanent positions in northern Helmand, namely, Musa Qala, Kajaki, and Sangin as well as portions of neighboring Nimruz province, where the focus is mainly special operations missions and police training.⁸⁵

The Marine force in northern Helmand is led by Regimental Combat Team-2 (RCT-2), commanded by Colonel Paul Kennedy. Although

the Marines are aggressively targeting Taliban insurgents and focused on expanding their footprint beyond the district centers of Musa Qala, Kajaki, and Sangin, it is currently unclear if there is enough available force to clear and hold significant portions of that terrain. In June 2010, it was reported that Secretary Gates discussed sending more force to northern Helmand to execute a fully resourced COIN effort, but since then, there has been no further public discussion of this.⁸⁶

The Marines' decision to commit additional resources to northern Helmand appears to be a product of multiple factors. First, UK forces in the north considered it a "logical" move to redeploy to central Helmand to concentrate their limited forces and apply them in a smaller geographic area that is more equitably suited to the size and scale of their Helmand contingent. Defence Secretary Liam Fox stated that this decision to turn over the remainder of northern Helmand to the Marines was "fully discussed, and agreed [to]" by General Stanley McChrystal and General David Petraeus, after it was decided that the Marines would not be sent to Kandahar to help resource the pending operation.⁸⁷ Second, the Marines' targeting of the insurgent-narcotics nexus necessitated a push north to dismantle the pre-existing narcotics establishments and those that relocated in areas like Sangin following their expulsion from Marjah. According to Colonel Kennedy, the Helmand narcotics network is a "linked...circulatory system."⁸⁸ Finally, Marines of I MEF believe that securing the Kajaki dam facility and the route from Sangin to Kajaki will allow for the implementation of USAID's plan to refurbish the Kajaki dam which includes the installation of the dam's third turbine. The belief is that this will enable greater access to electricity for central and northern Helmand in addition to neighboring Kandahar.⁸⁹

The Marines' first foray into northern Helmand began in 2008 when they arrived in the district of Now Zad to relieve British forces and execute a training mission with the district's police.⁹⁰ Shortly after arriving, they discovered there were no police to train.⁹¹ Instead, the Marines

discovered a town, abandoned of its residents, that was a Taliban stronghold, serving as a command and control hub for the Taliban in northern Helmand.⁹² With only a few hundred men, Marines were unable to clear much of the district until reinforcements arrived prior to the launch of Operation Eastern Resolve II in August 2009. This operation was followed by Operation Cobra's Anger in December 2009, where the Marines were inserted behind enemy lines with decisive force—enemy resistance quickly unraveled.⁹³ By March 2010, over 1,000 families had returned to the district, as the Taliban was no longer able to challenge coalition and Afghan troop's monopoly over the use of force.⁹⁴ The population was estimated to be at a four-year high by June 2010 and it is still increasing, a testament to Marine and Afghan forces ability to establish a secure environment.⁹⁵ Today, according to Major General Richard Mills, coalition forces are thinning out in Now Zad, replaced by increasingly capable ANSF.⁹⁶ The challenge remains getting the Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) to conduct projects in the district since the priority effort continues to be central Helmand.⁹⁷

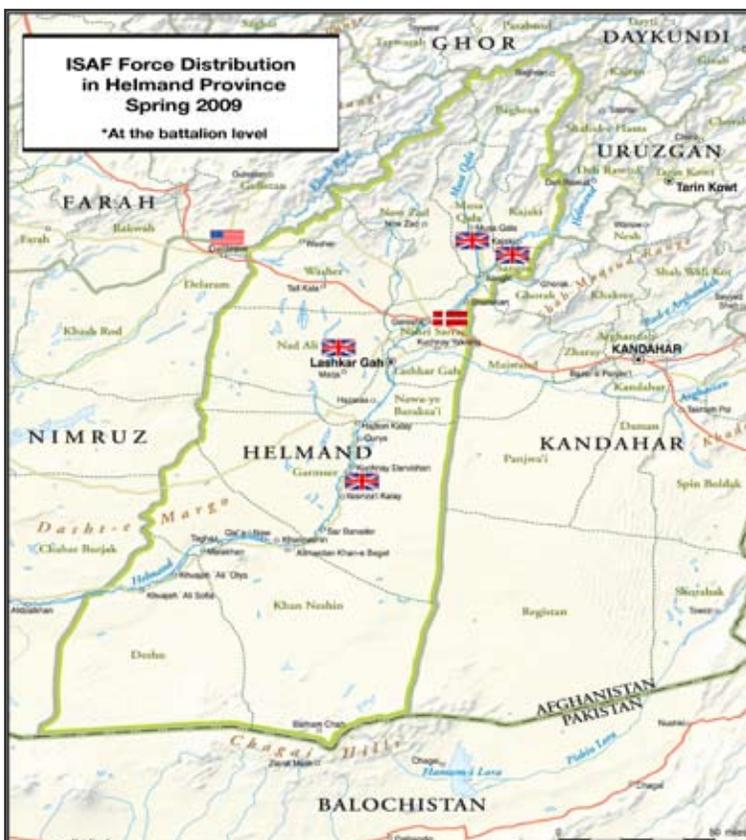
In late March 2010, 1st Battalion, 2nd Marines replaced the 500-strong British contingent in Musa Qala.⁹⁸ Within days of their arrival in Musa Qala, Marines pushed beyond the northern extent of the British-controlled area, seizing a Taliban-held town.⁹⁹ Marines also pushed south into the farmlands surrounding the district center.¹⁰⁰ Throughout the course of operations, forces discovered a Taliban prison that had been operating for years, holding as many as seventy prisoners as well as a separate installation of underground tunnels and bunkers the insurgency used to secretly maneuver around the area.¹⁰¹ Although there is still fighting to the south and east of the district center, security gains are evident. Several Taliban groups have reconciled with the local government. Locals have assisted security forces in identifying and even removing IEDs.¹⁰²

Perhaps most importantly, the Marines leaned on Governor Mangal to replace the ineffective, former Taliban commander and district governor

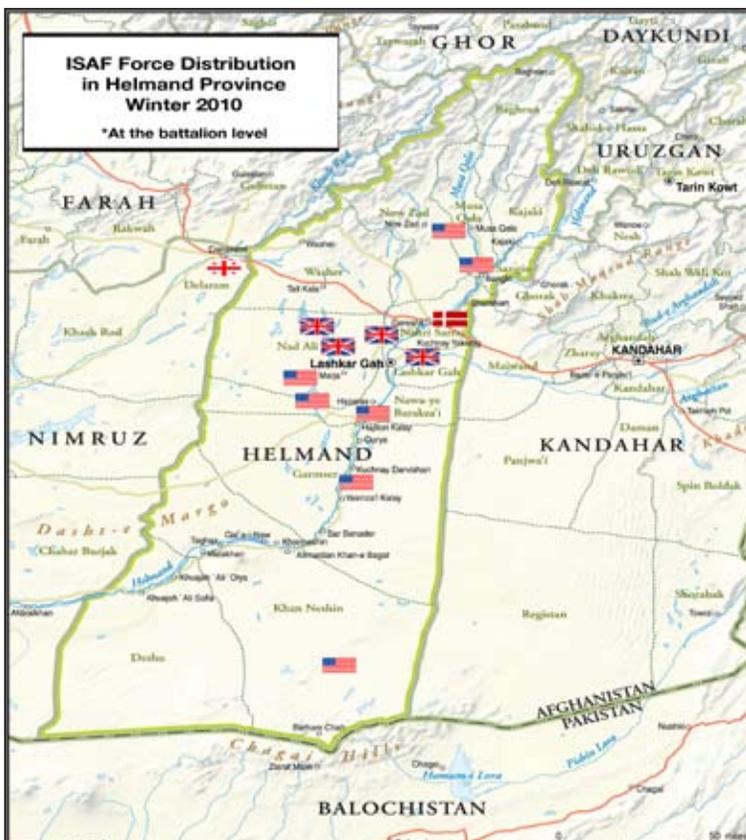
of Musa Qala, Mullah Salem. Salem was named district governor in 2007 at the urging of President Karzai who felt the former commander and his militia could convince Taliban fighters to reconcile with the Afghan government and thus bring peace to the district.¹⁰³ Salem's militia illegally taxed merchants, destroyed residents' property, and forced Afghans to work in its poppy fields, thus tainting not only Salem and his militia but all aspects of Afghan governance in Musa Qala.¹⁰⁴ Salem was replaced in July 2010 by the newly-appointed district governor, Niamatullah Sameen, a former school teacher and a government employee of twenty-five years.¹⁰⁵

Since the Marines arrival and their aggressive expansion, the main bazaar has tripled in size due to improved security along the major access roads in and out of the district.¹⁰⁶ The deputy district governor, Mohammad Akbar Khan, believes that "day by day" things are improving in Musa Qala.¹⁰⁷ The Marines brought with them a Civil Affairs Team that can execute small-scale development and reconstruction projects.¹⁰⁸ In the district center, electricity and cell phone service is available.¹⁰⁹ These projects, along with security and advancement of good district governance will be needed to break the trend of broken promises and deep skepticism that residents of the district have developed over the past several years.

