

OPERATION MOSHTARAK: TAKING AND HOLDING MARJAH

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

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

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

preparatory phases of the assault on Marjah were underway.

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

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



MAP 1 - HELMAND PROVINCE, SOUTHERN AFGHANISTAN

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

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

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

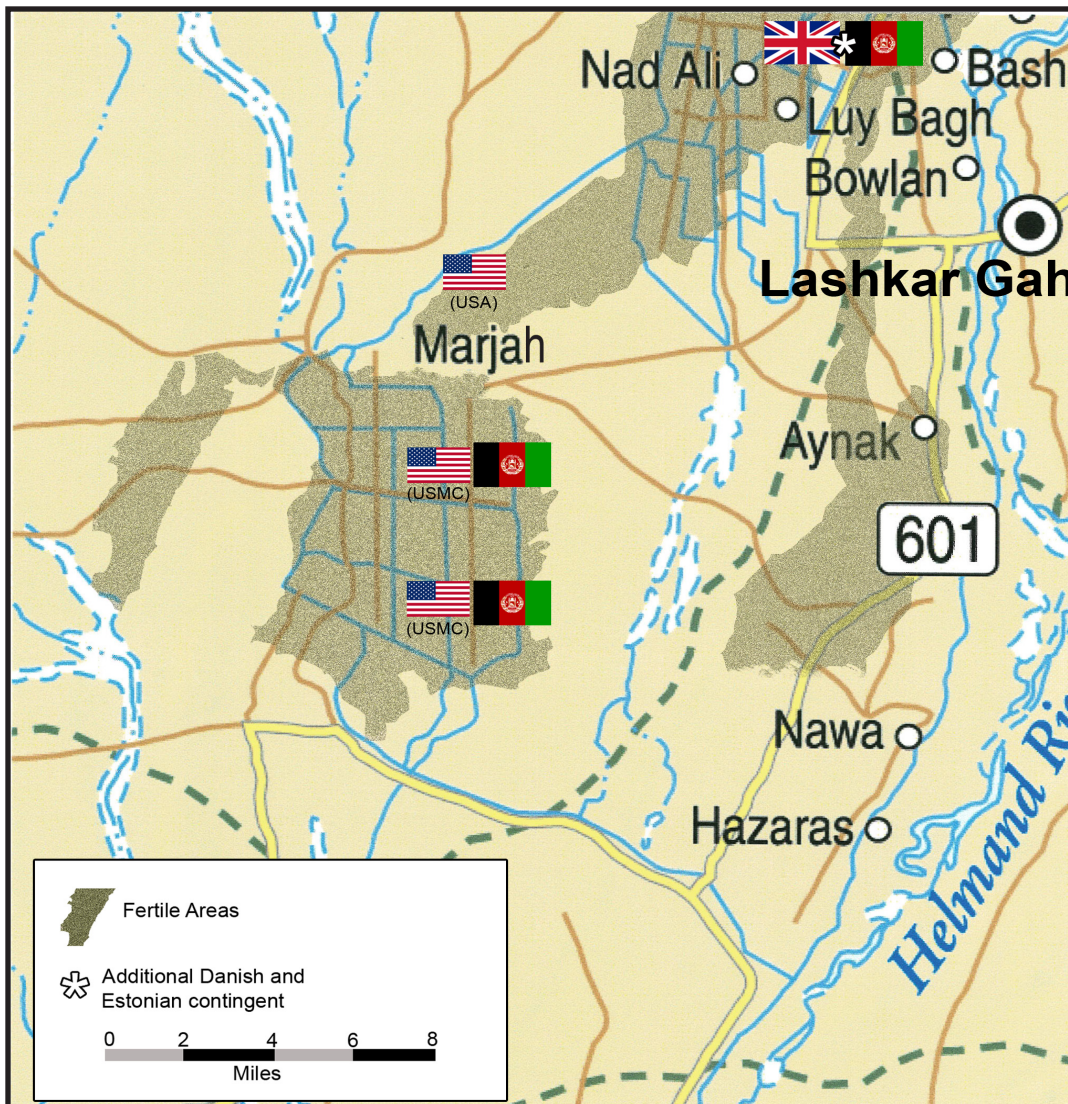
sit routes for insurgents moving south-to-north and north-to-south through Helmand.¹⁵

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

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

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

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



MAP 2 - FORCE DISTRIBUTION IN MARJAH & NAD ALI

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The biggest challenge in Nad Ali will be to con-

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

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

HOLDING CLEARED TERRAIN

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

CIVILIAN CASUALTIES

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

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

ALTERNATIVE LIVELIHOODS

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

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