

# WILL THE MARINES PUSH INTO NORTHERN HELMAND?

Northern Helmand may be the next focal point of U. S. and British efforts in the province, just four months after U.S. Marines launched the massive Operation Moshtarak in Marjah in central Helmand.<sup>1</sup> This effort, which would be significantly smaller in size and scope than Marjah, would concentrate on the troublesome districts of Kajaki and Sangin in northeastern Helmand.

Speaking to reporters in London on June 7, U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates said he discussed the possibility of sending more U.S. forces to northeastern Helmand.<sup>2</sup> However, Gates noted that any final decision would be up to General Stanley McChrystal, commander of U.S. and NATO forces in Afghanistan.

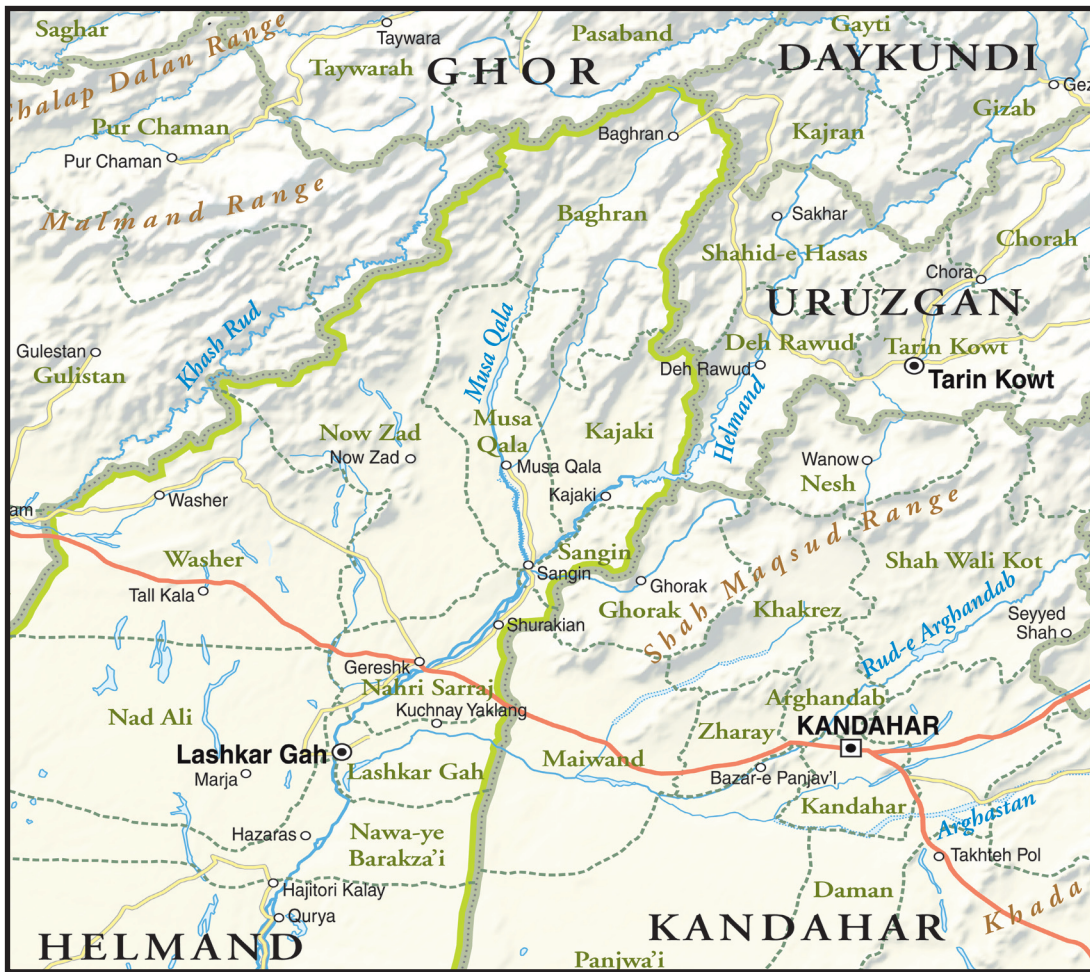
Currently, over 600 British Royal Marines are responsible for Sangin and Kajaki, concentrating on the Sangin bazaar area and the Kajaki dam, with assistance from a small number of U.S. Marines and Afghan National Police. Yet, now that Regional Command South has been split into Regional Command Southwest (Helmand and Nimruz) and Regional Command South (Kandahar, Uruzgan, Daykundi and Zabul), U.S. Marine Corps Major General Richard Mills has assumed responsibility for all NATO forces in the Southwest, including approximately 10,000 British forces in Helmand province.<sup>3</sup> U.S. Marines may now be responsible for much of the northern Helmand, including Musa Qala in the northwest of the province and now, Sangin and Kajaki.