Just twenty miles south of Musa Qala is the district of Sangin, the most dangerous of Helmand's northern districts. More than one hundred UK forces were killed during the four years of combat in the district.¹¹⁰ US Marines formally took over responsibility from the approximately 1200-strong UK contingent in late September 2010, although elements of 3rd Battalion, 7th Marines had been operating alongside UK forces in the district since July 2010.¹¹¹ 3/7 Marines were replaced in October 2010 by 3rd Battalion, 5th Marines, who currently maintain responsibility for the district.¹¹² The Marine battalion is assisted by a reconnaissance battalion (1st Recon) which includes two Marine reconnaissance companies and a force reconnaissance platoon operating in the upper Sangin valley and a company of Georgian soldiers operating on the western side



MAP 7 | ISAF FORCE DISTRIBUTION - SPRING 2009



MAP 8 | ISAF FORCE DISTRIBUTION - WINTER 2010

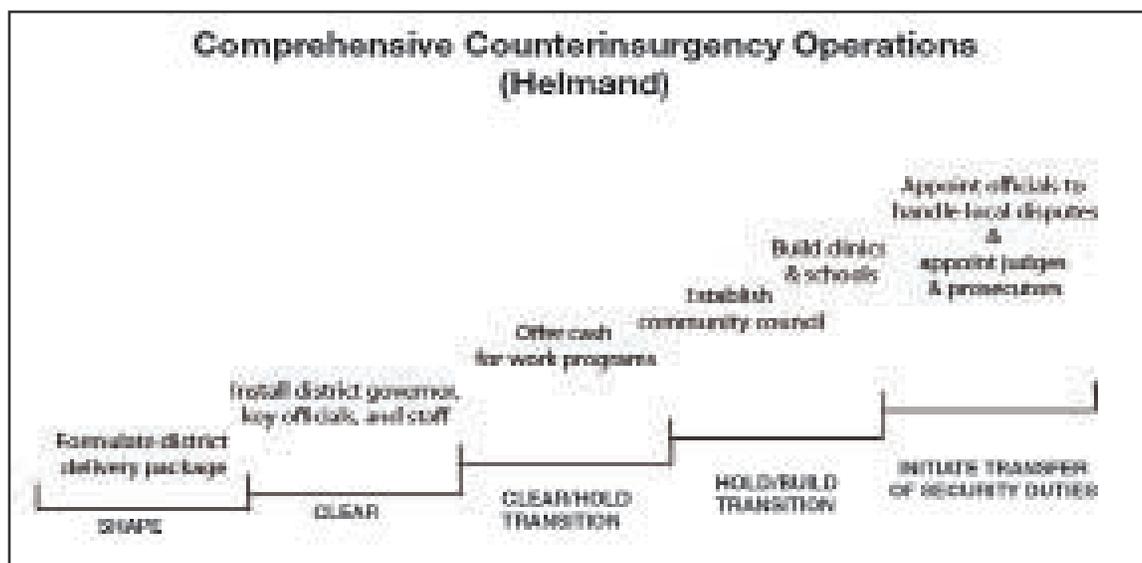


FIGURE 2 | COMPREHENSIVE COIN IN HELMAND

of the Helmand River, which runs through the district.¹¹³ MIAI tanks are scheduled to arrive in January.¹¹⁴

For the Taliban in Helmand, the area between Sangin and Kajaki is one of its few remaining strongholds.¹¹⁵ Not only has the area become for the center of the insurgent-narcotics nexus in Helmand following their ousting from Marjah, the area also serves as a major storage hub for insurgent munitions and for the manufacturing of IEDs that are distributed and emplaced throughout the area.¹¹⁶ One such hub, considered the Taliban’s command and control center for Sangin, was raided in mid-October, revealing more than six fifty-five pound barrels of homemade explosives (HME).¹¹⁷ Marines in Helmand consider the district to be the key crossroad to funnel drugs, weapons and fighters throughout northern and central Helmand and into neighboring Kandahar. Ghorak and Maiwand districts in Kandahar have been key Taliban lines of communication connecting Kandahar, Helmand and Uruzgan, and roads lead directly from these areas to Sangin district.¹¹⁸

When the Marines assumed responsibility for Sangin, they closed roughly half of the twenty-two patrol bases that UK forces had established throughout the district.¹¹⁹ The problem with the British “platoon house” strategy was that far too much force was required to protect the

positions from Taliban attacks, and UK forces were unable to patrol sufficiently.¹²⁰ The result was that the Taliban were allowed to move about the district with ease. Closing patrol bases freed-up Marines to patrol aggressively throughout a twenty-five square mile area containing approximately 25,000 residents.¹²¹ Yet, they have faced significant enemy resistance. The battalion engaged in more than one hundred firefights since arriving in Sangin.¹²² At least twenty-three Marines have lost their lives in Sangin while more than 100 have been wounded.¹²³ The IED threat alone is so great that Marines plan to deploy a company of the massive, MIAI Abrams tanks to the area.¹²⁴ Aside from heavy patrolling, Marines have also increasingly relied on airstrikes and mortars in addition to targeted raids into the remote mountains to the north and the eastern desert.¹²⁵

In Sangin, Marines have killed or captured over 600 enemy fighters within the last four months.¹²⁶ Comparatively, the last British unit in the district killed just over 100 enemy fighters in six months. During a six week period alone, 1st Recon battalion killed nearly 250 enemy fighters.¹²⁷ Enemy reports suggest that fighters are complaining to their senior leadership in Quetta, Pakistan that they cannot fight “toe to toe” with Marines.¹²⁸ Many are refusing to engage in direct combat.¹²⁹

Marines are also enlisting the help of Afghans to share the security burden, much like what has been successfully implemented in Marjah. The Alikozai are the largest tribe in Sangin but have been reluctant to turn against the Taliban since their efforts to do so in 2007 went unsupported by coalition forces, who at that time were concerned over getting involved in a messy tribal dispute between Alikozai elders and rival Alizais, some of whom were Taliban supporters.¹³⁰ Improving the security situation north of Sangin has helped to establish relations with the Alikozai tribe. Although in its earliest stages, successfully bringing the Alikozai in to the district government will be a significant achievement that will lead to increased stability.¹³¹ At the same time, Marines must also be careful not to alienate elements of the Ishaqzai tribe who are also present in Sangin and have been largely excluded from involvement in administrative affairs.

Despite the Marines progress in Sangin, it does not appear that there are currently enough forces to conduct comprehensive counterinsurgency operations beyond the area where they are currently operating. District Governor Mohammad Sharif stated that the district is roughly 200 square miles with a population approaching 100,000 people.¹³² This would require a significantly larger force for effective counterinsurgency operations. Yet, the Marines must be careful not to become overstretched. Therefore, their current focus should remain on bolstering security in the central districts while relying on carefully selected contingents of locally recruited defense forces and special operations forces in the outlying areas, especially the northern Sangin valley in the Alikozai strongholds.¹³³

Marines are also focused on clearing and securing Route 611 that stretches north from Sangin to Kajaki district, and is the only major road between the two districts.¹³⁴ The main reason for securing the road and the associated push north to Kajaki is to allow for the transiting of materials, namely concrete, to install the third and final turbine at the Kajaki dam.¹³⁵ For the past several years, coalition forces were unable to transport

materials from Highway One in central Helmand to Kajaki due to insecurity on Route 611. Marines believe that securing the road and the environs around the dam facility will allow for increased electricity for northern and central Helmand in addition to neighboring Kandahar. The resources that will be required to secure the road to Kajaki will likely be extensive. The road is paved from Highway One to approximately twenty kilometers south of the Sangin district center.¹³⁶ Much of what remains has been graded and prepared for paving. 3/5 Marines cleared ten kilometers north of the Sangin district center using explosive-breaching machinery, uncovering dozens of large IEDs.¹³⁷ Marines have constructed outposts along this stretch of highway to hold their gains. Approximately thirty-five kilometers of road up to Kajaki remains to be secured.¹³⁸ Alikozai may be willing to ensure freedom of movement for U.S. and Afghan forces for much of the remaining highway approaching the outskirts of Kajaki.¹³⁹ Marines suggest this may accelerate plans to install the third and final turbine at the Kajaki dam and allow for increased freedom of movement for the population and for increased economic activity in the local bazaars.¹⁴⁰

In June 2010, US Marines officially relieved British Royal Marine Commandos who held responsibility for Kajaki district, specifically, for securing the dam facility. A Marine artillery company, India Battery of 3rd Battalion, 12th Marines, maintains responsibility for Kajaki district and the dam facility. They are supported by howitzers, Marine helicopter gunships, and fixed-wing craft.¹⁴¹ Marines of India Battery have been in a tough fight in Kajaki since taking over responsibility for the district from the Royal Marines. Aside from aggressively patrolling the terrain surrounding the dam, Marines are also charged with securing several miles of Route 611 south of the facility while 3/5 Marines continue the push north from Sangin.¹⁴² The Marines' progress has encouraged select tribal elements to express their desire to begin working with the Afghan government in Kajaki.¹⁴³ A new district governor is in the process of being appointed and more than 100 police have been sent to Kajaki to assist in security efforts.¹⁴⁴ Securing the entirety

of Route 611 and increasing the involvement and participation of the local tribes will be a tremendous accelerant of progress in Kajaki.¹⁴⁵ However, given the extent of the challenge and the limited number of forces currently available for the push through Sangin to Kajaki, it is likely that Marines will face a tough fight, at least through the first half of 2011.

