

OPERATION MOSHTARAK: PREPARING FOR THE BATTLE OF MARJAH

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



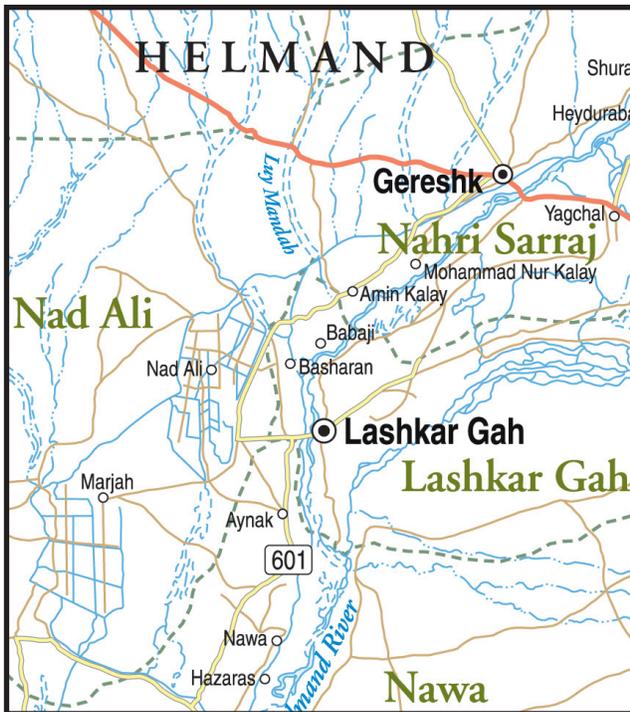
MAP 1: CENTRAL HELMAND PROVINCE

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

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

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

U.S. and coalition forces in Helmand have been



MAP 2: MARJAH, NAD ALI, AND LASHKAR GAH

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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