Both provinces have always had a strong Taliban presence, serving as hubs for the northern Helmand

narcotics network and home to large contingents of enemy fighters, IED manufacturing compounds, and weapons storage caches.<sup>4</sup> Sangin and Kajaki initially became hotspots for the Taliban after they were driven from Musa Qala in December 2007. Since then, the Taliban have expanded their presence and run mobile courts and effective shadow governance structures in the districts, offering popular and effective services for the population.<sup>5</sup> Taliban elements operate relatively undisturbed in the dense agricultural expanse that surrounds both banks of the Helmand River to the south and north of Sangin. Afghan, U.S., and coalition forces in the area have been able to conduct only limited patrolling beyond the district centers and the area surrounding the Kajaki dam, which provides power for much of Helmand and portions of Kandahar.

The enemy's presence in northeastern Helmand has increased significantly following February's Operation Moshtarak in Marjah, an area that had served as the main safe-haven for the enemy in Helmand.<sup>6</sup> Now that U.S. and Afghan forces are operating in large numbers in southern and central Helmand, many enemy fighters have relocated to the north to avoid unnecessary contact. Although this was not unforeseen, the extent of the enemy's operations in the northeast and the negative effects that presence has on security efforts in Kandahar was perhaps underestimated.

Indeed, northern Helmand provides the Taliban with certain advantages. First, Taliban insurgents in northern Helmand support their networks in Kandahar through the lines of communication running west from Sangin and Kajaki through



MAP 1 | NORTHERN HELMAND PROVINCE

Deh Rawood in southern Uruzgan, and the Ghorak and Khakrez districts of northwestern Kandahar.<sup>7</sup> Second, the dense agricultural fields along the Helmand River to the south and north of Sangin and abutting Kajaki provide excellent cover for Taliban and narcotics operations and hamper Afghan and coalition forces' patrols. Third, the Taliban has increasingly used Helmand's northernmost district of Baghran, a mountainous, sparsely populated area connected to Kajaki province for money laundering and possibly even command and control. Last, the majority of Sangin's population does not reside in the district center; rather, they are thinly dispersed throughout the agricultural land surrounding the Helmand River which is difficult to access.

Given the resource constraints and difficult terrain, it is unlikely that U.S. and coalition forces will

conduct a comprehensive population-centric counterinsurgency campaign in Sangin and Kajaki. Instead, new operations would likely focus on targeting specific enemy positions, expanding security efforts within and beyond the district centers and securing terrain around the Kajaki dam in order to install the last of the Dam's three turbines and ensure that repairs and construction can take place as needed. Overall, any increased effort should seek to disrupt an enemy stronghold to prevent the further destabilization of northeastern Helmand and the Taliban's use of the area to support their networks in Kandahar. Yet, any new effort ought not distract from successfully prosecuting the prioritized southern and central efforts in the province.

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# NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Zainullah Stanikzai, "Second major offensive to begin in Helmand," *Pajhwok Afghan News*, June 5, 2010.

<sup>2</sup> "U.S. weighs reinforcements for troubled Afghan province," *Agence France Presse*, June 8, 2010.

<sup>3</sup> "US general to command UK troops," *Press Association*, June 1, 2010.

<sup>4</sup> Jeffrey A. Dressler, "Securing Helmand: Understanding and Responding to the Enemy," *Institute for the Study of War*, September 2009.

<sup>5</sup> Jeffrey A. Dressler, "Securing Helmand: Understanding and Responding to the Enemy," *Institute for the Study of War*, September 2009.

<sup>6</sup> Kathy Gannon, "Taliban lose control of Marjah but remain strong," *Associated Press*, March 19, 2010.

<sup>7</sup> Dexter Filkins, "Taliban fill NATO's big gaps in Afghan south," *The New York Times*, January 21, 2009.