The Marines' push to Kajaki also represents an opportunity to degrade the power and negative influence of Sher Mohammad Akhundzada, discussed at length in the later section of this report. Akhundzada is perhaps the most influential figure among the Alizais in northern Helmand, but particularly among his Hasanzai sub-tribe. If the Marines are able to effectively bring security and good governance to Kajaki and the surrounding territory, it may present a critical opportunity to co-opt large portions of the Alizai and thus, work to degrade Akhundzada's powerbase. If the push north can effectively work to weaken the Akhundzada network's influence, it may be possible to persuade President Karzai to cease his support of the network. If the Akhundzada network is unable to sufficiently secure the political interests of the president and the alleged illicit interests of his brother Ahmed Wali and the Noorzais in southern Afghanistan, the costs of the president's support for the network may begin to outweigh any remaining benefits.¹⁴⁶

THE AFGHAN NATIONAL SECURITY FORCES IN HELMAND

Afghan National Army

Building the Afghan National Security Forces is a national undertaking that is overseen by NATO Training Mission Afghanistan (NTM-A) and the Combined Security Transition Command-Afghanistan (CSTC-A), under the command of LTG William Caldwell. At the regional level and below, the ANA is organized into Corps. The 205th "Hero" Corps, formed in 2004, was responsible for operations in southern Afghanistan until the 215th Corps was formed and activated in April 2010 and given responsibility

for Helmand and Nimruz.¹⁴⁷ 215th "Maiwand" Corps was formed from units of other ANA Corps in addition to being resourced by newly minted recruits from the Kabul National Training Center in Kabul.¹⁴⁸ As of summer 2010, 215th Corps had nearly 6,800 soldiers present for duty with the goal of reaching an authorized end-strength of 11,000 by the end of 2010.¹⁴⁹

The previous history of ANSF performance in Helmand had not been encouraging, although recently, there are significant signs of improvement. During Operation Strike of the Sword in July 2009, there were only 650 ANSF (mainly ANA) that were available for partnering with over 4,000 US Marines. Brigadier General Larry Nicholson, the Marine Expeditionary Brigade Commanding General, stated that he did not have enough Afghan force because "they're just not available right now."¹⁵⁰ According to General Nicholson, the ideal partnership ratio would have been one Marine battalion partnered with one ANA battalion (*kandak*).¹⁵¹ By November, Marines in Helmand had 300 Afghan Uniformed Police (AUP), 1,300 Army troops, and 500 border police, leaving them with the poorest ratio of Afghan to coalition forces in the country.¹⁵² Yet, even with minimal Afghan forces, many Marine battalions were partnering with ANA soldiers during most patrols in Helmand.¹⁵³ The arrival of an ANA battalion in Nawa during the earliest stages of Strike of the Sword helped put an Afghan face on Marine patrols throughout the district.¹⁵⁴

By the time Operation Moshtarak commenced in early February 2010, the ANA and the paramilitary Afghan National Civil Order Police (ANCOP) were prepared to play a more substantive role. Six ANA battalions, or a force of approximately 2,100 ANA soldiers, two special commando battalions, and 1,000 ANCOP participated in the operation.¹⁵⁵ The Marines achieved a 3:1 partnering ratio with Afghan forces while one ANA battalion operated entirely independently; this is compared with the 10:1 partnering ratio just eight months prior.¹⁵⁶ Although Afghan forces did not lead the operations or the planning, they did serve as the lead for engaging with locals in Marjah

and for searching Afghan homes.¹⁵⁷ According to one Marine squad commander in Marjah, ANA troops “understand all of our formations, they understand how to move. They know how to flank and they can recognize the bad guys a lot better than we can... they are a lot better than the Iraqis.”¹⁵⁸

Troop quantity is not the same as troop quality and capability, and overall, the primary focus has been quantity. While the ANA are often the most respected and well trained elements of the ANSF, their performance on the battlefield in Marjah was not without problems. Some ANA units exhibited poor behavior, including looting local bazaars, drug use, and a refusal to follow orders.¹⁵⁹ According to some accounts, the ANA refused to carry supplies to their counterparts operating nearby.¹⁶⁰ Part of the challenge was that many of the 215th Corps units were quickly assembled from various other units.¹⁶¹ Much of the officer corps was “as newly minted as the Corps itself,” and many of the company-grade officers were serving in their very first unit.¹⁶²

In June, according to the top ANSF training advisor to the Marines in Helmand, one should expect a growth period coupled with a hesitancy to act.¹⁶³ A significant portion of the Corps was “force-fed” from the Kabul National Training Center rather than from the Marines own training facility, Joint Security Academy Shorabak, located adjacent to the Afghan’s Camp Shorabak at Camp Leatherneck.¹⁶⁴ Marines live and bunk with Afghan trainees at the Leatherneck facility in order to build trust and camaraderie, which allows for approximately fourteen to fifteen hours of instruction each day for eight weeks.¹⁶⁵ Training includes classroom instruction, marksmanship, and leadership training. Instruction criteria is set by the Afghan Ministry of Interior and enhanced with additional Marine instruction.¹⁶⁶ As of mid-summer 2010, the 215th Corps was “right on the glide slope of where you’d expect [the new soldiers] to be,” according to Marine commander Brigadier General Joseph Osterman, who observed similar challenges training the Iraqi Army several years prior.¹⁶⁷

In some districts, such as Nawa, the ANA rates



Chief Warrant Officer 2 John L. Allnut congratulates a soldier with the Afghanistan National Army, who completed a tactical small unit leader course, during an awards ceremony, Oct. 24, 2010 at FOB Camp Hanson, Helmand province. (ISAF photo)

above average in core capabilities and unit cohesion. The battalion worked together for more than a year as a national drug-eradication force, which despite the lack of extensive military training, has significantly improved its ability to perform in the field.¹⁶⁸ Yet, much of the ANA has been trained to a minimum standard due to expediency and urgent demand. Therefore, even simple tasks can provide an opportunity to bolster relationships with a partnering force. One example that highlights these shortcomings and the importance of partnership was recounted to the author by a senior Marine officer in Helmand:

“The ANA living quarters was disorganized and unkempt. The sanitary issues likely contributed to many falling ill on a regular basis. Across the way was an encampment of Marines. The ANA marveled at the organization and cleanliness of the camp. When I told them we could show them how to make theirs look like ours they were very pleased. We took trash bags and picked up trash with them, we showed them how to order and align their tents...their camp has been spotless ever since. Sometimes [westerners] take these sorts of simple things for granted.”¹⁶⁹

The experience in Helmand demonstrates the importance of partnering and mentorship in continuing the training and improvement of the

Afghan forces once they are fielded.¹⁷⁰ In fact, in districts such as Nawa, partnering has improved ANA capability such that the Marines have transferred responsibility for populated areas and five patrol bases to Afghan Army control.¹⁷¹ Within the district, some ANA troops conduct regular patrols independent of their Marine partners who have since relocated two miles away.¹⁷²

By late summer 2010, Major General Richard Mills reported that the 215th Corps was able to execute small, independent operations, including operating in enemy controlled territory for days without coalition artillery or logistical support. Over the summer, the ANA planned, led, and supported Operation Hope Four in the district of Nahri Sarraj near the city of Gereshk. 215th Corps, along with US Marines, were partnered at every level, from the Corps level down to the platoon level. Marines in Helmand are currently focused on increasing the capacity of Afghan Army non-commissioned officers (NCOs). This effort is designed to “train the trainers” who will go on to instruct recent recruits on infantrymen skills such as land navigation, weapons handling and maintenance, patrolling, and site exploitation.¹⁷³

Afghan National Police

The performance of the ANP has been particularly problematic. Since the summer of 2005, police in Helmand were little more than a militia controlled by then-governor Sher Mohammad Akhundzada.¹⁷⁴ Akhundzada and his former police chief, Abdul Rahman Jan, used the police force for their own ends, particularly in facilitating a massive narcotics network in the central Helmand River Valley.¹⁷⁵ Many residents of the area harbor deep-seeded hostility towards the police for the years of abuse and predatory behavior they endured.¹⁷⁶ In early July 2009, as Operation Strike of the Sword was launched, General Nicholson described Helmand’s police as a “fledgling” force that was “not as well trained as we would like.”¹⁷⁷

The Afghan Uniformed Police is the primary police force and it performs law enforcement duties in districts and villages.¹⁷⁸ The AUP receive

basic literacy, survival, and police training. Their primary focus is to protect the population from violence and stem criminality at the local level.¹⁷⁹ They are not, nor should they be the primary force for combating the insurgency. Though limited, the AUP’s participation in Operation Strike of the Sword was the first major opportunity for the population to re-engage with what senior commanders hope will be the face of peacekeeping at the district and village level.

In the southern Helmand district of Khan Neshin, district governor Massoud Balouch received only fifty of the 120 police officers he was promised. According to Massoud, they were poorly trained, with only ten percent having undergone any formal training, and they preyed on the local population.¹⁸⁰ Of the police who did report for duty, nineteen were fired for testing positive for drugs.¹⁸¹ In other areas, the police have been accused of setting up illegal checkpoints on roadways to tax the local population. On Afghanistan’s main highway that runs through Helmand and Kandahar, police have been accused of stopping cars and demanding anywhere from twenty to one hundred Afghani (approximately \$0.50-\$2.00).¹⁸² For residents in Helmand, this sort of predatory behavior on behalf of an institution of the Afghan government is deeply disturbing. Behavior such as this actively drives the population away from the government, if not into the arms of a waiting insurgency. ISAF, as a whole, must do more to understand the extent of the damage of predatory behavior and specifically what more can be done to help curb it.

To help remedy the shortfalls in the police, the Interim Helmand PRT built the Helmand Police Training Center in December 2009 under the lead-responsibility of the UK.¹⁸³ The facility is capable of training up to 180 new recruits every three weeks.¹⁸⁴ In part, recruits come from Marines and UK soldier’s interactions with local populations, particularly from the recommendations of tribal elders who command the respect of their local villagers.¹⁸⁵ The importance of influential and respected tribal elders as a driver of recruitment cannot be understated. Since opening in December, the center has trained more than 1,200 patrolmen

and 130 non-commissioned officers. According to Brigadier Richard Felton, the former Commander of UK forces in Helmand, the police trained at the center “are well-motivated, they have a good ethos, they are well-trained and they stand out as a beacon within their societies.”¹⁸⁶

In Nawa, after the Marines initiated Strike of the Sword in the summer of 2009, they were forced to recruit, train and field a new police force which was practically non-existent prior to the operation.¹⁸⁷ In Garmser in September 2009, there were only eighty-five police on a force that was authorized for 150.¹⁸⁸ Over the course of the following months, the Garmser district governor was able to engineer the return of several influential local elders, many of whom backed the creation of a more robust and effective local police force. The result was the loss of support for the Taliban including the surrender of twenty Taliban fighters during the first four months of 2010.¹⁸⁹ By May, there were more men volunteering for the police force than there were available slots on the *tashkil* (manning document).¹⁹⁰

By the summer of 2010, recruitment, development, and professionalization had begun to show some progress. In Marjah, approximately 100 of more than 300 of the district’s police were recruited from among the local populous.¹⁹¹ The head of the PRT in Helmand, Lindy Cameron, stated that people in Marjah “are actually asking



Afghan National Police stand in formation and listen to an International Security Assistance Force Special Operations Forces soldier explain small unit tactics. (ISAF Photo)

for more, better-trained police from their local area... local boys from their area go off, do the eight-week training course, and come back able to police their local area, knowing who the bad guys are.”¹⁹² There are now three police stations near the bazaars in Marjah with embedded Marine mentor teams which significantly increased the professionalization of the force.¹⁹³ According to General Nicholson, local ANSF recruitment is a good metric for assessing the sentiment of the local population.¹⁹⁴

More generally, police in certain districts appear to be gaining the trust and support of the local populace, with whom they interact on a daily basis during patrolling and law enforcement tasks.¹⁹⁵ For instance, in the provincial capital of Lashkar Gah, Afghan police and army forces remain solely responsible for security duties. The current Commanding General of RC-SW recently stated that “in the coming months ahead, there will be areas in which we can turn over a significant portion of security to them [police]—for their execution.”¹⁹⁶ According to Marines, close partnering with Afghan police during workdays and off-days in tandem with local, community-driven recruitment has had profound positive effects on the efficacy and professionalization of the force.¹⁹⁷ It is believed that these close partnerships and intimate training opportunities that are replicated throughout the province, will speed up the Marines’ transition of security duties to the ANSF.¹⁹⁸

In Nawa district, Marines state that the local police “defy the reputation they have around the country,” conducting regular patrols in far-flung, remote outposts. Yet, there have been some challenges. Two rival police chiefs, one in northern Nawa and one in southern Nawa, prevented the establishment of a district-wide, cohesive force.¹⁹⁹ Both have since been replaced but many policemen maintain loyalty to their former bosses, rather than to the institution. Meanwhile, claims of increasing criminality in the absence of an effective law enforcement presence have been growing.²⁰⁰ Before they transition more security responsibility, the Marines must closely mentor and partner with the police to help curb the influence of their former commanders and

ensure that the northern and southern forces unite and maintain loyalty to the uniform rather than personalities.

The problematic influence of local personalities is also evident in northern Helmand province. In Musa Qala, the effectiveness of the police is largely due to their commander, a local and one-time Taliban fighter and alleged narcotics trafficker Hajji Abdul Wali Khan, simply known as Haji Koka.²⁰¹ Koka broke ties with the Taliban following his arrest by ISAF in 2002 and the subsequent murder of his brother at the hands of the Taliban.²⁰² Between 2003 and 2004, he and his force of approximately 140 men were officially sanctioned as “police.” In 2006, the British forced Karzai to remove Koka over accusations from the local population of human rights abuses, killings, robberies, murder, and the collection of approximately \$20,000 per day in opium taxes.²⁰³ In 2008, under pressure from the Afghan Ministry of Interior, ANA, and President Karzai, Koka was reinstated as police chief amidst claims of deteriorating security since his removal.²⁰⁴

Koka and his force have provided a check against the abusive and predatory former district governor, Mullah Salem, and have assisted ISAF in intelligence gathering and interaction with the local population, including the contentious issue of home searches which Koka’s men often conduct at ISAF’s behest. According to all available accounts, Koka has helped bring stability to the district center where his force operated under the supervision of US Marines. Beyond the district center, Koka’s force has limited influence although his forces provide protection services for US and NATO supply convoys throughout southern Afghanistan. Koka has been accused of arresting a resident with supposed Taliban links and demanding approximately \$8,000 for his release.²⁰⁵ Koka recently handpicked a selection of fourteen men to be trained as specialized commandos which will soon be able to conduct timely, small-scale operations.²⁰⁶ Despite the benefits of an influential, powerful, anti-Taliban police commander, Marines in Helmand must weigh those benefits against the population’s perception of Koka as a predatory actor. The

Marines in Helmand should use their increased presence in Musa Qala to closely mentor and supervise Koka and his force to ensure that their actions are not alienating large swaths of the local population.

COUNTERNARCOTICS IN HELMAND

Helmand is the largest poppy producing province in Afghanistan. For the Taliban in southern Afghanistan, the narcotics trade is among their principle sources of revenue. A Senate report from July 2010 found that, “the drug traffickers are co-equals with the Taliban regarding the production of narcotics in Afghanistan.”²⁰⁷ Estimates suggest the Taliban earns up to \$70 million a year from the country-wide narcotics trade, which it uses to pay for operating expenses, material, and insurgent salaries.²⁰⁸ A large portion of that total comes from Helmand.

For years, the international community struggled to find a solution that would reduce production and funding to the insurgency without alienating impoverished farming communities. Not only do insurgents encourage cultivation of the poppy crop, but they offer highly desired protection against eradication and interference by Afghan and coalition forces. In 2007, opium production in Afghanistan soared to unprecedented levels due to increasing insecurity, Taliban encouragement, and rising farm-gate prices (the net value of opium when it is collected from farmers).²⁰⁹ Afghanistan was responsible for the production of ninety-three percent of the global opiate market. In 2007, approximately half of Afghanistan’s total opium haul was produced in Helmand province.²¹⁰

The US government’s policy on counternarcotics in Afghanistan was based on five key pillars: poppy eradication, drug interdiction, judicial reform measures, public awareness campaigns, and economic and agricultural development assistance.²¹¹ The debate over effective courses of action aimed at reducing poppy cultivation and opium production has taken many forms over the past several years, from aerial pesticide spraying to full-scale eradication. Aerial spraying risked

alienating the entirety of Helmand's farming population, wholly at odds with a population-centric counterinsurgency strategy. For the very same reasons, full-scale eradication without sufficient economic and agricultural assistance was also insufficient.

According to the Commanding General of Regional Command Southwest, Major General Richard Mills, the amount of land dedicated to poppy production in Helmand has been reduced by nearly half and the insurgents "are being pushed further and further away from the river and the very important narcotics-growing areas that they've used for years to fund the insurgency."²¹² The Marines have made counternarcotics an important part of their overall operational focus since the summer of 2009. Those efforts, detailed below, combined with that of the Afghan government and PRT are having some success.

Alternative Livelihoods

Between 2008 and 2009, the US government significantly altered its approach to counternarcotics in Afghanistan, moving away from eradication in favor of interdiction, while increasing agricultural assistance to farmers, also known as alternative livelihood development.²¹³ Alternative livelihood development is a multifaceted approach aimed at swaying farmers to cease poppy cultivation. The Afghanistan Vouchers for Increased Production in Agriculture Plus (AVIPA-P), an expansion of the original AVIPA program designed to increase basic wheat production, and Governor Mangal's Food Zone Program are the main mechanisms for encouraging the planting of licit crops over illicit crops. AVIPA-P has distributed wheat seeds and fertilizer. It has also offered technical assistance to farmers in Helmand in addition to "cash for work" programs designed to modernize Helmand's agricultural infrastructure.²¹⁴ AVIPA-P provides small grants for tools and machinery, agricultural vouchers, increasing training, and capacity development.²¹⁵



Narcotics seizure in the Helmand desert (ISAF Photo)

Governor Mangal's Food Zone Program, implemented shortly after he began his tenure as governor in the spring of 2008, is currently in its third year of existence. The program's premise states that it is illegal to grow poppy while, at the same time, offering farmers inputs for alternative planting options.²¹⁶ In exchange for alternative crop assistance, farmers must sign pledges stating that they will not grow poppy. Helmand Governor Mangal, a firm believer in targeted crop eradication, has pledged to eradicate the fields of farmers who continue to grow poppy. Marines in Helmand believe this is an important enforcement mechanism in certain areas where legitimate alternative livelihood programs exist. Yet, the Marines have also been instrumental in curbing Governor Mangal's desire to greatly expand eradication efforts, as they fear this could provoke widespread alienation and discontent amongst Helmand's farming populace.²¹⁷ In the past year, new criteria was established to help determine eradication targets, including farmer's access to wheat seed distribution, proximity to provincial or district centers (for access to markets), and whether or not a farmer's land could support growing more than one crop per year.²¹⁸

In 2009, poppy production fell by thirty-three percent, and it fell an additional seven percent in 2010.²¹⁹ Additionally, wheat prices (the main alternative to poppy in Helmand) also fell in 2010; however, opium production still shrank, indicating that some farmers decided to plant licit crops despite less attractive crop prices.²²⁰



US Marines assigned to the female engagement team (FET) of I MEF (Forward) conduct a patrol alongside a poppy field while visiting Afghan settlements in Boldak, Afghanistan, April 5, 2010. (DoD Photo)

This decrease in production was largely due to the spread of a disease that affected the poppy crop, primarily in Helmand and Kandahar.²²¹ Yet, the decrease in production caused farm-gate prices to spike over 150 percent. There is widespread concern that if prices remain high next planting season, farmers will be faced with a difficult choice. A recent study concludes that farmers who best managed the transition from illicit to licit crops over the past several years produced a surplus of opium and invested in local income streams such as livestock, transport, and trading.²²² It is unclear if last year's production shortfall will inhibit this shift. A household's capacity to absorb the impact of abandoning or reducing poppy production is therefore closely tied to economic opportunities available to them as well as the degree of financial outlays due to family events such as death or illness, crop failure, and the like.²²³

Some experts contend that the main reason for farmers' shift towards licit crops is due to the decadal trend of shrinking opium prices.²²⁴ This trend is largely due to the ten-fold increase in opium prices following the Taliban's 2000 opium ban. The supply shortage caused prices to spike. Prices have largely been contracting ever since, save for the recent spike due to a blighted harvest. At least for the immediate future, Marines and Afghan government officials in Helmand are hopeful that wheat prices will increase and remain high, in addition to the price of other attractive planting options such as cotton.²²⁵

Yet, price considerations were not the only driver

of the preference for opium over other licit crops. For years, the inability of farmers to transport their crops to market was one of the main reasons why opium cultivation was an attractive alternative. Opium paste can be stored without spoiling for years and traffickers often travel to the farmers' location to collect the paste rather than farmers having to worry about transporting their product to market.²²⁶ As secured areas in and around central Helmand continue to expand and road projects continue to improve poor infrastructure, farmers and traders will enjoy greater freedom of movement to key economic zones. This enables increased trade and the ability for farmers to transport perishable crops to market with minimal spoilage. Additionally, the provincial-wide improved security situation and increased security presence makes it difficult for smugglers to access key population nodes to collect and traffic the narcotics out of Afghanistan.

Afghan and coalition forces in Helmand contend that wheat is the most viable alternative to poppy production. Wheat seed (and fertilizer) is primarily distributed through the governor's Food Zone program. According to a recent study, residents complained of favoritism and patronage as the primary determinant of which segments of the farming population received assistance, often corresponding to the strength of their relationship to local *maliks* (governmental officials).²²⁷ Many complained that assistance should be channeled directly to the village rather than through a middle man, such as the *malik*. Still, the majority of farmers maintain that wheat is an agricultural commodity to be consumed, not sold. Only approximately one in three households who produced more wheat than they consumed chose to sell that surplus due to concerns over food insecurity, the ability to provide for guests and farm hands, and even Taliban fighters who demanded shelter and food.²²⁸ The poor quality of distributed seed also appears to be a contentious issue for many farmers.²²⁹

The prognosis for next growing season is currently unclear.²³⁰ One potentially troubling development is that next year's Food Zone program will be a smaller operation, with only one distribution event in autumn rather than the three events that

occurred this year.²³¹ Additionally, in line with the requirements of the Ministry of Agriculture, farmers will have to pay thirty-five percent of the cost of inputs, up seven percent from last year.²³² The decrease in distribution and the additional costs for farmer's participation coupled with the near tripling of the per-kilogram price of opium is a potentially troubling development. Progress on the counternarcotics front is, therefore, heavily dependent on the improvement of governance, security, and economic growth, among other factors.²³³ It will take multiple years to realistically evaluate the success or failure of any alternative livelihoods program.

Interdicting the Opium Trade

In the late spring of 2009, the US government decided to abandon the policy of eradication, as it was generally ineffective in reducing the amount of money that the Taliban was earning from the trade.²³⁴ The focus on interdiction meant targeting narcotics smugglers, insurgents, labs and refineries after the illicit crop was collected from farmers, thus not directly affecting their livelihoods. Additionally, senior drug traffickers or "nexus" targets were added to a Department of Defense capture or kill list due to their interconnectedness with the Taliban.²³⁵ In extreme cases, the US Department of the Treasury has even labeled individuals as Specially Designated Global Terrorists for providing financial and logistical support to the Taliban in Helmand, which effectively freezes individual's assets under US jurisdiction and prevents US persons from engaging in transactions with such individuals.²³⁶

The Afghan Counternarcotics Police of Afghanistan (CNPA), assisted by coalition civilian and police mentors, including the DEA and the State Department's Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs (INL) are the primary organizations in the fight against illicit narcotics.²³⁷ The CNPA has an approved *tashkil* of approximately sixty-eight officers.²³⁸ The CNPA consists of the Sensitive Investigative Unit (SIU), the Technical Investigative Unit (TIU), and

the National Interdiction Unit (NIU).²³⁹ These three units are closely mentored and sponsored by the DEA/INL and have demonstrated their increased effectiveness over the past several years. In 2009, the CNPA in conjunction with the DEA, seized nearly 100,000kg of illicit narcotics, 200,000kg of precursor chemicals used to refine opium into heroin, destroyed twenty-five drug labs, and arrested over fifty individuals for narcotics trafficking.²⁴⁰

Often, insurgent weapons caches and bomb making materials are seized alongside narcotics in raids conducted by the CNPA. In July 2010, Afghan forces seized fifteen tons of drugs and chemicals including weapons, bomb-making materials, and two narcotics laboratories for refining raw opium into processed heroin.²⁴¹ Authorities discovered 5.7 metric tons of heroin, the largest single seizure of the drug in Afghan history.²⁴² By comparison, 5.7 metric tons is approximately twenty to twenty-five percent of the UK's annual domestic consumption.²⁴³

In recent years, the Taliban has become increasingly involved in the processing and exporting components of the drug trade in order to maximize profits.²⁴⁴ Despite this, Mills stated that, "we have intelligence that indicated [the Taliban] has a financial crisis on his hands. He has a cash flow problem. He doesn't have the money he needs."²⁴⁵ Although Mills stated that it is difficult to ascertain precisely how much the insurgency has lost in terms of funding from the narcotics trade, he estimated that it was roughly one-half of last year's take.²⁴⁶ According to ISAF's Afghan Threat Finance Cell, narcotics constitutes the largest portion of Taliban funding, though revenue is also dependent on a host of other activities such as local and foreign donations, taxing of licit crops, and extortion from reconstruction contracts.²⁴⁷

Given the recent progress on the security front, now is not the time to be shortchanging alternative livelihood programs. Instead, these programs should be adequately resourced throughout the next several years to ensure that farmers receive the steady and predictable

financial and agricultural assistance they need to weather the difficult shift from illicit to licit crops. Failure to adequately curb poppy cultivation provides an unnecessary opportunity for a Taliban resurgence.

GOVERNANCE IN HELMAND

Provincial politics

Counterinsurgency is as much about the psychological separation of the enemy from the population as it is about physical separation. As US Marines and coalition forces in Helmand continue to reduce insurgent capacity and access to major population centers, the legitimacy and efficacy of Afghan governance is increasingly important. Most Helmandis have little to no interaction with Afghan government institutions beyond the provincial or even district level. For that reason, many Helmand residents view Governor Gulab Mangal as the man who has helped to transform the province.

Helmand is unique in that the province has a capable and credible provincial governor. Mangal is the fourth governor of Helmand in the past five years but has remained in his position since early 2008.²⁴⁸ In years past, Mangal has served as governor in both Laghman and Paktika provinces. He is described as particularly active and energetic by his international partners in Helmand.²⁴⁹ To date, there have been no direct accusations of corruption against Governor Mangal, although some members of his staff have been accused of using Food Zone funds for personal financial gain and directing that friends be selected to a list of individuals receiving assistance.²⁵⁰

Mangal has also been heavily involved with the military campaign in Helmand. He was keen to participate in the planning of Operation Moshtarak in February 2010 and was instrumental in the selection of the capable district governor of Nad Ali, Haji Habibullah, as well as the less stellar and recently replaced District Governor Haji Zahir in Marjah.²⁵¹ Mangal has also received praise by UK forces for his Food Zone program

which combines anti-poppy publicity campaigns, stronger law enforcement mechanisms, and the distribution of seeds and fertilizer to farmers.²⁵² Under Mangal's governorship, twice as many schools are open and twice as many district governors are working out in their districts.²⁵³ Mangal is also a proponent of reintegrating insurgents in Helmand who have agreed to give up arms.²⁵⁴ In late November 2010, a Pashto language radio station in Lashkar Gah announced that more than 200 insurgent fighters (out of a larger group of 1,000) had agreed to join the peace process in Helmand.²⁵⁵ Mangal is currently working to establish a council of tribal elders to conduct courses for the fighters, instructing them on how to make the transition to a peaceful life.²⁵⁶ While this is largely seen as a positive step, the precise mechanisms for reintegrating insurgent fighters have not yet been formally established.

Despite Mangal's competency and good working relationship with US and international forces in Helmand, he is not an ally of President Hamid Karzai. President Karzai has been a long-time supporter of the former governor of Helmand, Sher Mohammad Akhundzada, who remains one of the largest landholders in the province. The Akhundzada family carefully wrested control of Helmand's opium trade from the families of well-respected tribal leaders (*khans*) and warlords, including Abdul Rahman Khan and Abdul Wahid (also known as Rais al-Baghrani, as he hailed from Helmand's northernmost district, Baghran). Baghrani is an Alizai and the leader of the influential Khalozai sub-tribe. Baghrani allied with the Taliban in late 1994 to help drive Akhundzada out of Helmand in order to increase his own power. Today, Baghrani retains links to both the government and the Taliban.²⁵⁷

Sher Mohammad Akhundzada was replaced as Helmand's governor in December 2005 after the international diplomatic community, particularly the UK, demanded his removal on account of his involvement in Helmand's narcotics trade and for the brutal conduct of commanders under his authority.²⁵⁸ Yet, President Karzai ultimately blamed the removal of Akhundzada for the deteriorating security situation in Helmand.



Governor Mangal speaks during a ceremony to celebrate the construction of a new government building designed to unite the people & the government in Musa Qal'eh. (US Marine Corps photo by Cpl Ned Johnson)

Karzai remarked at the World Economic Forum in Davos in 2008 that “before [the British came] we were fully in charge of Helmand... they came and said ‘your governor is no good.’ I said, ‘All right, do we have a replacement for this governor? Do you have enough forces? Both the American and British forces guaranteed to me they knew what they were doing and I made the mistake of listening to them. And when they came in, the Taliban came.”²⁵⁹ During the Taliban’s rule, Akhundzada and Karzai both took refuge in Pakistan where they first developed their relationship and solidified the bonds between their families through marriage.²⁶⁰ Nearly three years later, Karzai’s actions signal that his support for Akhundzada and his allies such as Helmand’s former police commander Abdul Rahman Jan continues.²⁶¹ Although Akhundzada and Jan are from different tribal backgrounds, Alizai and Noorzai respectively, they both fought for the *Harakat Al-Inqilab Al Islami* (Islamic Revolutionary Movement) which opposed the Soviets and the Afghan communists.²⁶²

Today, Sher Mohammad Akhundzada is a serving senator from Helmand in the upper house of the Afghan parliament, the *Meshrano Jirga* (House of Elders), and was recently named to President Karzai’s High Peace Council.²⁶³ The son of Abdul Rahman Jan and former Gereshk district police chief, Haji Wali Jan Sabir, represents Helmand in parliament’s lower house, the *Wolesi Jirga* (House of the People). When President Karzai visited the province in the late fall of 2009 to attend a lunch

with senior officials, he sat next to Akhundzada and Rahman Jan rather than with his provincial governor Gulab Mangal, signaling to all in attendance Karzai’s personal allegiance.²⁶⁴ Prior to and following Operation Moshtarak in Marjah, Abdul Rahman Jan attempted to position himself to be the key powerbroker for ISAF in a post invasion Marjah, despite strenuous objections from some of Marjah’s influential elders.²⁶⁵ Although his overtures were largely ignored, he along with Sher Mohammad Akhundzada nonetheless wield significant influence in central Helmand.

Jan and his son are both involved with the Arif Noorzai network. Noorzai is the current head of the Independent Directorate for the Protection of Public Spaces and Highways by Tribal Support.²⁶⁶ It is unclear exactly what that job entails, but it is an influential post because it gives him the nominal control over Highway One throughout Afghanistan and thus helps to facilitate his alleged narcotics interests.²⁶⁷ It is likely that Jan’s militia assists in this effort.²⁶⁸ Sher Mohammad Akhundzada is also affiliated with Noorzai. Akhundzada is married to the sister of Arif Noorzai.²⁶⁹ Noorzai has another sister who is married to President Karzai’s brother and chief Kandahar powerbroker, Ahmed Wali Karzai.²⁷⁰

One incident in particular demonstrates both the influence and negative impact of the Akhundzada network on local governance. In early January 2011, Special Operations Forces raided a home in Garmser district, which resulted in accusations by insurgents and opposing mullahs that a Koran had been damaged.²⁷¹ Although these accusations were later found to be unsubstantiated, the incident was manipulated by Mangal’s rivals. Over the course of the next week, rioters and unruly mobs descended on the Garmser district center and other locations throughout the district, giving the appearance that the district was spinning out of control. In Kabul, Sher Mohammad Akhundzada and his allies exploited the situation. Mangal was forced to launch an investigation, which resulted in the reassignment of the district police chief to Sangin district and the removal of the largely effective and popular district governor,

Abdullah Jan. The move was vehemently opposed by Garmser's influential elders. In early summer 2010, interference from Kabul persisted. Kabul's Ministry of Interior attempted to remove district police chief Omar Jan while other influential governmental figures were targeted for removal by the Independent Directorate of Local Governance (IDLG) and National Directorate of Security (NDS).²⁷² For Marines and the District Support Team in Garmser, protecting quality leadership from malign actors has taken time and energy away from the fight against the Taliban and promoting good governance and development. Yet, as long as respected and effective leaders are targeted by Sher Mohammad Akhundzada and his cronies in Kabul, protecting quality leadership is a critical task.

Although President Karzai has not been supportive of Mangal's efforts in Helmand, the US and international presence has provided Mangal with the resources and backing to be able to successfully execute his duties as governor.²⁷³ Mangal is also careful to manage his public image, portraying himself as an independent figure who is not too closely tied to international forces, especially UK forces and the British-led PRT. Helmandis' opinion of the UK's efforts in Afghanistan appear to be shaped by historical military pursuits in the country and recent years of relatively ineffective operations in the province. It is unclear what the future holds for Governor Mangal without the presence of thousands of US and international forces. Convincing President Karzai that he ought to back the popular and

effective Mangal over figures such as Sher Mohammad Akhundzada and his supporters could be the ultimate determinate of lasting success in Helmand.

District-Level Governance

The majority of Helmandis interaction with the Afghan government occurs on a district and sub-district level. In Helmand, district governors are often selected by the provincial governor but they must also be approved by the IDLG in Kabul.²⁷⁴ Governor Mangal implemented the first merit-based selection program for district governors in Afghanistan, a process that is aimed at identifying the most qualified, respected, and capable district leaders rather than appointments due to patronage or familial connections.²⁷⁵

District governors maintain a *tashkil* that allows them to employ individuals to perform critical tasks in support of their governance efforts.²⁷⁶ In key districts such as Nawa, Governor Mangal provided the district governor with a core group of five line (non-security) ministry representatives stationed in Helmand, including education, health, agriculture, irrigation and justice.²⁷⁷ Governor Mangal continues to maintain oversight to ensure that newly-instituted district governors would appoint effective individuals rather than according to familial or tribal ties.²⁷⁸ In many instances, Kabul did not provide adequate funding for district governance so the British-led PRT provided Mangal with funds to pay district governors' staff.²⁷⁹ For this reason, the district delivery program was created to help district governors recruit and pay staff rather than funneling money in through the ministries in Kabul which restricts local government's ability to allocate and monitor funds.²⁸⁰

District governance would not be effective without the support of influential, respected local leaders. District Community Councils serve as a representative body elected through secret balloting to work with the district governor and to advise on security and development issues.²⁸¹ Currently, there are five district Community



Habibullah Shamalani Outreach Shura held in Torjan. Up to 180 village elders and locals attend the shura in the Nad-e Ali district of Helmand province. (DoD Photo)

Councils operating in Helmand compared to two years ago when there were none.²⁸² Over 3,000 locals participated in the recent re-election of the Nad Ali district community council.²⁸³

District governors are also supported by District Support Teams (DST), a British-led effort usually consisting of four to five personnel including a stabilization advisor (who works very closely with the district governor), a USAID development expert, a political advisor from the US State Department, and an individual from the UK Department for International Development.²⁸⁴ There are currently district governors in eleven of Helmand's fourteen districts and DSTs partnered with the majority of those eleven district governors.²⁸⁵ District governors of Garmser, Nawa, Nad Ali and Marjah—the critical four districts of central Helmand—are considered competent and high-functioning according to US personnel.²⁸⁶

Afghan ministries also maintain a *tashkil* at the district level and draw on their line ministry representatives at the provincial level for services and support.²⁸⁷ Line ministries at the provincial level are funded and resourced from Kabul, but the national government's record of adequately and appropriately resourcing provincial efforts has been poor, despite representation from twenty-six Afghan line ministries in Lashkar Gah.²⁸⁸ As the security situation in Nawa, Garmser, and Nad Ali steadily improved throughout the course of 2009 and 2010, line ministry representatives were willing to spend more time in the district rather than in the provincial capital of Lashkar Gah.²⁸⁹ Previously, it was difficult to convince representatives to spend significant time away from Lashkar Gah, as they would typically refuse to travel due to transportation insecurity and the hesitancy to relocate their families to potentially unsafe district centers.

Although there have been tremendous strides made in provincial and district governance over the past several years, some critical challenges remain, including identifying and attracting capable civil servants, providing effective and transparent rule of law mechanisms, and the

ability to deal with land disputes. Many Helmandis are not literate and of those that are, many belong to the northern Alizai tribe that is typically not welcomed in south and central Helmand both because of their outsider status and because of Sher Mohammad Akhundzada's association with Alizai sub-tribes. Marines have been engaged in a constant struggle to attract smart, literate, and young civil servants. In most instances, young, educated Afghans from Helmand who speak English can make significantly more money as a coalition interpreter than as a civil administrator. For example, the former district governor of Marjah, Haji Zahir, made approximately \$80.00 per week compared to some interpreters who were making approximately \$2,300.00.²⁹⁰ To address some of these issues, Marines attempted to open a civil service academy at Camp Leatherneck but the effort was allegedly opposed by the British-led PRT in Lashkar Gah.²⁹¹ The UK has maintained the lead for the PRT despite subordinating the military effort to the Marines.

Efforts to establish effective, transparent justice institutions outside of the urban centers have been problematic. The Marines' rule of law program is in its most nascent state. To the extent that there were Afghan prosecutors in districts outside of Lashkar Gah and Gereshk, they could do little more than refer cases to the provincial capital.²⁹² A Helmand-PRT sponsored study in early 2009 revealed that the vast majority of Helmandis living outside of Lashkar Gah and Gereshk viewed the Afghan court system as "slow, ineffective, and devastatingly corrupt."²⁹³ This forces many locals to frequent informal justice mechanisms outside the state apparatus such as tribal elders, mullahs, or even Taliban justice which is regarded by many as "quick and untainted."²⁹⁴ Since justice is one of the few services the Taliban provides for the population, the Afghan government's ability to administer timely, fair and effective justice would deal a significant blow to the enemy; however, more training, resourcing, and oversight are necessary preconditions to successful rule of law mechanisms.

Disputes over land ownership, squatters on government land, and the inability of the Afghan

government to deal with these issues in an effective way is a serious deficiency. In an agrarian society such as Helmand, land is often the only valuable entity that most farmers possess and plans to pass on to their progeny. Yet, the last time deed registration was performed in Helmand was in the early 1970s. The Afghan government's land redistribution campaigns of the late 1970s, coupled with decades of warfare, population migration, and the chaotic Mujahideen and Taliban years has further complicated the issue of rightful ownership.²⁹⁵ Land-grabs by influential powerbrokers and the privatization of public land are also widespread throughout southern Afghanistan.²⁹⁶ Squatters on government land have also been problematic. In order to register land, individuals would have to petition provincial government in Lashkar Gah and ultimately, get approval from Kabul. In some cases, Taliban fighters have exploited squatters' grievances by offering protection against the provincial government's attempts to remove them from their land.²⁹⁷ The provincial government and coalition forces lack the necessary resources and capability to sufficiently mediate and resolve land disputes.

Finally, ISAF officials at the national level must support RC-SW by working to cut President Karzai's support for malign actors at the provincial level. Sher Mohammad Akhundzada and his network continue to negatively impact the stability of Afghan governance at the provincial and district level. As long as these malign actors maintain the support of the President at the expense of the current and effective governor of Helmand, it will be difficult to ensure that progress in the short term will lead to enduring success.

RECONSTRUCTION AND DEVELOPMENT

Reconstruction and development projects were a central tenet of UK-led efforts in Helmand from 2006 to 2008.²⁹⁸ In 2008, Britain's Foreign Commonwealth Office focused heavily on several "zones of development" in key districts across the province.²⁹⁹ Yet, it quickly became evident that these "demonstration effects" could not win

the hearts and minds of a population, which was suffering under a deleterious security situation with constant intimidation and oppression at the hands of the Taliban. In July 2009, a report by the British government determined that development and reconstruction projects for civilians in Helmand were largely ineffective because of the poor security situation.³⁰⁰

There is no better example of the failure of ambitious, large-scale reconstruction and development projects than the Kajaki dam in Helmand. The dam was built in the 1950's by the United States as part of the Helmand River Valley Project, just one aspect of a multi-million dollar effort to modernize the province. Ravaged by years of war, it was on the verge of failure when US experts returned to evaluate it in 2002.³⁰¹ The dam already has two turbines installed by the United States in the mid-1950s. German engineers repaired one of the turbines in 1975, restoring the dam's full eighteen megawatt production capacity.³⁰² In September 2008, the British attempted to increase the power-producing capacity of the dilapidated dam by transporting a new, third turbine through treacherous terrain.³⁰³ Yet, the security situation surrounding the dam has deteriorated to such an extent that the cement needed to install the third and final turbine cannot be delivered. More than two years later, the third turbine remains packed away while the two functioning turbines struggle to deliver electricity to sections of Helmand and neighboring Kandahar province.³⁰⁴

Making matters worse, the Taliban largely dominate the terrain surrounding the dam, taxing and extorting large sums of money for the use of electricity.³⁰⁵ Taxing residents for the use of electricity has a psychological effect on the population of northern Afghanistan and segments of northwestern Kandahar, reinforcing the notion of Taliban domination. The Taliban collect as much as \$30,000 per month in taxation for the use of electricity that passes through areas under their control and demand payment in exchange for sparing transmission lines.³⁰⁶ As much as forty percent of the electricity from the dam is lost to theft and transmission inefficiencies.³⁰⁷

During the summer of 2010, Taliban fighters cut power-lines in a central district, disrupting the flow of electricity throughout northern and central Helmand. Weeks later, the Taliban demanded provincial officials fix the lines, which they did—further reinforcing the appearance that the Taliban were more powerful and influential than in actuality.³⁰⁸ Afghan news reported that the Taliban agreed to let Afghan engineers restore the power lines one day after officials temporarily suspended the power supply to areas under Taliban control.

There are several key takeaways from the experience of the Kajaki dam. First, large-scale, long-term reconstruction and development projects are ineffective in the absence of security. Second, unless US and Afghan security forces can dominate and control power substations and key electricity transmission lines running from the Kajaki power station to their final destinations in Sangin, Musa Qala, Gereshk, Lashkar Gah and Kandahar, any further expansion of the dam facility will likely be in vain. Recent experiences in Helmand and indeed, throughout Afghanistan, demonstrate that small, efficient, quick-impact projects are far more successful than expansive, multi-million dollar reconstruction and development undertakings such as the Kajaki dam.

When the Marines launched Operation Strike of the Sword in July 2009, Brigadier General Nicholson stated that long term projects such as infrastructure were necessary, but the immediate need would be for quick-impact, simple projects such as wells and cash for work programs.³⁰⁹ Much of this work would be coordinated or facilitated through the British-led PRT in Lashkar Gah. Through the PRT, USAID, and a “muscular” civil affairs team, Nicholson worked to achieve a “whole of government” approach that was coordinated by the civilian-military cooperation cell responsible for southern Afghanistan. The cell provides a total of \$700 million for such regional projects as power, water and water management, and regional infrastructure.³¹⁰

Cash for work programs are popular with local communities, as they provide an immediate



US Marines construct a bridge in Helmand province (ISAF Photo)

infusion of cash, combined with the ability to employ thousands of military-aged males who would otherwise be attractive recruits to Taliban insurgents. Marines paid day-laborers for work clearing irrigation canals and watercourses in Nawa, a program which employed over 150,000 military-aged males for a period of six months.³¹¹ In districts such as Nawa, once day-labor opportunities appeared, unemployment disappeared almost overnight.³¹² In neighboring Marjah, residents have begun to come forward to participate in PRT-led programs to increase employment, which in turn has positive effects on the local economic situation.³¹³ These programs currently employ approximately 4,000 local residents in throughout central Helmand every day.³¹⁴ According to a recent study on Helmand, unemployed Helmandis constitute the largest group of Taliban fighters.³¹⁵ Average foot soldiers can make upwards of \$300.00 per month, not including special “bonuses” for dangerous operations.³¹⁶

One of the main concerns with this massive infusion of cash into rural and relatively poor communities is that Helmand’s provincial government cannot sustain such a program on its own. Still, Marines believe that as security improves, these programs will help to jump-start the war-ravaged economy. This, they argue, will spark new jobs and opportunities that are sustainable and based on local capacity, slowly weaning the population off of their dependency on foreign aid.

Marines in Helmand note that, after security, the population’s access to education and healthcare

is a top priority.³¹⁷ The Afghan government's ability to deliver these services helps to undermine support for competing Taliban governance, as the Taliban effectively provide neither. Across Helmand, residents consistently voice desires for schools and opportunities for their children to be educated and taught by local, literate teachers.³¹⁸ Residents also discuss the need for basic health care and trained female doctors to treat women.³¹⁹

By early spring 2010, the security situation in some districts had improved enough that progress along the education and health front was evident. In southern Nawa district, eleven public schools for boys were open by March. In Nad Ali, thirteen schools are open with children by the hundreds attending on a regular basis.³²⁰ Even in districts such as Marjah, which was completely under Taliban control as recently as February 2010, nine schools are open.³²¹ Combined, there were approximately 150 government-licensed teachers providing regular instruction to upwards of 2,500 boys and 400 girls by early summer.³²² The teacher training college in Lashkar Gah is currently offering teacher certification to help meet the demand for instructors in rural districts.³²³ In the northern district of Now Zad, a health clinic had opened with a midwife on staff as well as a school in which boys and girls are taught in separate classrooms.³²⁴ The greatest developments in healthcare have occurred in Lashkar Gah.³²⁵ Private clinics and hospitals have been constructed over the past year in addition to increasing the capacity of Helmand's central healthcare facility, Bost Hospital, which handles nearly all trauma cases in Helmand province.³²⁶

By comparison, in 2006, there was one district hospital, nine comprehensive health clinics and twenty basic health clinics in Helmand.³²⁷ By 2009, two additional district hospitals were built, and six comprehensive health clinics were added in addition to eleven basic health clinics and nine sub-centers.³²⁸ Over 400 health posts operate across the province providing basic health care at a local level.³²⁹ The total number of health care workers in Helmand is now above 1,000 according to the Helmand PRT.³³⁰

In places such as the provincial capital of Lashkar

Gah, there are significant signs of economic progress. In 2006, Lashkar Gah resembled a ghost town according to many who visited the city.³³¹ Fast-rising buildings, restaurants blaring loud music, and asphalt-paved streets packed with car traffic are now the norm.³³² Daily flights from the city's new airport connect residents with the Afghan capital of Kabul.³³³ According to local shopkeepers, business has been booming now that there is steady security provided by Afghan forces.³³⁴ Afghanistan's former Minister of Finance, Ashraf Ghani, recently visited Helmand's capital and was struck by how busy the local bazaar was. A new agri-business park is scheduled to be constructed next to the airport to facilitate an expansion of trade. In the future, PRT officials hope to install cold-storage facilities to keep recently harvested crops fresh for increased transport and distribution. Currently, the largest markets for farmers are in neighboring Kandahar, all of which are difficult to reach due to illegal road checkpoints and tolls on Highway One.³³⁵

Consistent with the strategy of connecting zones of stability within Helmand, the British-led PRT and US Marines have focused on long-term infrastructure development to aid freedom of movement and connectivity between districts.³³⁶ Prior to the Marines arrival in the summer of 2009, UK forces constructed approximately thirty miles of road.³³⁷ In Garmser, Nawa, Gereshk, and Nad Ali, road projects and bridges have helped the local population access Lashkar Gah.³³⁸ In fact, during Afghanistan's September elections, all materials were able to be delivered to Helmand's six central districts by road.³³⁹ One of the more critical roads in the province, connecting Highway One in Gereshk to Lashkar Gah, is now trafficked by roughly 1,400 vehicles daily, as compared to just 200 only six months prior.³⁴⁰

CONCLUSION

Over the course of the past year, the momentum in Helmand has swung from the insurgency to the coalition and Afghan forces.³⁴⁰ Definable progress is evident in many areas throughout southern and central Helmand. This progress was largely due to “getting the inputs right,” that is, providing the decisive force that was required for successful comprehensive counterinsurgency operations.³⁴¹ Marines and Afghan forces are currently widening the campaign to include significant population centers in the northern reaches of the province. In just a year and a half, coalition forces along with their Afghan partners have demonstrated their ability to achieve success on the battlefield through sufficiently resourced, population-centric counterinsurgency operations designed to protect the population while taking the fight to the enemy.

According to recent polling by *The Washington Post*, ABC and the BBC, the number of people in Helmand describing their security as “good” increased from fourteen percent in December 2009 poll to sixty-seven percent as of December 2010.³⁴² Approximately two-thirds of Helmand residents believe that Afghanistan is on the right track. Furthermore, seventy-one percent currently describe their living conditions as “good,” an increase of twenty-seven percent since late last year. Of those surveyed, fifty-nine percent give positive marks to the availability of jobs, up nearly fifty percent from last year. In Helmand, public assessments of the availability of clean water and medical care are sharply higher than last year.

I MEF Commander Major General Richard Mills believes that the enemy is losing the support of the population, has already lost the initiative, and is continuing to lose required resources.³⁴³ In districts such as Nawa, Marines have transitioned several patrol bases to ANSF with many more such “handovers” to follow in the coming months. Though Marines believe they will maintain a presence in Nawa through next summer, Major General Mills noted that there is little overt presence of Marines on the streets in the district.³⁴⁴ Throughout Helmand, Marines will continue to press the Taliban throughout the winter months, a time that is often considered a

lull in friendly and enemy operations due to poor weather conditions.

Yet, progress in Helmand has not been limited to the security line of effort. Substantial gains have been made regarding the development and capabilities of the ANSF in Helmand, though there continues to be challenges in professionalizing the force. This will be achieved over time through close mentoring with their coalition partners. Counternarcotics efforts have been successful in some areas but need to be maintained at their current levels or expanded over the coming years to help farmers weather the multi-year transition from illicit to licit agriculture. Progress on the governance front, arguably the most important line of effort, has been heartening, though there remain significant challenges. The most significant impediment in provincial and district governance has been the interference of malign actors who remain close to President Karzai. As long as this continues, it will be a serious impediment to the establishment of enduring, representative governance in Helmand. Lastly, reconstruction and development efforts are a critical aspect of counterinsurgency operations and follow closely after the establishment of security. Coalition forces must follow through with their promises and at the same time, be cautious not to engender a culture of dependency and corruption among the local population through the massive infusion of aid dollars. While there are many challenges as coalition and Afghan forces that remain, the success that has been achieved over the past eighteen months in Helmand is undeniable.

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